

Collateral 4.5

Thunder Feat.

The sound of a dozen fists striking wood and concrete was, appropriately, like thunder. My duplicates and I lashed out as one with my martial art's deadliest technique, and unlike my fight with Glory Girl, the splintering boards that had been placed over the windows and even the crumbling walls that had been worn thin by the salty sea air and unrelenting rain cracked and shattered beneath our fists.

This was the Thunder Feat, the skill with which Cuchulainn had felled a thousand men. I was still only a novice in its use, still only utilizing a small portion of its true might, but even with that fraction of its power, no part of this decrepit warehouse was capable of resisting me. It might as well have been made of tissue paper, for all the difference it would have made against my fists.

In another time and another place, without the threat of being bombed or the city being destroyed one explosion at a time, it would have been thrilling to watch solid concrete be obliterated by my own two hands, but this was not that time and not that place.

Instead, as I came through the wall and bits of concrete and shards of wood spiraled around me, I focused in on Bakuda, who turned almost in slow motion. She swung her rocket launcher around, the end of it trailing her as she whipped around towards me. Whether she planned to use it or it was just a reflex reaction, I didn't know, and I didn't care to find out.

As soon as my feet touched down, I threw myself at her in a feat of acrobatics and agility that would have left the me of three months ago wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Bakuda was halfway through her turn when I slammed into her, driving my knees into her chest and using my weight and my momentum to push her to the ground.

The landing was jarring and almost dislodged me, sending my knees into Bakuda's shoulder joints, but I bounced and managed to stay atop her. I heard a crack like a gunshot, and Bakuda's scream came through her mask accompanied by a mechanical buzz. She floundered beneath me, jerking, throwing her head back and into the floor. A metallic clang echoed, and in the harsh lights, flecks of red blood splattered the walkway beneath her.

In a distant sense, I was aware of my other selves pouncing, as well, tackling their targets to the floor as more screams rent the air. As I rummaged about through the pockets built into my pants, more duplicates spawned of shadow and vapor and I absently sent them off to handle the extras my original twelve hadn't accounted for.

The seconds stretched impossibly long before my fingers wrapped around something round and hard, and I pulled out a quarter that I had prepared for tonight. It was smooth and featureless — pressed flat by Aife's raw strength — and carved into its surface was a series of runes that formed a spell of binding.

This was another part of the plan Lisa and I had worked out. There were plenty of ways I could have taken down Bakuda, if I was being honest, and if she really *had* killed Dad, then maybe...

But that wasn't a step I wanted to take. So I needed something that could hold Bakuda without requiring me to switch heroes mid-fight and let the goons do as they pleased.

That was where Aife and her runic magic came in. It didn't need to be fancy, it didn't need to last years, and it didn't take hours, days, or weeks to make. Sure, it might've been better if I'd used a volcanic stone or a rock plucked from a clean, fresh water spring, but for a quick and dirty job, the five minutes to take a quarter, press it flat between my fingers, and carve a few symbols into it was good enough.

"Hold still," I told Bakuda, and I slid the quarter under the top edge of her mask, where it couldn't be dislodged, to press it against her forehead.

Bakuda jerked beneath me, groaning, and one of her legs moved. Then, suddenly —

BOOM

An explosion went off inside the warehouse at the same time that one of my other selves vanished from the Delusional Illusion, and I startled, looking up, to find that a goon and one of my duplicates had been transformed into...was that *glass*?

It was like a sculpture, a perfect rendering of a man, pressed into the floor, with me perched atop him, holding him down with one hand and twisting his arms behind his back with the other. It glittered and shone, refracting the light from the ceiling and scattering it like raindrops. The only thing missing was his...head?

Petrification...? No, this wasn't turning them into stone, was it? I could see the resemblance to the effects of Medusa's eyes, but it wasn't exactly the same. This was more like...transmutation? The transformation of one material into another by changing its structural makeup? Nicolas would know for sure.

Either way, Bakuda had just used it to turn a *human being* into glass.

Was *this* what a Tinker who specialized in bombs could do?

"LEE!" she gurgled from underneath me.

My attention swung back to her, but barely a second later, I felt more than heard someone appear behind me, and as I twisted around and turned to face him, something swung out for my neck, skittering across the surface of my costume like a figure skater over ice. Faint gold sparks flickered in my peripheral vision — my base form's defensive shield had protected me.

He'd tried to kill me.

I lashed out, more instinct and muscle memory than an intentional response, and planted my fist in his gut with more strength than I really meant to. I had a bare moment, little more than a glimpse, to catch sight of his imposing mask, shaped in the visage of what must have been a Japanese demon, as he doubled over. Then, in between one blink and the next, his body exploded in a shower of grey ash.

Oni Lee. It had to be.

No sooner had I realized it than did the air shift again and a shadow loomed over me, and I leaned backwards and under the second swing of his knife. I watched it pass in front of my face, saw out of the corner of my eye one of Bakuda's legs, mangled and broken, and after it had gone, I swung myself forward and lashed out again.

For a second time, my fist found home in his belly, and for a second time, he exploded into ash. Beneath me, Bakuda gave another cry of pain, because the motion had driven my knees back into her shoulders. I paid her little mind, because Oni Lee had already reappeared, was already getting ready to attack me, again.

But I'd continued forward and into a crouch, and as Oni Lee's knife came back for me a third time, leapt up and back and over the blow like a spring, flipping in midair. I came down behind him on the balls of my feet with a little bounce, then backed away and put as much space as I dared between me and him.

Oni Lee hadn't been part of the plan. Lisa had been *sure* that Bakuda wouldn't want to involve him, would want this to be *her* debut, *her* moment to make an impression. Bakuda wanted this to be her chance to make a name for herself, and having another cape on her side would take the focus off of her. Lisa'd been so sure of it that we hadn't even bothered to go over the possibility of him actually showing up.

She'd been *so damn sure*... But then, even Lisa wasn't omniscient, was she?

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, watching as he turned to face me, silent as the grave, and stared at me through the black pits that made up his mask's eyes. The grinning, shark-toothed mouth leered at me from under the shadow of a pair of horns, and from under the bandolier of knives and grenades — some bearing the distinct look of Bakuda's work — peeked some kind of thin, armored vest. Probably kevlar. In his hand, he held a large, wicked-looking combat knife.

Which meant I didn't have any plans for how to fight him. Even back when I'd first started looking up the local villains, I'd earmarked him for later, for another time when I could focus entirely on him, because his power was the one that wasn't as simple and easy to handle as Including the right Noble Phantasm or Installing the right hero. I just hadn't ever actually gotten around figuring out a solution.

Sure, I could punch him and kick him all day, destroy every clone he threw at me. That was the problem — they were all clones, duplicates, temporary fakes. I wasn't hitting the real Oni Lee, so I was never doing any actual damage to him. If it was just a matter of waiting for him to get tired and leave, that was fine, I could do that all day.

I glanced back at Bakuda, only took my eyes off of Oni Lee for less than a second.

Unfortunately, I didn't have all day and I couldn't afford to let him distract me long enough for Bakuda to escape. That meant that I had to find a way to beat him and beat him quickly, all without — I checked briefly on my other selves, but with the racket that was loud enough to pierce the rumble of my pulse in my ears, I wasn't surprised to find that they were still in the process of subduing the goons Bakuda had brought with her. So I had to find a way to beat Oni Lee before

Bakuda got the chance to escape *without* swapping out my current hero, or else switch and risk finding out *exactly* how bulletproof my shield was.

Terrific.

If I'd prepared another runestone... But no, that wouldn't have worked either, would it? I still ran into the same problem of needing to hit the *real* Oni Lee for it to knock him out of the fight. Square one, just with one more option.

I took a calming breath and readied myself. If I was fast enough... How quickly did Oni Lee even teleport? If I was fast enough, I could catch him between one and the other.

Right?

I didn't have a better plan than that, at the time.

"The *fuck* are you *waiting for*, Lee?" Bakuda screeched. "Kill her! Kill her *now!*"

Oni Lee's grip on his knife tightened, and then he was gone. I'd learned, though, and when he appeared behind me, I stepped back, threw up my right arm to catch him at the middle of his forearm, and then I sank my left elbow into his gut — and before I even felt the resistance of his body vanish, he was in front of me, again, not swinging, but stabbing with that huge combat knife towards my belly.

I twisted out of the way to avoid it, but he was too close and I wasn't quite fast enough, so it skittered over my costume again, sliding over the fabric of my vest like it was made of ice and throwing up gold sparks. I could feel the pressure of it as it curved around and past my hip.

I was already moving, twisting back around to deliver another punch, but before my fist even touched his mask, another of him was beside me and grappling with my other arm. The knife stabbed for me again, aimed and angled to slip through my ribs, and I stomped down with one foot, pushing myself backwards and wrenching him off balance. I took one more step back —

— and into the embrace of the duplicate that had appeared behind me. Before I even realized what was happening, he had grabbed me under the armpits and linked his hands behind my head. Barely had his fingers intertwined against my hair than did yet another duplicate appear in front of me, hefting that knife and pulling his arm back to stab.

But I hadn't been training as martial artist for nothing. The fighting style of the ancient Celts was one that focused on agility, speed, and flexibility, on hitting hard and fast and simply not being there for the return blow. It was, in many ways, far more acrobatic than anything I knew about Asian styles, and even then, I'd seen a few Jackie Chan movies with this kind of situation in it.

And, well, my base form had a minor Brute power. Automatically, things that normal people required tons of conditioning for to develop the muscle strength to pull off came much easier to me.

As the last duplicate came for me, I threw myself back and up with my legs, landing one foot in the advancing Lee's chin as the one holding me lost his grip and fell over backwards. I felt only the

slightest twinge of remorse as I came down on his chest, stomping with both feet. He was only a duplicate, after all, a fake, and his lifespan was measured in seconds anyway.

As the duplicate beneath my boots exploded into ash like a popped balloon, I was surprised to find that the one I kicked had stumbled backwards and was rubbing faintly at his chin. The real one, it had to be.

My heart leapt. That was the *real* one, not a duplicate, and he was distracted, if only for a moment. I need to press the advantage, put him out of the fight, *now*, while I could be sure that he was the real Oni Lee and not one of the clones. I just needed to —

Clink

I barely heard the noise, amidst all the rest of the chaos. It was like a pin dropping during a concert, and even when I thought back on the fight later, I had no idea how I'd managed to notice it, but I did.

When I looked down, there, sitting by my feet and lolling slightly to from side to side, was a grenade, and one of Bakuda's, to boot. For a few fractions of a second, as my heart stopped and I realized what it was, it gleamed up at me, all chrome and vaguely futuristic, and it seemed the most sinister, evil thing I had ever laid eyes on.

Contrary to the clink that I had barely heard, the click of the thing arming itself sounded thunderous.

“Shi —”

At the last possible moment, I managed to throw up my arms to guard my face and my head, and then the grenade went off with an echoing *BOOM*, throwing me back with an incredible amount of force.

I was flying through the air for far longer than I really thought I should have been, and I landed roughly on my back on something hard and solid and whole — and it *hurt*. The air was driven from my lungs by the impact, and my head cracked against the ground, filling my vision with stars.

No, wait, those were *actual* stars.

I gasped, heaving and trying to draw in air, and blinked up at the night sky. Around me, a pair of buildings jutted upwards to form a frame, and after a moment of staring dumbly at the sky, I realized that Bakuda's grenade had thrown me not only backwards, but out of the warehouse and into the alleyway behind it.

And it had *hurt*.

I shot up, scrambling to my feet, and tried to ignore how my back felt like one, gigantic bruise and how the back of my head throbbed from where I'd hit it. I patted down my stomach and my chest and my thighs, but I found nothing, and when I looked down, my front was entirely unscathed. Fortunately, that...I decided to call it a “force bomb.” Fortunately, that force bomb and whatever shrapnel it had thrown at me hadn't actually done any real harm.

It *had* gotten through my shield, though.

And...yes, *there*, even as I watched, my defensive barrier shimmered back to life around my body. That force bomb had taken it down, if only for a few seconds. I had no idea exactly how much power had gone into it, but whatever it was, it'd been enough to pop my barrier like a soap bubble. I'd have been a goner, probably had my organs pasted and liquified, if I'd been a normal person.

Fuck, that was close, though. He'd almost —

Oni Lee was suddenly in front of me, holding another one of Bakuda's canisters. I had only a moment, little more than a second, to realize what he intended, then he released the trigger, and as I tried to leap away, it went off.

Time slowed around me. Oni Lee's motions started to lose speed, such that his fingers appeared as though they were moving through molasses. The light coming from the warehouse and from the stars above started to dim and turn red, and something tugged on my barrier as my leap carried me backwards. Even the sparks and flickers that it let off started to smear and change colors before my eyes.

I was the only thing still moving at normal speed, until I cleared the radius of the bomb's effects and landed further away down the alley. In front of me, a large sphere of altered space had formed, and everything inside of it was slowly dimming and turning red and fading away. It was like someone was dialing down a dimmer switch that only affected that one spot.

"Fuck," I breathed again. What *was* that? Did one of Bakuda's bombs just *freeze time* for everything inside the blast zone?

That... That was *insane*.

I had no time to consider exactly how ridiculous it was, because Oni Lee was in front of me, again, swinging his knife for my neck. I didn't bother meeting him — I ducked under his arm, coiled my legs beneath me, then *jumped* up and as high as I could go, and once I'd reached the apex, I used a jutting windowsill to propel myself even higher.

I landed on the roof of another warehouse, an old thing much like the others around me, made of brick and lined with gravel on the top. It would give me maybe a few seconds to get my bearings, a moment of breathing space to gather my thoughts.

And it was just a better idea, overall. Any idiot knew that explosives of any kind were always more dangerous in close quarters and tight spaces than they were out in the open.

Okay. So, obviously, I'd *vastly* underestimated Bakuda. That was apparent, now. When I'd tried to imagine that she could do the sorts of things my casters could do, I obviously hadn't taken that thought seriously enough. Transmutation, a localized field that bent the fabric of space and time over her knee? It would be more accurate to say that she could do things with bombs that any single *one* of my casters wouldn't be able to do.

Except maybe Medea. I hadn't explored her limits quite as thoroughly as I probably could have.

Not the point, I thought, scolding myself for straying.

Right. So, for sheer versatility, Bakuda could outmatch any of my individual casters. That was bad. On the other hand, it seemed that stuff that didn't pack enough *oomph* to take out my barrier just didn't work on me. That was good. I didn't intend on testing *exactly* how immune I was to something like that transmutation bomb or something that compressed space into a tiny dot or whatever, but I had a better chance of getting out of this if I screwed up.

What was *really* tripping me up was —

Across from me, Oni Lee appeared atop another roof, suddenly and silently, and for a moment, he simply stared.

— him. The shell game he was playing with all of those duplicates, never risking his real body, spamming clones all the time, *that* was what I was really having trouble with.

I started to reach for an Install, looking for a hero who could take him down effortlessly, but I'd barely started before I stopped.

The last time I'd used an Install for a fight, I'd destroyed an entire street. This was a *much* tighter collection of buildings, collateral was a *much* bigger concern, and even if they were thugs, I didn't want to take the chance that I might kill all of those people inside the warehouse. I didn't want to be a murderer, not for Lung, and not for any of these wretches.

Plus, the only thing holding any of those gangers in place was my duplicates' hands. The moment I switched, one of them could go to Bakuda's aid, and then she'd escape and have another shot at hurting, *killing* Dad. If she'd been willing to go as far as threaten his life and bomb a bunch of innocent people just to get my *attention*, there was no way she wouldn't go *at least* that far in revenge for the leg I broke.

My hands curled into fists.

I needed to get back to her and finish what I'd started, and Oni Lee was the only thing getting in my way. His clones were making it difficult, impossible to take him out — but two could play at that game. I had about fifty of my own still in reserve. If I could leverage them to force him into position...

Fine. If that's the way you want to do this, I can do it that way, too.

Oni Lee disappeared from the rooftop across from me, but I already knew his pattern, and as he appeared behind me, one of my own formed from shadow and vapor and crushed him before he could move. As the ash fluttered and fell, one, two, six more formed around me, positioned like an honor guard or the Secret Service.

He reappeared back on the rooftop he'd just left, regarding me with what I might have called caution, in another person. In someone like him, it could just as easily — and far more likely — have been a predatory examination of my weaknesses.

Come on, I thought. *Take the bait.*

Movement. Oni Lee vanished, and suddenly, six more of him appeared around me and my own copies, one after the other. Before they could even pull the pins on the grenades they'd grabbed from their bandoliers, my other selves reached out and crushed them, too, and their ash joined the gravel at our feet.

I hadn't moved.

I swallowed nervously as my heart thudded anxiously in my chest.

Come on, I thought at him. You're not gonna get me like that. Take the bait.

He was too fast for me to hit him between teleports, or at least, he teleported so quickly that he was already gone by the time I was reacting to his appearance. In that case, I needed to force him into a situation where he *couldn't* teleport immediately, where he was there long enough for me to land a decisive blow.

For another long moment, Oni Lee observed me, again. I didn't dare take my attention off of him long enough to check on how things were going inside the warehouse.

Then, he vanished again, only this time, he didn't reappear around me, like he had before, and my heart leapt in my chest —

CRACK

There was a sound like thunder, the sickening crunch of something hard and sturdy snapping and breaking, and suddenly, Oni Lee was lying face down on the rooftop in front of me. I felt my lips pull up into a grin.

Success.

I glanced over to my hidden duplicate, the seventh one who had slipped away while Oni Lee wasn't paying attention to her, and gave her a nod. She gave me her own grin, then promptly vanished, and the gravel she'd been holding in one hand as ammunition fell back into place.

The only direction he could attack from where I'd be sure he was the real thing, at least long enough to hit him, was above me. With six of me huddled close enough to protect me and each of them fast enough to take out one of his before they could pull the pin on a grenade, if he wanted to hit me at all, he needed to come from a direction I wouldn't be watching moving at speed with enough time to arm his grenade that I couldn't prevent it. The alternative would have been trying to swamp me with clones — except he had no idea that I had a limit on how many I could summon, either.

Cautiously, I approached Oni Lee, who was disturbingly still. If not for the subtle movements of his back as he breathed, I might have thought him dead. With the toe of one boot, I wedged my foot under his uninjured shoulder and carefully turned him over.

And then recoiled, startled, as he carelessly yanked on the pin of every grenade he could reach.

“Shit —”

Something slammed into me from the side —

BOOM

— and then my world was thunder and force and crushing *silence*.

After a moment, I became aware of myself again. I had no idea how much time had passed, but it felt simultaneously like forever and less than a second. I blinked open eyes I hadn't realized I'd closed and found myself on my back, staring up at the sky, again. The gravel beneath my back was like salt in the open wound that was the bruise I'd just picked up minutes — hours? Days? — ago.

At first, there was no sound at all. My ears were stuffed with cotton, and I couldn't even hear myself breathe. Then, the ringing started, a shrill, high pitched whine that threatened to deafen me all over again. It was like someone had set a siren next to my ears, because that was all that I could hear.

I picked myself up and stumbled to my feet, clumsily, drunkenly, like I was just learning how to walk. My feet were unsteady beneath me, and my balance was so skewed that I was having a hard time figuring out which direction was up.

I shook my head to try and clear it, and *that* was when the situation started to come back to me. Bakuda. The bombs. The goons in the warehouse. Oni Lee. Oni Lee *setting off almost all of his grenades at once, right in my face*. That *sonnuva* —

“Hey, bitch!”

I turned towards the voice, my *enemy's* voice, *Bakuda's* voice. She stood in the hole I'd made in the warehouse, her rocket launcher hefted onto one shoulder as she used the wall to keep herself upright. Something whizzed past my face.

Clink

“Chew on that, motherfucker!”

Clink-clink

I turned back with what felt like agonizing slowness, and there, sitting innocently in the gravel, was another of Bakuda's bombs.

Maybe, if I'd been at this for longer, I might have done better. Maybe, if this was more than my third ever fight — only really my second, if you didn't count that thing with Glory Girl — I would have reacted faster. Maybe, if I'd been as experienced and if my instincts had been as honed as some of my heroes, neither Oni Lee nor Bakuda would have ever gotten the drop on me.

But I wasn't that experienced. I'd fought Lung, Glory Girl, and now I was fighting Bakuda and Oni Lee. I hadn't had the time for my responses to become instant and unthinking. I hadn't had the time to become *that* good.

So by the time I was throwing myself off of the roof and away from the bomb, it had already gone off, and —

PAIN

— the world melted away again.

For an eternity, the agony was all I felt. Liquid fire along every inch of skin, acid poured all over me, every single nerve prodded with a hot iron. I burned, hotter and hotter and hotter, like I was falling into the sun, like every bit of me was being seared away, like if I let it, even my mind would be destroyed.

That broken arm had *nothing* on this.

The landing was jarring, but I barely felt it. I was trying, desperately, hopelessly, to keep myself from falling over some invisible edge, from *breaking*, and it felt like I was holding onto my sanity by my fingertips. After a moment, the sound of someone screaming, loud enough and shrill enough to wake the dead, started to pierce through the white-hot agony of my torment.

It was another few seconds before I realized it was me.

Somehow, somehow, I managed to hold on, even as I screamed until my throat was raw and aching. Even as the bruise on my back throbbed, now more painful than it had ever been, I managed to hold on. Even as I wished, *wished* for something as sweet as an *end*, I managed to hold on.

And then, finally, the agony began to fade, and I panted, out of breath and exhausted, as I came back to myself and my world became more than just me and that pain.

It was hard to focus. Even though the pain was starting to go away, my arms and legs still trembled from it. I felt as weak as a newborn and twice as vulnerable. A fly could have killed me, for all I could have stopped it, right then.

And as I forced my eyes open, forced myself to push past the remnants of the pain and try to *move*, it was to find Oni Lee, ominous and demon-masked, standing over me with that enormous knife. One of his shoulders, it was plain to see, was in no condition to be used. My duplicate's Thunder Feat had shattered it, and the arm attached to it hung, limp and useless, at his side.

And yet, despite how much pain he was in, he made no sound, but for his slightly labored breathing. He merely hefted that knife, holding it as surely as ever, and his intent was clear. He was going to kill me, even if he had to stab and stab and stab until he had no strength left.

I wouldn't be able to stop him.

He took a step towards me, raising his knife, even as I tried frantically to back away —

And then, suddenly, a silvery cylinder erupted from his chest as though it had been there all along.