

Interlude 10.e: The Good Doctor

Bonesaw had no idea where she was or how she'd got there.

It *felt* familiar, as familiar as Jack's smile, as familiar as Siberian's fingers running through her hair, familiar as Shatterbird's grin, sharklike and vicious. There was a bone-deep certainty that she had been here before, once, that she knew this place and knew it well, like the back of her hand.

But she couldn't put a name to it, couldn't put her finger on *how* she knew it, *where* it was, *when* she'd been there, and it made that familiarity itch at the base of her skull, a constant, annoying tickle.

It must have been one of the towns the Nine had visited, over the years. That was the only answer she could come up with. Which one? She didn't know, even though she was sure she should. The Nine had visited many sleepy little towns, after all, and even if this one felt special and important, she couldn't be expected to remember them all, could she?

Bonesaw made a mental note to spitball a memory enhancer, whenever she found Jack and the others and they went to lay low. Maybe test it out on Shatterbird — oh, or maybe Mannequin? He might have a few ideas, too.

That was for later, though. First, she had to figure out where she was and find the others, because *gosh darn it*, where was everyone?

"Jack!" she called down the empty street. There was no answer, not even the panicked scurrying of someone trying to escape notice. "Jack?"

Nothing. She strained with her ears and all the sensor suites she'd built into her body, but there was still nothing.

"Sibby?" she called again. "Crawler? Burnscar!"

Still, there was no response but silence. There wasn't even a conveniently timed breeze howling along around her, like in the cartoons.

Gosh golly gee, this would be so much easier if she just had some of her spiderbots, but those had disappeared, too. Maybe someone had gotten the bright idea to launch an EMP at them? If it took down her implants for a little while, that might have been enough to knock her unconscious for a while, and that would neatly explain her memory problem.

Except she thought she'd gotten around that sort of thing. Her upgrades would be pretty bad if they couldn't handle a little old EMP, after all.

Darn it. Well, it wasn't like the rest of the Nine would just up and abandon her, right? So they had to be around here somewhere, didn't they? All she had to do was find out where they'd all run off to and everything would be fine, then.

It was as good a plan as any, thought Bonesaw, and so she set off, walking down the gentle slope of the hill the town was built over. Her head swiveled this way and that as she went, looking around at

the houses and the cars in the driveways. They all felt as familiar to her now as they had when she first woke up, although she couldn't remember why, and there were no people around who might help jog her memory.

Jog her memory. Bonesaw had always wanted to try and see if she could do something like that, but what would a jogging memory look like, exactly? Oh! Maybe she could mash together a bunch of people together, make their faces look like Jack and the others, then take it for a walk on a leash? It had been so very long since she'd had the chance to keep a pet, and something dumb but affectionate seemed like a nice idea.

Ah, but she was getting ahead of herself again. She had to stop doing that. Jack had admonished her for it enough times, as it was.

So far, it looked like she was alone on the street. All of the townsfolk were completely absent, so either the rest of the Nine had already been through and killed everyone in their own homes or everyone else had evacuated once they heard the Nine were in town. That would just make things boring, though, wouldn't it? If everyone else was dead or gone, that meant Bonesaw wouldn't have anyone to play around with. Dead bodies were harder to mess with and had too small a window for anything but a rush job before the realities of decay started to set in.

Maybe the rest of the Nine were hanging out in one of the houses? No, they must be, if they weren't out on the street with her.

"Jack?" Bonesaw called again. It was rude to raise her voice, but she couldn't see anyone around, so it was probably okay.

Nothing. Not even someone scurrying in one of the nearby houses, hoping to escape Bonesaw's notice.

"This is getting kinda spooky."

She kept walking, but other than her own footsteps, the town was utterly silent, without even the buzz of insects or other fauna. With every step, the nostalgic feeling of familiarity got stronger and stronger, welling up inside of her chest and tickling her lungs.

This really was a place she knew, wasn't it? Yeah, she'd definitely been here before, and something really important must have happened here, too. Maybe she'd had a breakthrough? Or maybe one of her favorite creations had been made here? Oh, or maybe they'd picked up the Siberian here? So many different milestones they'd made along the way that it was hard to pick just the one that it could have been.

Ugh, if only she could remember.

Eventually, her feet carried her down the road and to a stop in front of one, particular house, a house that looked so achingly familiar that the memory felt like it was trying to crawl out of her throat. Why? There wasn't anything special about it, really. It wasn't any nicer than any of the other houses around, and it wasn't like it was painted a drastically different color, either. There were no fancy additions or adornments, no crazily expensive car sitting in the driveway, no old timey architecture or anything.

It was just a house.

So why did it feel like so much more? Like she should be able to walk in and sit down at the dinner table with her eyes closed?

Gosh darn it, this was getting frustrating. It was like the entire thing sat upon the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't, for the life of her, force it to come out of her mouth. If it was so important and so memorable, shouldn't it also be so easy to figure out that she could have recited the entire thing front to back and in reverse?

Maybe if she knew how she'd been knocked out and got here in the first place...

Nothing to it but to go inside, was there?

And so, she stepped forward, twisted open the front door, and stepped inside.

Except the inside wasn't all that special, either. It was ordinary, nothing out of place or unusual, a home. Lived in, used, with all the signs of a family in residence who lived ordinary lives and did ordinary family things.

All the signs except for the actual family, that was.

Bonesaw walked slowly through the living room.

Nothing. A couch, a reclining chair, a TV — one of those old CRT ones from just on the cusp of the HD revolution a few years back, before flat screens became a thing, even a few kids' toys from the children who once would have played there — but no sign of actual people. No corpses, no blood spatter.

But such an intense feeling of nostalgia that it almost made her dizzy.

She made her way into the kitchen and then the dining room, and the nostalgia only got worse. There was still no sign of people, but if she squinted, she could imagine a vaguely familiar set of blobs sitting at the table, faces and voices indistinct but oh so achingly familiar.

A crash drew her back to the living room, where the corpse of a middle-aged man had magically appeared, carved up and stitched up and...and...and she *knew* him, didn't she? How? Where from? The nostalgic familiarity remained, stronger than ever, but it was like a memory she'd purposefully forgotten: locked off from conscious thought.

"How do I know you?" she asked the corpse. The dead eyed stare didn't answer.

Footsteps thudded along the ceiling from the floor above, and Bonesaw bounded for the stairs, taking them two at a time — and the instant she reached the top, laying half out of the bathroom, she found another corpse. Younger than the man downstairs, maybe his son or nephew, but still just as dead and still just as carved up.

Still just as familiar.

But she recognized the cuts, now. This was *Jack's* work.

A soft murmur. Bonesaw whipped around and raced towards it, towards a bedroom just down the hall.

Finally, finally, she must have found them. She shoved open the door — a rude thing to do, but she was too excited to be nice and gentle —

“Hurry,” said Jack’s voice with something approaching gentleness. “You have time. You can fix her, can’t you?”

“Jack!” Bonesaw squealed, rushing into the room. “Jack, there you are, mister! I had to look so hard for you!”

But Jack ignored her as she ran towards him, back turned to her. He just kept watching whatever was in front of him.

“Jack?”

He didn’t reply, that was how intense his focus was. She came up beside him, and when she looked at his face, there was a smile hinting at the corners of his lips, his secret smile that he wore when people were playing into his hands and didn’t realize it.

“Come on,” he said softly. “You can do it. Don’t you love your mommy?”

“Oh!” Bonesaw said as she realized what was going on. “Did you find someone interestin’, Jack? We gonna have someone new in the family?”

She turned to look at what must be their newest recruit and was struck at once by another pang of familiarity — and an equally potent surge of suspicious jealousy, because the girl on the floor was really young. She couldn’t have been older than six.

Jack wasn’t trying to replace her, was he? *Bonesaw* was supposed to be the darling of the group.

Still. There was something...off about this. Strange. Like the rest of this place, a niggling familiarity that told her she should recognize it, even though she didn’t.

“No,” the little girl said, voice tired and devoid of emotion.

Bonesaw’s heart shuddered in her chest.

No. No, this couldn’t be...

“No?” Jack asked, like he’d already known the answer.

Could it?

How?

“I don’t love her,” the little girl said.

Dream. This had to be a dream. It couldn't be real, because it had already *happened*.

Cherish. Was this Cherish's doing? She'd been *so sure* that she'd figured out how to get around Cherish's powers. Could she have been wrong? Had Cherish only pretended to be stopped by it, so that she could wait for the right moment?

"Alrighty. Say goodbye, then."

"Goodbye, Mommy."

The woman on the floor wheezed, tried to speak. Nothing came out, and the sutures on her face pulled the flesh in ways that made her lips move awkwardly and at odd angles.

But Bonesaw knew what she was trying to say. Her own lips formed around the words, and she couldn't stop them.

"Well," said Jack. "That's that, then."

At last, he turned to Bonesaw, smiling. "I think she'll make a wonderful addition to our little group. Don't you?"

She didn't answer. She knew she should. She knew what she was supposed to say, what Jack wanted to hear. She just couldn't say it.

"Don't you?" asked a new voice.

Bonesaw whipped around, and there, standing a few feet past Jack, was a girl, maybe sixteen, but tall and lean. She was dressed in purple and gold and black, although her mask was gone, revealing a narrow face with large eyes and a wide, expressive mouth.

Apocrypha. The up-and-coming hero from Brockton Bay. A couple of the Nine had said something about going to visit there, but Jack had always put it off, saying that Brockton was too hot to try and go after. He'd told them they had to wait until all of the hubbub died down around that Leviathan situation.

Except, it seemed, Apocrypha had come to them.

"This isn't real," said Bonesaw.

The other girl's lips tightened. "No," she agreed, "I guess it isn't."

"What were you trying to do?" asked Bonesaw. "Did you think you could scare me with this? Or maybe you were tryna say something, like Jack is evil and I'm evil and I can totally be a better person. Is that it? You think you can make me realize the error of my ways or some stupid *crud* like that?"

No reaction. No wince or flinch or twitch of the lips that would give it away, tell her that she'd hit the mark.

“All I did was specify your moment of greatest regret. This?” Apocrypha gestured to the scene around them, to Jack and the others, to the little house, to the bodies on the floor. “This is what your own mind provided.”

This hero had to be either stupid or stupidly new. She certainly wasn’t the first to have hesitated or tried moralizing, just because Bonesaw was little. She was just the most recent; all the others had either died quickly because of it or figured out not to bother.

“You’re tellin’ me I regret this? That I regret joinin’ Jack? Becomin’ Bonesaw?” she asked, laughing incredulously. “Well, you’re wrong! I don’t regret a minute of it! Joinin’ Jack was the best decision I ever made!”

The other girl tilted her head to one side, frowning skeptically. “Really?”

“Darn tootin’!”

“Then why,” said Apocrypha, “are you trying so hard to save her?”

“What —”

Bonesaw looked down, and her mother — *Riley’s* mother — looked back up, her face pale and drawn and tired, her blood splattered about her cheeks and neck.

Bonesaw tried to draw away, but she couldn’t, something stopped her, and her hands, moving on their own without her conscious direction, were repairing the rents in her mother’s flesh, the wounds that Jack had carved into her body. Not improving, not modifying, not enhancing, the way she had with so many other people, so many other works of her *art*, but repairing.

But more wounds opened up, even as the ones she was fixing closed. Ruptured spleen, severed carotid, punctured lung. She didn’t stop to think about it. In fact, she wasn’t really thinking at all, she just moved, hands frantically but methodically sewing and cutting and re-sewing.

“What am I doing?” she asked herself. *“Why am I even trying?”*

She felt the presence of Jack looming over her, watching, grinning. She knew what he wanted. She knew he expected her to make another masterpiece.

But she didn’t. She *couldn’t*. She knew she was supposed to, she knew it was expected, heck, she even had a few ideas on what improvements to make, too. But her hands *wouldn’t do it*, they just kept putting her mother back together.

It didn’t make any sense. It didn’t make any sense at all. She was Bonesaw. She made art out of people. This woman meant nothing to her, was just another body, to be modified to suit her vision. And if she were to die, so what? A corpse was a corpse, and there was nothing here that Bonesaw was attached to, nobody who was important.

So why was she trying so hard to keep this woman alive?

There was a limit, though, to what even Bonesaw could accomplish. Eventually, inevitably, too much damage accumulated, and she just didn't have the resources to fix it all.

Riley's mother looked up at her, gave a faint smile that pulled at her uneven stitches, and with her last breath, said, "Be a good girl."

And then, she died, and Bonesaw's hands stopped, because there was nothing more she could do with what she had available.

"You can't change the past," said Apocrypha, like it was a nugget of some great wisdom.

Bonesaw *whipped* around, lunging for her, activating all of the weapons she'd built into her body — except none of them *worked*, and she was too short, and she stumbled and fell onto her face.

"Owie," she mumbled.

And when she looked down at her legs, they were shorter than she remembered, and so were her arms, and so was she. Twelve-year-old Bonesaw was now six years old.

Just like that little girl.

"What happened here can't be undone," the other girl went on. "Nothing in this world can bring your family back. They all died six years ago. And since then..."

She gestured, and as Bonesaw looked back, the room in her little house transformed into a long, dark hallway. Her mother... *Riley's* mother was still there, blood oozing slowly from open wounds, but beyond her were her brother, Drew, and her father, and past them were piles and piles of bodies, stacked haphazardly, stretching off into the distance.

Bonesaw recognized each and every one of them. Not by name, because she'd never known most of their names, but their faces, their flesh, those were all familiar to her.

They were all the people she'd made part of her art.

Then, they warped and changed, and they were all Drew and Riley's mom and dad, and a little Riley worked tirelessly on each of them, stitching their wounds up, then stitching their parts together when she ran out of the resources she needed to keep them alive.

"Don't worry," said one of the little girls. *"I'll fix you up, good as new, and we can be a family again. Maybe Jack will let me keep you, if I make it interesting enough!"*

Of course he would. Jack always let her bring her best creations along, her best works of *art*. They never lasted long, though. They always got taken apart or destroyed within a month or two. Jack said that no one else understood what she was doing and how beautiful her work was, so they went about breaking them whenever they could.

Even if she'd patched her mommy — her mother and father up again, made them into one of her works, they would have been destroyed in just a couple of weeks.

“What’s the point of this?” asked Bonesaw. “I already said I don’t regret it. You’re wasting your time, thinking you’re gonna appeal to my bleeding heart or whatever.”

“You can’t change the past,” Apocrypha repeated, “but you don’t have to be ruled by it.”

Everything clicked, and suddenly, she understood.

Bonesaw laughed.

“You’re preaching at me!” she cackled. “*Gosh darn*, you’re actually preaching at me! What are you, stupid?”

It wasn’t a nice, good girl thing to say, but it was just so silly that she couldn’t stop herself.

“Preaching?” the girl tilted her head to one side, a single eyebrow rising. “I don’t think you understand. *I’m* not the one in control, here. *You* are.”

That stopped Bonesaw cold. “What?”

“I told you, I only chose your moment of greatest regret. Everything else...?”

She waved an arm as though to encompass the whole house and everything in it.

“It’s all you. You, sustaining this whole thing, because you never faced up to what happened back then.”

“I *don’t* regret it,” Bonesaw snapped. “I *chose* to join Jack and the Nine. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“Then why are we still here?”

“Riley!” a voice called. “Dinner’s ready!”

“Coming, Mommy!”

A little girl — the same one she’d just seen trying to put her mother back together — rushed past, giggling as she hopped down the steps. *Thump, thump, thump*, they thudded beneath her feet.

The scene melted, and suddenly, they were in a dining room, watching that little girl smile and laugh and eat with her family, with her mommy, her daddy, her brother, Drew, and Muffles sat over in the corner, gobbling up his dog food from his silvery bowl.

They were all happy and joyful and the picture of a perfect family.

It made Bonesaw sick.

“You don’t regret it, do you?” Apocrypha asked wryly.

“No,” Bonesaw said stubbornly. “Not one bit.”

“And yet, the memory you chose was one of your old family, whole and healthy, before powers, before Jack, before the Nine,” said Apocrypha. “A memory from the girl who used to live in this house with this family. What happened to that girl, I wonder?”

“I’m right here!” snapped Bonesaw.

“Really? I don’t see it. Where’s Riley?”

“I’m her!” Bonesaw said waspishly. “She’s me! We’re the same person!”

“No, you’re not,” Apocrypha rebuked matter-of-factly. “Riley was human.”

What was that supposed to make her, a vegetable?

“I *am* human!”

“Are you?” The words contained a hint of a challenge. “Are you really?”

“Yes! Why wouldn’t I be, *darn it?*”

“I don’t know,” said Apocrypha. “You’re the one who knows the most about passengers, aren’t you? You *understand* how they work, as much as anyone does. How they influence us, how they twist us, how they start to overlap with us. So tell me: how much of Bonesaw is that little girl, and how much of her is her passenger?”

“I...!”

She...didn’t have an immediate answer to that.

Because she *did* understand that a passenger’s influence on its host could have incredible breadth and depth, could inflict changes both minor and major, blatantly obvious and insidiously subtle.

“There’s a litany of modifications you’ve done to your body,” Apocrypha said, words slithering into Bonesaw’s brain. “Invasive modifications, to your spine, to your arms, to your fingernails and your brain and your organs... The list of ways you’ve *changed* yourself, *twisted* your body into a *weapon*, a vehicle for fighting, is longer than I am tall. What little girl gives herself a prehensile spine? What little girl puts acid vents in her fingernails? Makes her humerus telescopic? Loads her limbs with needles and darts, all carrying paralytic and neurotoxin payloads?”

“I... I did.” It came out uncertain, like she wasn’t sure of the answer.

Was she?

“No little girl,” Apocrypha went on, as though she hadn’t spoken. “But a Tinker? A Tinker who triggered so very young, who spent years and years pushing the boundaries, growing up with her passenger whispering in her ear, in her dreams, egging her on and prodding her? A Tinker who never had anyone to curb those impulses, who never had anyone to tether her to that little girl, who, instead, only had others who encouraged her to push herself further and further into her power?”

“Shut up!” Bonesaw shouted, even though it wasn’t a good girl thing to do. “I’m me! ME! No one else, darn it! I’m me and I don’t regret any of it! I’ve always been a good girl!”

“No, you’re not,” said another voice, and Bonesaw whirled around to come face to face with six-year-old Riley, holding a teddy bear in her arms. “You’re a bad, bad girl. Mommy would be ashamed of you.”

“Stop it!”

She lunged, but her feet caught on something and she fell face first to the floor — the floor of her house, the house she’d lived in back before Jack and the Nine. When she looked at what she’d tripped on, the stitched face of her...of *Riley’s* mother looked back at her.

Be a good girl.

She scrambled to her feet and as far away as she could from the body, then whirled about, looking for the one responsible.

“Apocrypha!” she howled.

But the person behind her wasn’t Apocrypha, it was that six-year-old girl.

“You do really bad things.”

Bonesaw spun, but Riley stood there, too.

“You hurt people.”

She turned away, but there was a third Riley, waiting for her, glaring with all the stern anger a six-year-old could possibly manage.

“You *kill* people.”

“You help that bad man.”

“You help that bad man hurt people like he hurt Mommy and Daddy and Drew and Muffles.”

“You’re friends with that lady who eats people.”

A final Riley appeared, face twisted, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“You love that bad man who killed Mommy!”

“You’re a monster.”

“You’re a bad girl.”

“You broke your promise!”

“SHUT UP!” Bonesaw screamed, throwing a punch at one of the Rileys.

But she hit nothing and they all disappeared as she fell to the floor, leaving her alone.

“I’m not,” she mumbled, as though they could still hear her. “I’m not a bad girl. I’ve been a good girl all this time. I have. I didn’t break my promise. I’ve been a good girl.”

“No, you haven’t,” a new voice said, and when she looked up, there stood herself — her proper self, twelve-year-old Bonesaw, dressed in a smock and covered in dried blood. “But then, you’ve known that for a while, haven’t you? It’s just easier to let Jack convince you that you have been.”

“I *am* a good girl,” Bonesaw said stubbornly. “I’m nice, I’m polite, I don’t swear, I respect my elders —”

Her doppelganger laughed. “Oh, yes, so very nice! So nice, in fact, that you’ll stitch a couple together so they never have to be apart and give extra eyes to people who have trouble seeing! So nice that you’ll cut apart a hero and a villain and smush them into one body so they can learn to be best friends forever! How kind! How noble! How incredibly selfless of you!”

The laughter echoed and echoed and *echoed*.

“You can’t just own up to it all, because that would mean coming face to face with your own monstrosity! Poor, little Frankenstein, so caught up in your own head and your own delusions that you can’t even see the suffering you’ve caused to oh so many people! You don’t even realize the pain you inflict on your own creations!”

“Monster!” screamed the other Rileys. “Monster! Monster!”

“Shut up!” Bonesaw shouted, eyes squeezed shut and hands pressed over her ears. “Shut up, shut up! This isn’t real! *You’re* not real! This is all just a...a trick! A bad dream! It’s all happening in my head!”

“Oh, but this is very real, my dear Bonesaw,” a new voice said smoothly. Her heart skipped a beat.

Jack.

When she looked, there he was, sitting in front of her with a smile.

“Jack!” she squealed happily.

“After all,” he went on, “even if this is just an illusion, you *did* hurt all of those people. Didn’t you?”

Her smile froze. “J-Jack?”

“How cruel,” he said, and his smile twisted into an ugly, triumphant thing. “So many, many people who did nothing to deserve your attention, and you pulled them apart and stuck them back together with all of the grace of a child finger-painting. I’m so *proud* of you, Bonesaw. You turned out to be even more of a monster than I could ever have dreamed.”

“Y-you...” Bonesaw stuttered, taking a step back. “You aren’t J-Jack.”

“Aren’t I?” His grin split his face. “How would you know, Poppet? Jack and his passenger have been whispering in your ear for six years, egging you on, wearing down everything that made you sweet and innocent and *good*. You’ve fallen so deeply into your powers that even *you* can’t find the line between you and your passenger, anymore. How can you be so *sure*, my dear, that even in this fanciful little dream that girl has cooked up, I can’t reach you?”

He seemed to grow, taller and darker and more menacing, until he loomed over her, and his grin was like the Cheshire Cat from the adventures of Alice in Wonderland that Bonesaw...that Riley’s mother had once read to her when she was younger. It stretched from ear to ear and was filled with sharp teeth like knives.

“I *made* you, Poppet,” he said. “Jack Slash is as much a part of Bonesaw as Riley ever was. Why ever should it take more than the slightest of efforts to reach out to you, here?”

“No!” Bonesaw screamed, squeezing her eyes shut. “You’re not Jack! Jack didn’t! Jack would never...!”

Except she knew it wasn’t true. She had watched him do it before, watched him string capes along and twist them to play his games. She’d watched him do it to keep their little group in line, to prevent them from fighting and hurting each other. She’d watched him spin around the heroes who came to kill them and the recruits they went out to test.

And even though everything inside of her wanted to reject it...she knew he’d done the same to her. Manipulated her. Tortured her. Run her ragged so that he could break her and mould her as he saw fit.

She hadn’t known it at the time, she’d been too young. But she’d seen it now too many times, had seen him do it to too many other people, not to recognize that he’d done the same to her.

“I never really stepped out of his shadow.”

Bonesaw froze and opened her eyes, and when she looked up, Jack was gone, replaced by another girl, a teenager, maybe sixteen, maybe a little older. Her blonde hair fell in soft waves, and she was dressed in a strange combination of a dress and a doctor’s scrubs.

“He left his mark on me,” the girl said, “a bloody handprint that I had to carry with me for the rest of my life. Some people are just born *wrong*, you know, but most people have to be made that way. And Jack? He made me. Us. He twisted me around so badly that I never managed to get my head back on straight, not all the way.”

“Wh-who...”

The girl smiled, but it was wan and bitter. “They called me the Good Doctor. It took a while before they trusted me enough for that, though. Years. The better part of about two decades. Before that, I was called Bonesaw, Jack’s little pet. And before that, I was a little girl named Riley, who hadn’t really thought about what she wanted to be when she grew up.”

“Y-you’re... not real. You’re just another...another illusion.”

The Good Doctor paused and mulled that over.

“In a way, you’re right,” she admitted. “I don’t exist, yet, in this world, and yet from my perspective, I’ve been dead for a long time. Either way you look at it, I’m just a phantom, a ghost. I guess you could even say I’m just the image of a person who isn’t real.”

Her lips quirked into another not-smile. “But I’m also the person you *could* be.” She shrugged. “Or you could be even better, if you gave it a shot. To be honest, I don’t really care. A part of me actually thinks it would be better off to just kill you.”

Bonesaw’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“You don’t think so?” The Good Doctor tilted her head to the side. “Jack’s going to die today, no matter what. Most of the rest of the Nine, including the Siberian, will die, too. You? You’ll be alone. And you won’t change, not like I did. Eventually, you’ll escape and you’ll backslide and you’ll be put down, like the animal you are.”

“Y-you’re wrong. I’m not... I’m a good girl...”

She didn’t deny the other parts. It was hard to even try, when she thought about it.

How long had she been here? How long had she been unconscious? How many times had this illusion shifted and changed and interacted with her? If Jack or the others were alive and conscious, they would have fought Apocrypha, already. They would have killed her. They would have woken Bonesaw up from this nightmare.

That they hadn’t meant they were probably already dead.

“Are you?” asked the Good Doctor. “Because all I see is a monster, sculpted by Jack Slash, made more of her passenger than the little girl she used to be. Frankly, I don’t think it’s possible to make you realize exactly how twisted you are. Not right now, not without the things that happened to me that made it possible. I was the one-in-a-million chance, and even then, they had to stack the deck to get through to me. You? You’re part of the other million, the irredeemable monsters wearing the face of a little girl.”

“I-I’m not...”

But when she shut her eyes, all she could see was Mommy and Daddy and Drew, and she suddenly felt cold, inside and out, like she would never be happy again.

“I-I’m not...”

Something hot and wet squeezed out of her eyes and dribbled down the sides of her face.

She remembered the last meal she’d had with her family, the feeling of it as it settled, warm and satisfying, in her belly. She remembered her mother’s arms around her, hugging her, her mother’s lips pressing against her forehead, and the simple happiness that had given her.

By comparison, the Siberian's hugs were cold and stiff and utterly lacking in warmth, because they were just a poor substitute for the woman who should've been there instead. They'd helped, and she'd lied to herself about how much, but they'd never ever been enough and they never would be.

"I-I'm..."

Daddy's hand in her hair, ruffling it. Jack's was a poor replacement.

Daddy and Mommy laughing. Drew tickling her. Muffles licking her face and racing around the yard. The well-worn couch where they sat and watched movies together, snuggled up and whole. The dinner table where they all sat and ate, with Riley in her favorite chair with her favorite spoon. Mommy's home-cooked meals, made out of an old cookbook with a frayed spine.

Her heart throbbed and her chest ached with longing.

"I-I want to go home..."

"You can't," the Good Doctor said bluntly. "Jack stole it from you. He stole your family from you. He stole everything from you. There's nothing left for you to go back to. No friends, no one who will miss you. No one who really, truly *cares*."

There really wasn't, was there? Her real family was long gone, another of the Nine's victims. Even the town where she'd lived was nothing but a mass grave. The Nine themselves? They were dead. If they weren't already, then they would be by the time she woke up. She could bring them back... Maybe, maybe she could...

But no. They were all in the hands of Apocrypha, the girl who had killed Leviathan, who had done the impossible and slain an Endbringer. If she'd planned this out well enough to ensnare the Nine, then she wasn't sloppy enough to give Bonesaw the chance to bring the others back.

She really didn't have anything left for her, did she? Not her real family, not the dysfunctional, hodge-podge mess that was the Nine. She was completely alone.

So there really wasn't any point in denying it anymore.

"Apocrypha," she said, speaking to the girl who was behind all of this, "kill me. Please. Just kill me."

"But that would be too easy, wouldn't it?" the voice whispered in her ear. "Too neat, too clean. The others may be irredeemable, but you have it in you to be better, don't you? To make up for all of the people you've hurt."

"I can't," said Riley. "I-I'm a bad girl. I've done mean, h-horrible things. I-I'm one of the Nine, now. I can't go back. I can't be Riley, again. I should die with them."

A second chance... No, she couldn't. She wasn't good enough for it. There was too much of Jack in her, now, too much of the Nine. She *was* Bonesaw. Riley... Riley would never have done even one of the things Bonesaw had.

And Bonesaw... Without the Nine, Bonesaw was nothing. Without the Nine, Bonesaw had no meaning and no purpose.

Better for Bonesaw to die with her family, messy, hodge-podge, dysfunctional, and utterly inadequate though it was, than to live on without them.

The Good Doctor chuckled, even as the world of the illusion dissolved and began to fade away. “Oh, Riley. If it was that easy, I never would have made it, either...”

For an endless moment, she floated, free of everything. Her body felt like it was resting upon a cloud, and around her was complete, dead silence — not even the thudding of her heart or the rushing of her blood through her veins or the gurgle of her stomach digesting food. Just pure nothingness, a void without beginning or end.

Was this death? She wondered. The thought was scary and terrifying, but some part of her hoped it was. Was this the purgatory she would have to wait in while her soul sat before whatever judge would pass sentence upon her afterlife?

She wasn't sure she'd ever believed in something like that before, not even when her mommy and daddy took her to church to sing and listen to the pastor preach his gospel, but now... now...

Slowly, the nothingness began to fade and she was spared having to answer the question as feeling started to return to her limbs. Heaviness, a deep, bone-weary heaviness that weighed her down. Almost reflexively, she reached out with her imaginary fingers and tried to diagnose her various and varied implants — only there weren't any. Not her weapons, not her subdermal mesh, not even the switch she'd installed that would turn off the pain receptors in her brain. Even the controller she'd made had been removed without a trace.

Something cold settled into her chest, and the fear warred with something like relief. Like if she just opened her eyes, she'd find herself back home, and Jack and the Slaughterhouse Nine would just have been a bad dream. She could go back to being a regular girl with regular problems and live a regular life. Bonesaw would just be a nightmare she could put in the back of her mind.

That forlorn hope was dashed the instant she realized she wasn't lying in her bed. Instead, she was face down on an asphalt road; she could feel the texture of it under the pads of her fingertips, the little bits of loose rock that pressed against the underside of her forearms uncomfortably.

She breathed in and wasn't sure if she should be happy that it was all real and the Nine were now dead or mourn their loss. Mostly, she just felt lost, like a rowboat adrift in the ocean without any idea which direction led to land.

Someone next to her shifted, and the hand that she hadn't realized was pressing gently into the back of her neck left. An unfamiliar voice declared, “That's everything.”

“Everything?” asked Apocrypha's voice from the other side of her.

A shadow moved and blocked what she realized must have been the sun shining down on her face. Daytime? It felt like so long ago... She couldn't recall what time it must have been when the Nine were attacked and she'd been put under Apocrypha's spell.

“Everything that would make her an actual threat, anyway, so... basically everything, yeah. All of the contingencies and plagues and dead-man switches included.”

A moment later, the name of the mysterious second person flitted through her head, and Bonesaw... Riley... the nameless girl who was both and neither recognized her as the wonderchild healer from Brockton, Panacea. Once upon a time, Bonesaw thought it would have been wonderful to have her as a big sister.

The nameless girl... Riley worked for now, until she could get her head back on straight (and she could do that literally, she thought with some morbid humor). Riley wasn't sure what she was supposed to be feeling about the girl she might have nominated for the Nine, in another life.

Gratitude?

What did she have to be thankful for? Riley no longer had anyone or anything in the entire world to call friend or family, and now, she didn't even have her implants that she'd spent so much time and effort perfecting, sometimes with the most utterly worthless of supplies that it was a wonder they'd turned out so well.

Except maybe she should be. Because this was a clean break, wasn't it? She had nothing left, and that meant nothing tying her to the Bonesaw she'd been before. *Jack's little pet*, the Good Doctor had called her, and everything that had made it so was just as gone as he was.

She wasn't sure if that was what she really wanted.

“Thank you, Amy.”

“What did you show her?” asked Panacea.

“A mirror,” was the cryptic answer. “I made her take a good, hard look at who she was and what she'd been doing, made her really *think* about her choices and whether she was really making her own. I forced her to relive the moment where Bonesaw was born, so she could see for herself just what Jack Slash had done to her.”

Saved her. Damned her. Riley wasn't sure which it even was. Jack had opened her up to a whole new world of possibilities, of things she could do with her power and ways she could shape flesh. He'd shown her things she'd never even believed could be done. She'd reveled in trying new ways of rearranging the body, of enhancing it and playing with powers *just so* to see what happened.

But she wasn't so blind that she didn't realize that he'd also shaped her into exactly what he'd wanted her to be. Manipulated her. Destroyed a little girl's life and twisted her around his finger — or maybe strung her up as his marionette, dancing upon his strings. Jack Slash had always been a part of Bonesaw, from the moment he'd decided she would be his little poppet.

“A part of me wants to call it needlessly cruel,” said Panacea.

“Cruel, maybe, but not needlessly,” Apocrypha replied. “Jack took a little girl named Riley and broke her to make Bonesaw. I took a monster named Bonesaw and broke her to give that little girl enough strength to claw her way back to the surface.”

“It’s not that simple. She’s not going to go back to being some cherub just because you made her take a look in the mirror.”

“No,” Apocrypha agreed. “But it’s the start of a long, hard journey. Even if she doesn’t relapse into the monster, she’s seen too much and caused too much suffering to be that wide-eyed little girl again. The important thing is that it *is* possible for her to be better. She doesn’t have to carry Jack’s shadow with her forever.”

How could she be so certain, when Riley herself wasn’t even sure? She’d been Bonesaw for so *long*, how could Apocrypha even *think* it was possible for her to be anything else? If she could find the strength to do more than flutter her eyelids halfway open, she would scream and shout and cry and ask that very question, but her arms wouldn’t even move, let alone lift her up.

“I like to give people second chances,” said Apocrypha. “Because I understand, better than most, I think, exactly how important it is to have someone reach down and offer you a way out of the muck and the dirt. Sometimes, all it takes to be a better person is for someone to give you the chance to try. If I can be that and save just one other person from themselves, then I think that’s worth it.”

“But you just killed Jack Slash and the rest of the Nine outright, instead of giving *them* that second chance? Don’t you think that’s a little hypocritical?”

“Maybe it *is* hypocritical. But I’m not so naive as to think that everyone is redeemable and that everyone can be afforded the chance to change. In those cases, I’ll do what is necessary, harden my heart, and eliminate the monsters that plague this world.” Her voice was firm and determined. “Are you willing to stay with me, knowing that this sort of thing might happen...no, *will* happen again?”

There was a long moment of silence, then a sigh.

“I’ve stuck with you for six months already, haven’t I? You don’t think you can scare me away just by saying something hardcore like that, do you?”

“Okay. Let’s get them out of here, then, and let the PRT know where to find the bodies. If we’re lucky, we can keep this a secret until they’ve managed to get past the Nine and find some semblance of a normal life.”

“I think Piggot won’t know whether to salute you or strangle you, once she finds out.”

“That’s why I plan to let Armsmaster handle her when she does.”

And then Apocrypha leaned down, pressing a finger to Riley’s forehead, mumbling something under her breath. Riley couldn’t make out what it was, but a moment later, she slipped away as the world dimmed to black.