

Collateral 4.6

For a moment, neither of us moved. The span of a heartbeat or an hour, I couldn't tell. I could barely breathe, barely focus my eyes on Oni Lee and the cylinder now jutting out of his chest. It was a Herculean effort just to keep myself from collapsing, again. Every muscle in my body still trembled from the aftershocks of the agony that still hadn't quite left me. My brain still hadn't managed to get back in order enough for me to figure out what was happening.

Oni Lee seemed equally as perplexed. He stared down at the cylinder without any signs of comprehension, like he was utterly stunned and just couldn't put together how it had gotten there or why it was there in the first place.

My pulse pounded in my ears like thunder. The moment stretched out impossibly long, like a rubber band. The sound of my own breathing was like a whirlwind that whipped around my head.

Then, Oni Lee looked away from the cylinder and back to me. He reached up with his good hand, uncurling his top two fingers from around the handle of his knife, and made to grab the pins of several of the grenades strapped to his chest —

CRACK

— and what had to be a rubber bullet smashed into his hand with pinpoint precision, snapping several bones like they were twigs. His knife clattered to the ground as he stumbled backwards, and he made the first sound I had heard from him the entire night: a long, low groan that did very little to convey the pain he had to be in.

My scrambled thoughts stretched and straightened, trying to grasp at coherency and understanding, but it was like trying to walk uphill with a boulder on my back. The cylinder, the rubber bullet, they *meant* something, I knew they did, I knew I knew what they did, but I struggled to remember that *what*.

After a moment, Oni Lee turned back to me, again, staring at me through the gaping pits that were his mask's eyeholes, and I had no idea what he was thinking, what he was going to try and do without his knife, with one shoulder busted, and with the fingers in his other hand shattered like so much glass.

I didn't really get the chance to find out.

Oni Lee moved only the barest bit, his leg shifting to one side as he regarded me, sprawled on the ground, helpless and weak. *CRACK* — and another rubber bullet slammed into his head, right between the eyes of his mask, and he jerked backwards and started to stumble...

And before he hit the ground, Oni Lee vanished into a cloud of ash.

He didn't appear again, not anywhere nearby. The knife he'd dropped was left to lie, abandoned, where it had fallen from his grip. Fortunately, he hadn't left behind any live grenades or anything like that when he left.

Panting, I tried to leverage myself up and stand. There was still something... Before... I had to... I had to... do *something*...

There was a surety in my chest that there was something yet unfinished, something I still had to take care of, something I had to finish, to handle, but my scattered thoughts couldn't string together enough for me to remember exactly *what*. I only knew that it was urgent and I had to hurry.

The echoing rhythm of footsteps was like thunder over the sound of my breathing and the rapid tempo of my heartbeat, and they were coming closer. I put my utmost effort into pushing myself up, because there was an equal surety inside of me that I was alone, that it was an *enemy* coming towards me, because this fight was one I'd had to undertake by myself, but my arm wobbled and my palm slipped and I crashed back to the ground, slamming my head against the pavement.

I felt no pain from the collision, but I had no idea whether that was because I was actually unhurt or because all of my pain receptors had been burnt out by... by...

Bakuda's bomb.

My heart jolted in my chest.

Bakuda. Bakuda's bomb. The explosions earlier today, the people who'd been killed, the threat on Dad's life, on *my* life, the promise of retribution for Lung's defeat and capture, the threat to escalate if I didn't come alone, the warehouse, the goons, Bakuda *Bakuda* **Bakuda**...

The memories slotted back into place, and I could remember, now, what I was doing there in that alleyway, why every part of me hurt so badly, what I still had to do, everything. My thoughts were still scattered and sluggish, like they'd been blown all over and were struggling to stand in the winds of a hurricane, but they were clear enough.

I needed to take down Bakuda.

"Kuh..."

I struggled against my wobbling arms and the weakness in my body, the shakes and aftershocks of that bomb that had left me almost completely undamaged, but lit on fire every nerve in my body. I pushed as hard as I could past it, forcing my elbows down and underneath me, and just doing something that simple and easy seemed then like a work of supreme effort.

And then, before I could even get more than a few inches up off my back, the footsteps drew up in front of me, and when I looked towards them, expecting to find one of Bakuda's goons come to finish me off, a flag-clad face looked back at me.

Miss Militia fell to her knees beside me, hefting in one hand a long rifle with a barrel too large for any ordinary bullet. My thoughts aligned and clicked together, and I realized that *she* was the one who had shot Oni Lee, first with a tranquilizer dart and then again twice with rubber bullets.

And she'd probably saved my life doing so.

She let the barrel of her rifle rest on one knee and raised her off hand to the side of her head, pressing her fingertips against her ear.

“Armsmaster,” she said, sounding more like the soldier she dressed as than the kindly woman who’d smiled at me that first night, “Oni Lee is in the wind. Right shoulder is injured, dislocation at minimum, and I got his other hand. He’s likely not in any condition to engage you, but I’d still advise caution.”

I watched her head turn as she swept her gaze up and down the alleyway. It wasn’t long; the alleyway wasn’t exactly a parking lot.

“No sign of Bakuda,” she continued. “I’ve got eyes on the warehouse. Madison Street, north side. Lights are on. There’s a large hole on my side, about twenty feet up. Size, shape...definitely a breach. Expect hostiles — I can hear them from here.”

There was a moment’s pause.

“I’ve got her, yes,” she said. My heart skipped a beat — she was talking about *me*. “She’s right here.”

She looked at me, then, her eyes traveling up and down my body with a kind of clinical detachment.

“No visible injuries,” she went on. “But she doesn’t look okay. Shakes, general weakness — she seems to be having trouble standing. I don’t think it’s safe to leave her by herself.”

Another pause.

“Understood. I’ll leave Oni Lee to you, let Assault and Battery handle the warehouse. Tell them to expect a less than warm welcome, but I don’t hear any gunfire. I’m not sure what’s happening inside, sounds like a riot. Over.”

After the last word, she turned towards me and leaned over, resting her free hand on my shoulder. She was so close that I could see the flecks of green in her eyes.

“Apocrypha. Can you hear me?”

I gave her the best nod I was capable of.

“Good. Are you injured? Hurt? What happened to you?”

“Ba-Bakuda,” I rasped with effort. “P-pain...bomb...”

Miss Militia’s brow knitted together, and for a second, she closed her eyes. “What kind of twisted mind...” I heard her mutter.

“Can you stand?” she asked a moment later. “Or do you need help?”

“I...” There was no point in trying to tough it out or put on a strong face. The answer was obvious. “No...”

I could see her frown in the way her brow furrowed. The large rifle she'd been hefting with one hand flashed with dark green energy and shifted forms into a simple pistol, which she holstered at her hip.

With her hands free, she reached for me, and with one, she grabbed my wrist and pulled one of my arms over her shoulders. With the other, she wrapped her arm around my back and took hold of the left side of my waist. My skin tingled numbly under her grip, a kind of pins and needles sensation, like when your arm fell asleep.

"Three," she murmured softly. "Two. One."

The moment she'd finished counting, she lifted me up like a ragdoll, and my feet scrambled for purchase on the ground as I tried to stand under my own power. I managed to get my heels under me and put my weight on them, and I thought I'd be able to keep myself upright.

But my knees buckled almost immediately, and I nearly collapsed straight back down. I would have, if Miss Militia hadn't kept hold of me, held me up.

"I've got you," she reassured me. "Don't push yourself. I've got you."

One hand let go of my wrist and went back up to her ear.

"Armsmaster. I've got her, but she's weak, can't even stand on her own, can barely speak. She said Bakuda hit her with some kind of pain bomb — however that works."

She stopped — to listen to Armsmaster, if I had to guess — then grunted.

"I don't think she's up to giving a report," Miss Militia said, but it sounded like a rebuke. "Like I said, she can barely speak. Right now, I'm the only thing keeping her upright. I'm not sure she has the strength to give us any details about what's going on."

"D-duplicates," I managed to force out of my mouth.

"Hold on a second, Armsmaster." She turned her head towards me. "What was that?"

"D-duplicates," I repeated, trying to get the words out. "H-Hassan...of the...H-hundred Faces...can make *duplicates*."

She turned back away, and to Armsmaster, she said, "I don't know. Something about duplicates? It might be a new ABB cape, although the naming sounds wrong."

I grunted, screwed my eyes shut, and *focused*.

Delusional Illusion

"Za...baniya."

From the shadows cast at our feet appeared two more of myself, ready and willing. Unlike me, they were completely and entirely unharmed and had no trouble standing.

There was a loud click from next to me, and when I looked, it was to see Miss Militia wielding a large, deadly looking pistol, which she aimed warily at my doubles.

“Hassan of the Hundred Faces,” said one of them. It was...strange, hearing my voice coming from someone else’s mouth. It was different when I was looking through their eyes, hearing through their ears, speaking through their mouths — it wasn’t that different from doing it myself. Like this, though, it was just *unsettling*. “A Middle Eastern hero. His power is to split himself into about eighty different fractions, each one simultaneously independent and part of the greater whole.”

After a moment of tension, Miss Militia lowered that huge handgun and regarded the one that had spoken.

“And you’re one of those parts?”

My double — Deuce, I decided to call her — gave a slight shake of her head. “It’s complicated. ‘Part’ isn’t exactly...”

“Right. Duplicates, she — *you* said.” She gestured to me with a nod of her head. “Which means that this...”

“The original,” Deuce confirmed. There was no point in hiding it. I wasn’t expendable, and I didn’t want Miss Militia to get the impression that I *was*.

“What happened?” Miss Militia asked.

“Bakuda,” said Deuce.

“S-speaking of,” I rasped, turning towards my other double — fuck, I just decided she’d be Tres. Keep things simple.

Tres nodded, and as I had that first night against Lung, I pushed into her head and joined with her, so that I was seeing from her eyes and hearing from her ears. I didn’t leave my own body, but it *did* distract me from the aches and pains left over from that bomb, at least a little.

The instant I was settled, Tres spun on her heel and took off, racing back down the alleyway with speed. The brick and mortar around her blurred and bled together, and as she came upon the big, black ball that was the area of altered space-time left behind by Bakuda’s bomb, she flung herself up and towards one of the warehouses that framed it, angled herself, and bounced off the wall like some kind of human rubber ball.

Watching it as a spectator, it really was incredible. Was *this* what Amy had meant, about how impossible and superhuman it was?

“Bakuda?” asked Miss Militia.

“Yeah,” replied Deuce. “We...ambushed her ambush, I guess? Distracted her to get everyone in place, then went through the walls. We managed to get the drop on her and her goons, like that.”

Tres hit the pavement, then took three long steps and kicked off the ground again. Up she went, five, ten, fifteen, twenty feet, and she landed inside the hole and on the walkway, back where I'd started this fight, where I'd been when that force bomb had thrown me out of the building. She swung her gaze around, letting me see the inside of the warehouse, again — no Bakuda. The goons were still there, still struggling, and the duplicates I'd set to holding them down were still holding them down, but of their boss, there was no sign.

Damn it.

No, I couldn't let her escape.

“*Through* the walls?”

“Yes, through them.” Let the Protectorate stew on how I managed that one. “It...seemed like a better idea than charging in through the front door.”

There. The front door. It was ajar, left wide open. Maybe, if she'd had more time and had been in better shape, Bakuda might have done it as a distraction, a red herring, and gone out a side door or something. With that broken leg, though, there was no way she had the time or the focus to do something that clever to throw off anyone following her.

Tres vaulted over the railing and landed on the floor below, then made a beeline for the front door, weaving her way around the bodies struggling to escape on the ground. The glass statue that had once been a human being and one of my copies still stood off to one side.

“Then?”

Deuce shifted slightly. “I... We had her pinned. Broke one of her legs on the way down. We...almost had her, there.”

“Until Oni Lee showed up.”

“Until Oni Lee showed up,” Deuce agreed.

The street was dark when Tres made it out the front door. Even the bright lights from inside, spilling out through the doorway and the holes we'd made on our way in, did little to make it brighter. Tres looked around, stepping cautiously out onto the sidewalk and then the road, but there was no sign of Bakuda. Up the street, nothing. Down the street, nothing. In the distance, the low buzz of a helicopter echoed.

Then — movement. A flutter, a rustle on the wind, barely audible. Tres dashed down the street, and there, hidden away in one of the alleyways, was a shape large enough to be a care, covered in a tarp that was being removed. A moment later, a limping, panting figure, one leg twisted and obviously broken, came around it.

If I'd been capable of it then, I would have smiled. Tres *did*.

Found you.

“He managed to tag me with some kind of...force bomb or something, knocked me clear out of the warehouse. Almost got me with a...a time-freeze bomb, too.”

Miss Militia startled. “A *time-freeze* bomb?”

Deuce gestured in the direction of the black ball in the middle of the alley. “That thing.”

Tres rushed forward and was suddenly on the other side of the street, just a few feet from Bakuda, who turned and shrieked.

“Get away, you bitch!” she screamed. “Get away!”

Tres didn’t listen or reply. She just grabbed Bakuda, hauled her up, and threw her out onto the street. Bakuda hit the asphalt with another scream, jostling her broken leg in what had to be a very painful manner. I couldn’t bring myself to care.

Tres tore away the tarp, revealing a jeep parked in the alleyway, squeezed between the two buildings. Bakuda’s getaway vehicle, no doubt. With that rocket launcher she’d been toting around... Yeah, I could picture her riding around, shooting her bombs at stuff with a startling clarity.

“You can’t,” Bakuda was saying as Tres stalked back to her. She was trying to drag herself away with her arms, but she hadn’t gotten very far. “You can’t kill me! You can’t! If you do, every bomb I’ve made goes off! All of them! All over the city!”

I didn’t plan on killing her. Even after everything she’d done...no, I didn’t want to take that step. Tres said nothing, but went to work securing Bakuda to the tarp. Bakuda continued to scream, shouting profanities and promises of vengeance once she realized Tres wasn’t going to strangle her in the middle of the road.

“Got her,” I muttered, and left my double’s head.

I blinked, and I was back in the alleyway with Deuce and Miss Militia, who looked to me.

“Apocrypha?”

“Bakuda,” I managed. “C-captured...Bakuda.”

We heard the yelling a minute later.

“— kill you! Do you hear me?! I’m gonna get you for this, you bitch! You and your old man! You think that last bomb was something?! That was *nothing* compared to what I’m going to do to you! Nothing!”

Tres appeared from around the side of the warehouse, dragging Bakuda behind her by her good leg. The only comfort Bakuda had been given was that she was wrapped up in the tarp that had covered her jeep, so she wasn’t being pulled across the pavement without anything protecting her. It was more than I thought she deserved.

Tres brought her along and stopped a few feet away, then let go and let Bakuda flop to the ground. Bakuda let out another yowl as her broken leg landed, then quickly transitioned back to her stream of cursing.

“— ucking bitch! When I’m done with you, you’re gonna *wish* you’d let me kill you, tonight! Hear me?! A whole new *world* of pain and suffering! Like nothing you’ve ever *fucking seen!*”

I grunted and pushed myself away from Miss Militia — only made it two steps before my legs gave out. Deuce and Tres were there to catch me, each offering me a shoulder to prop myself up with, and with their help, I managed to hobble my way over to Bakuda. She snarled up at me, spitting furiously, but a lot of it was lost behind the blank, featureless face of her mask.

“You’re gonna *beg* me for mercy, bitch! Beg! And I’ll say no and keep on going! Your old man will go fucking first! I’m gonna do to him things that make fucking *Bonesaw* look cute and cuddly! Turn his insides into his outsides! Flay him alive! Make a bomb *just* for him! And I’ll make *you* watch the whole *fucking time!*”

Carefully, Deuce and Tres lowered me back to the ground. Bakuda squirmed as I kneeled over her, and with one shaking hand, I reached up to the top edge of her mask, where the runestone I’d made from a quarter was still wedged against her forehead, and pressed my thumb against it.

“Tosaigh.”

There was a flash and a crackle as the runes ignited and burned and activated, and immediately, Bakuda’s constant spewing of vitriol cut off as the binding spell locked her voluntary muscle groups. She breathed, her heart beat, she could probably even move her eyes and make basic vocalizations. However, she no longer had any control over things like her tongue or her vocal cords or her arms and legs.

She was completely and utterly helpless.

I pushed myself backwards and stumbled as I tried to stand, but Tres and Deuce were there to catch me, again, and they half-carried me towards the wall on the other side of the alley, where they carefully helped me sit down. I sighed and let my head fall back to rest against the cool brickwork.

It wasn’t quite over, yet, but the big part was done. I’d captured Bakuda. She couldn’t threaten me or Dad anymore.

“...Apocrypha?” Miss Militia ventured tentatively.

When I opened my eyes, she was crouched in front of me, far enough away not to crowd me, but close enough to offer her help if I asked for it.

“Yeah?” I croaked.

God, I felt weak, though. The worst of it was starting to pass, but it was still an effort and a half to do *anything*.

“What did you do to her?” she asked. “To Bakuda?”

“B-bound her. Locked...volun...voluntary movements.”

“Is it...permanent?”

“N-no.” I gave a slight shake of my head. “Should last...a-about an hour...or two.”

“Good.” She gave me a nod, then turned and scooted over to sit down next to me. One hand went back up to her ear. “Armsmaster. Bakuda’s in custody. One broken leg, but otherwise unharmed. Apocrypha used some kind of Striker effect to temporarily disable her, so we need a containment team to handle her.”

She paused a moment.

“No, I don’t see —”

“LOOK OUT BELOW!”

Miss Militia and I both looked upwards, and from out of the sky dropped two figures — one, a blur of red, landed nearby with little more than a muted *thump*, while the other, a blur of gray and white with electric blue streaks, landed on a rooftop and immediately sped off. The red blur resolved into a man, lean and tall, wearing red body armor and an equally red visor that covered the top half of his face.

He grinned at us and offered a mocking salute.

“Yo, M&Ms, wish I could stay and chat, but I’ve got some mooks to deal with, so I gotta jet! Talk to you later!”

And then he was gone.

Miss Militia sighed. “Assault,” she said by way of explanation.

“O-oh.”

I didn’t have any idea what I was supposed to say to that.

Her hand went back up to her ear, “Armsmaster. Yeah, I just saw Assault and Battery. They’re on the scene. They decided to drop in.”

Almost against my will, I felt myself starting to smile.

She glanced over at me.

“She’s still here, yes. Recovering. I’m not sure she’ll be up to it. We might have to call in Panacea.”

Amy. My heart leapt in my chest, then settled in my stomach. No. I wasn’t ready to see her, again, after yesterday. Not with how things had been when she left. Would she refuse to heal me? Would she tell the Protectorate about Lisa, about the promise and the geis and Coil? It certainly seemed like she hadn’t, yet, but if it was right in her face, again, would she still keep her silence?

I didn't know. I didn't really want to find out.

"N-no," I rasped.

"Hold on, Armsmaster. Apocrypha?"

"C-can...heal myself," I managed. "J-just...as soon as...Assault 'n Battery..."

Miss Militia's brow furrowed, and then she looked away from me and down the alleyway towards the warehouse. "Assault, Battery, what's it look like in there?"

In the pause that followed, I closed my eyes and reached out to my other duplicates, to the ones that were in the warehouse and holding down all of Bakuda's goons. It was a little nauseating, seeing, hearing from that many perspectives all at once. After I'd ensured that they all still had their goons subdued, I switched to one near the door and had her look around, get a better view of things from a single angle.

Assault stood in the middle of all the madness, head swiveling as the woman in grey and white, Battery, went from goon to goon, tying their wrists with zip ties.

"Hey, M&Ms, what kind of powers does the new girl have, again? Because unless she's got a whole bunch of identical twins..."

In my real body, I heard Miss Militia say, "You weren't paying attention at the briefing?"

Battery snorted. "What else is new?"

Assault gasped theatrically and spun towards her, hand flying to his heart. "Honeybuns, I'm hurt! I always pay attention!"

"To Farmville, sure."

"That hurts, Honeybuns." He patted his chest. "Right here. Gets me right through the heart."

Miss Militia gave a little chuckle. "In any case, Assault, yes, that's one of Apocrypha's powers. I take it Bakuda's underlings are all handled but the wrapping?"

"Handled' is the word for it," said Assault. "She's got them all pinned and subdued. It's kind of boring, actually. The only thing we have to do is get them tied up."

"The only thing *I* have to do, you mean," Battery interjected wryly. "All *you're* doing is standing around."

"I'm surveying the situation!" Assault claimed, grinning. "Just like they teach us in those seminars, Honeybuns, remember?"

"Oh, so you *can* pay attention."

"When I want to." The smile slipped away. "There *is* something strange, though. I'm looking around and I'm noticing, there's a lot of people here that I wouldn't have expected to see."

“Like?” Miss Militia asked.

“Old people,” was the answer. “A couple of salarymen, it looks like. There’s a guy here who has to be pushing sixty. Another guy who looks like he just came home from a day at the office. Even a couple of kids that can’t be older than ten or eleven. I didn’t realize the ABB had that big of a draw.”

For a moment, as they fell silent, I started to look myself and realized he was right. There *were* people who didn’t look like they could possibly be ABB regulars. Middle-aged men who had the clean-cut look of salarymen. A couple of older folks in their fifties. Even, as Assault had said, a kid or two younger than *me*.

Why would *they*...

“Maybe,” Miss Militia said quietly, “Bakuda threatened them, too. Them and their families.”

I suddenly felt sick to my stomach.

So these people...the entire time, they’d been... And I just took them down, without even thinking about it? What about that guy she’d blown up, the one who’d been turned to glass alongside one of my duplicates? Had *he* been a...a *conscript* too? Some innocent man, dragged out of his home in the middle of the night and told to either work for Bakuda or have his family turned into ash?

“I guess it looks that way, huh?”

There was no humor in his voice, now.

“Handle them as gently as you can, Assault. That’s all we can do for them until this whole thing is sorted out.”

“Ain’t that the truth...”

They continued in silence, visiting each of the people I’d pinned and methodically binding their arms behind their backs. A few minutes later, when they were done, I let out a sigh and relaxed.

“Release.”

Deuce, Tres, and all of the other mes in the warehouse, they all vanished as I let go of the Hundred-Faced Hassan. There was a brief burst of noise from beside me, and Miss Militia winced and held her ear.

“Everything’s fine, Assault. Apocrypha is just...changing powersets, I think.”

I reached out, and my first instinct was to pull on Medea, the caster who had become my mainstay, who could heal as well as she could destroy, but just as I was about to, I stopped and considered that it *might* be a bad idea to pull out a hero who had problems with betrayal while sitting next to someone who...I wasn’t sure hadn’t betrayed me.

I still didn’t know if they’d known about Sophia.

Instead, I grabbed someone more reasonable, someone more level-headed and calm.

“S-set. In-Install.”

Immediately, I shrunk down almost ten inches. My hair straightened out, then everything behind my ears gathered itself into a braided bun. My vambraces turned into gauntlets. My bodysuit became a blue dress trimmed in gold. My vest became a cuirass and tassets. My boots became greaves and sabatons. The heart beating in my chest shuddered and strengthened, pumping liquid fire through my veins.

And most importantly, the divine sheath that ensured I would never spill a drop of blood got to work, healing my frayed and damaged nerves and smoothing out the tears in my muscles I'd caused in my thrashing.

Miss Militia was looking at me.

“Apocrypha?”

“Be at ease, Miss Militia,” I told her. “There are few things more effective at healing than my sheath.”

Immediately, I felt my face flush.

“Ah, that is to — I-I mean,” I corrected myself, “it's, uh, you don't need to worry about me. A-Arthur's sheath will take care of everything.”

“Arthur?” She paused and looked me up and down, and a skeptical line drew across her brow. “*King Arthur?*”

“Af...ter a fashion, yes,” I said. I wasn't quite sure how I could explain the whole thing, or, for that matter, my own confusion about whether or not these had once been *real people*, let alone if I *wanted* to. “Um, it's complicated?”

I saw her smile in the crinkle of her eyes. “So it would seem, yes.”

We fell into silence, after that, as I waited for my — *Arthur's* sheath to do its work. Over the minutes, the aches started to fade away, the tremors and the shaking began to stop, and slowly, it felt like I was gaining back my strength.

It was incredible, really, how quickly and easily my body was being healed. Damage that I might never have fully recovered from on my own was being repaired just by sitting there and letting Avalon do its work.

When it felt like my legs could support me again, I pulled my legs up beneath me and tried to stand.

It was effortless.

I didn't think, then, that I would ever take for granted the ability to just stand under your own power ever again. Not after having been without it, having been so weak and so feeble that I needed another person to hold me up just so that I didn't collapse immediately.

I held up a hand, armor clinking, and clenched my fist, testing my strength. Still not quite recovered. Good enough to fight, though. Good enough that it wouldn't hold me back too much.

"Apocrypha?" I turned back to Miss Militia. "Everything okay?"

"It's fine," I assured her. For lack of a better way to put it, I added, "Just stretching my legs."

"Back to normal, then?"

I frowned.

"Not quite. But close enough."

Although why that mattered to her... But maybe that was unfair. Miss Militia had never been anything but kind to me, and for all that I suspected the PRT and Protectorate's complicity in Sophia's wrongdoings, I still didn't *know*, one way or the other. If I was honest with myself, I was afraid to ask.

If even the warmth and kindness they had showed to me that night was nothing more than a veneer, a *mask*, then who and what was I supposed to trust, anymore?

A king must have a righteous heart. All else originates thence.

At the very least, I supposed I could hold onto the fact that I wasn't wrong, whatever they tried to tell me. *I* was Sophia's victim, and it was her arrogance and cruelty that had gotten her killed. I refused to suffer another Blackwell, another person who insisted *I* was the bully for standing up for myself.

"Good," said Miss Militia. "Then, are you able to stay for a little while longer? Armsmaster would like to speak with you."

My heart skipped a beat and I hesitated.

Armsmaster...wanted to speak to *me*?

I was almost tempted to say no and leave. It had been a long night and a lot had happened. Artoria was fresh and full of energy, but I just wanted to be done with it and climb into bed. Even though the damage was being healed and I'd be as good as new, it wasn't easy to just walk off something like that pain bomb as though it had never happened.

And when I thought about what Armsmaster could want with me...not much came to mind. To try and pitch the Wards again? Somehow, I doubted I'd made a strong enough impression or a powerful enough bond that he was coming to *make sure I was okay*.

But...

No king is a kingdom unto himself.

There was really no reason not to hear him out, in the end.

“I can wait,” I told her.

“Thank you,” said Miss Militia. “He should be here —”

At that moment, light flashed from the end of the alleyway, and with a nearly silent purr, a large motorcycle, carrying with it a familiar figure in blue and silver armor, pulled up in our direction.

“— shortly.” Beneath her breath, I heard her add, “Speak of the devil...”

And so he appears.

Armsmaster swung himself off with not quite as much grace as he had Monday night, looking a little more awkward without the additional momentum to make the motion smoother. The kickstand clicked out automatically, and the beast of a bike seemed to catch itself on it without any help from its rider.

“Miss Militia,” he greeted her a little stiffly.

“Armsmaster.”

He turned, then, to me and regarded me somewhat more carefully. “Apocrypha?”

“Yes?” I answered.

His head swiveled back around to Miss Militia, who told him, “King Arthur.”

He glanced in my direction again, then back to Miss Militia, who gave him a helpless shrug that seemed to encapsulate the phrase, ‘It’s complicated.’ I didn’t imagine it’d be any clearer if I tried to explain *that* incident, either, where Merlin had... Well. Mordred had to come from *somewhere*.