

Fracture 9.8

In the end, my capture of Mama Mathers was so anticlimactic that I couldn't even have called it a proper fight. Maybe, if she'd been a Brute or a Shaker or a Tinker, she could have actually challenged me for a moment or two. She could have fought back.

But the woman who called herself the matriarch of the Mathers clan, the leader of the Fallen's most zealous sect, was none of those things. She wasn't even physically imposing; if she'd been a wall of solid muscle, a broad-shouldered giant with a thick, sturdy body, I could have seen it. She wasn't. She was rail-thin, like she hadn't eaten properly in months, and when paired with her frail white hair and her pale skin, it gave her a gaunt, almost ghostly appearance. Like she was some kind of specter, the anemic remnants of a dead woman's grudges.

She couldn't even throw a proper punch.

In some ways, I was kind of disappointed. I was expecting... I wasn't sure *what* I'd been expecting of the woman whose power made her all but untouchable, a boogeyman far closer to the image than Contessa ever had been. Her power had seemed so incredible and so overwhelming that maybe I'd been expecting someone with presence and poise, someone who *felt* powerful just from being in the same room. Someone, I think, more like Nilbog or Glaistig Uaine.

I felt almost cheated by the fact that she wasn't.

She was just a woman. A zealot, a cult leader, and there was a kind of power to her words, but without the looming threat of her own power, it felt hollow and fake.

And now that I had her, now that I'd dragged her back to my castle and bound her in one of Aife's runic spells, I found that I didn't quite know what to do with her.

Some part of me knew that maybe it would just be better to kill her.

But no matter how far I'd come in accepting Khepri and everything she represented, casual murder wasn't something I could bring myself to do. There would be some people I couldn't afford to let live, some people so far gone and so dangerous that they were a threat, no matter what I did to try and disarm them. There would be some people so hard to subdue that it wouldn't be worth the risk to my own life. There would be some people I would have no choice but to put down, permanently.

Mama Mathers... I didn't think she was one of them.

I also didn't think it would be right for me to hold onto her indefinitely. I wasn't law enforcement, now. As an independent hero, my job was only to stop crime and apprehend villains. Not hold them in jail and try them for their misdeeds.

And, naturally, the instant it got out that I was keeping another cape here against her will, half the country would let out a collective cry of outrage and start accusing me of all sorts of nasty things. With Tagg in command of the PRT ENE, swift action from them was sure to follow. The longer I kept her, the more my support base would erode. I'd become just another warlord.

Therein lay the problem. Right now, I was the only one who *could* hold her.

“Because your power would let you break out of any prison they tried to hold you in. At this point, I’m not entirely sure it wouldn’t work on *Dragon*.”

She glared up at me balefully. The makeshift gag that kept her mouth shut was really... Well, okay, maybe it wasn’t *necessary*, but there was only so much vitriol I could take before I got tired of listening.

I also didn’t want to imagine what might happen if she and Teacher teamed up in the Birdcage. With that sort of combination, it might defeat the point entirely to send her there.

“But keeping you *here* for the foreseeable future is absolutely out of the question, too.”

The trouble was, it didn’t leave me with a lot in the way of options.

My finger tapped on the inside of my elbow as I worked my jaw.

The obvious solution was to remove her powers, the way I had Noelle. A single prick from Rule Breaker, a fairly simple runic spell, and there they went. She would be an ordinary human again.

Except would she?

Her power would be gone, but not her support, not her family. Unless I went down and tried to clean the whole of the Fallen up myself, there was bound to be someone who would come to her rescue to try and free their matriarch. They would be weaker, lacking her potent anti-Thinker power, but she would mostly pick up where she left off.

The PRT’s revolving door.

That was assuming that her passenger didn’t find a way around the block, something I hadn’t considered with Noelle. Even then, that might not be a good example — Noelle and her passenger had driven each other half mad through an improperly formed connection. What might a passenger with a proper connection and a stable host be capable of, if it put its whole and considerable weight behind the task?

So maybe the question became what I was comfortable with. What I could accept as necessary or unavoidable.

If I couldn’t remove her powers, then could I refine them? Add conditions to their use or penalties for abusing them? That might be the ideal solution, but even something like that, her passenger might be able to find ways around it. Loopholes. Unexpected flaws that I couldn’t possibly account for.

Then, to the other extreme, could I change *her*?

Because I could. Even if I didn’t count that future version of Amy, there were several Heroic Spirits out there who had the ability to attack and mold the psyche, manipulate memories, emotions, and

mental states. With that, I could turn this sinner into a saint and a force for good, capable of doing so much more than even *I* could, simply by virtue of her greater and more ubiquitous reach.

But then the question that Amy herself faced: did I have that right? If I started “rehabilitating” villains by rewriting their brains and their memories and forcing them to accept a worldview that I found right and just, where did I stop? Would that not make me a monster, as well? Even if it did, could I accept that, in the name of making right some of the world’s worst wrongs?

I thought of Khepri. I thought of the terrible feeling of my self unraveling and becoming someone, *something* else. I thought of those moments in the Locker where I was being *overwritten*. The terror, the horror, the weight of the knowledge that whatever came out of the other end, it wouldn’t be *me*...

Could I do that to someone else?

“No.”

The answer was obvious.

Better for these villains to die as they were than to live, twisted into someone else’s image of what they should be. Even if that image was mine.

I sighed.

“I’m just going to keep going in circles like this, aren’t I?”

Mama Mathers didn’t answer.

I shook my head and turned away.

“That was Khepri’s problem,” I told myself. “She was always determined to do everything her way, even and especially if it meant doing it all herself.”

Mama Mathers probably had no idea what I was talking about.

My phone came out of my pocket as I walked away, and I waited until I was out of earshot to thumb through my contacts list and pull up Lisa’s number. With Mama stuck and unable to do anything, it should be fine to call her and get a second opinion.

It had barely started ringing before it was answered with a soft *click*.

“*Are you out of your fucking mind?*” Lisa didn’t quite shout it, but it wasn’t far off, either. “*What were you even **thinking?***”

“Which part?” I asked wryly. A little smile tugged at one corner of my lips.

“*Which — the fucking **castle**, you moron!*”

“*Is that Taylor?*” I heard Amy ask in the background. Lisa ignored her.

*“You just declared ownership of the whole fucking Bay! What the fuck do you think Tagg and the PRT are gonna do about you **taking over the fucking city**? Fuck, are you **trying** to get yourself tossed into the Birdcage?”* There was a pause. Lisa took in a sharp breath. *“This is something **Khepri** would have done.”*

I had to admit, that *did* still sting, a little. But I’d also accepted it.

“I haven’t laid claim to law and order,” I recited, because I’d known exactly this point would come up eventually. “I haven’t usurped the lawful authority of the duly elected government, either of the United States or Brockton Bay. I haven’t taken territory or extorted protection payments from the local citizenry. I haven’t disrupted the city’s economy. At worst, I’ve violated New Hampshire zoning laws — a fine I’ll gladly pay without complaint.”

I hadn’t cared to check, and there hadn’t been a good moment for it anyway, but I was sure I’d received at least some kind of substantial reward for killing Leviathan.

For a moment, Lisa didn’t reply. But when she did, she sounded much calmer.

“Fuck, you had this whole thing planned out, didn’t you?” she sighed. *“That’s not going to satisfy Tagg or the PRT. Hell, maybe not even the federal government.”*

“Something I’ll have to handle as and when it comes,” I told her. “That’s not why I called you, though.”

“Yeah? You got something for me? Juicier than you going all warlord on me?”

“The Fallen’s anti-Thinker asset. She’s chained up here in the castle while I figure out what to do with her. Has been since last night.”

And I wasn’t sure she’d slept at all since then. A Noctis cape, like Miss Militia? Because her powers weren’t already unfair enough, she had to be able to keep going indefinitely, too.

“You have the anti-Thinker asset?” Then, *“Wait a sec, **she**? The asset’s a cape?”*

“Yes,” I said, “and I have no idea what to do with her.”

“Because you can’t turn her in without compromising, like, the entire criminal justice system and half the PRT, and even if you gave her the Noelle treatment, she’d probably just get broken out and go back to the Fallen,” she said, summarizing my previous thoughts.

“Exactly. So I’d like to get a second opinion.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Another *click* signalled the end of the call, and I pressed the button myself and put my phone away. Kind of incredible that it got such good reception out here in my castle, but then I didn’t really understand the science enough to say it should be impossible or not.

I spared a glance back at where Mama Mathers was still chained up, then made my way to the gate at the other end of the courtyard that led out and into the bay. The door swung open and I stepped through — and an instant later, stepped out onto the Docks.

Of course. The overlapping of space that had allowed me to take that whole group down to my castle before was now something that could be done so trivially.

Unexpectedly, someone was already waiting for me, there.

I blinked.

“Sam?”

It was Battery, only dressed down in her civvies instead of in costume. I’d half expected the whole Protectorate team to come charging for me, waving an arrest warrant about, if I was honest, but — I glanced around, looking for anything out of place or anyone hiding nearby — we were alone. Even Assault hadn’t tagged along.

Sam gave me a grim half-smile. “Hey.”

I cocked one eyebrow. “If you came to arrest me, now isn’t exactly the best time.”

“No. Don’t think I could even if I tried,” she admitted. “I’m not...*officially* here. Not in my capacity as a member of the Protectorate.” She gestured at her face. “Hence why I’m not in costume.”

“I figured.”

Honestly, at this point, if they sent someone to try and arrest me, it would almost certainly be the Triumvirate. Tagg might have been paranoid, but he wasn’t *stupid*; my stronger Installs were good enough to match a whole regional team, and I’d just proven that I’d *still* been holding back. He wouldn’t take chances sending a solo hero out to bring me in.

“So? What, then?”

“I just...wanted to check up on you,” she said. “Yesterday was...not good.”

Understatement of the century, there.

“No,” I said a little sardonically. “No, it really wasn’t.”

“But *this* is...” She waved her arm to the walls that were no longer there. I’d kept my word; they went down as soon as Mama Mathers was captured. “Don’t you think that’s going too far?”

God, I’d discussed this same topic all of once and I was already getting tired of it.

“There’s been no damage done to the city or its economy,” I said. “No one was hurt. I haven’t taken territory or unlawfully usurped the government’s authority. The worst I’ve done is break some zoning laws.”

She stared at me for a moment, nonplussed, and then she raised a hand to her head and rubbed at her brow. I was struck, suddenly, by the realization that she wasn't actually that much older than me. Maybe six or seven years. Twenty-two, maybe twenty-three. Young enough that she would have been a Ward not that long ago, young enough that it seemed kind of crazy to think that she was actually already married, young enough that Armsmaster and Miss Militia probably had a decade or more of experience on her.

Young enough that she probably didn't really have her life figured out, either.

"Tagg isn't going to accept that when you go in," she tried instead.

"Tagg can go sit on a pinecone," I replied. "If he's determined to see the worst in me, then I won't feed into his delusions. If the PRT wants me to come in and testify about the castle, then they can either wait until Piggot is back in the saddle or send me a time and date to go talk with the nearest available regional director."

Which, if I was remembering right, was Armstrong up in Boston. He was a lot more pragmatic than some of the others, and therefore would be a lot more willing to let this whole thing slide.

"Tagg won't accept that, either," she said. "You know he's going to try and get a team here specifically to bring you in."

"He'll have to get that past the other directors, first, and they're going to be a lot more reasonable and a lot less prone to panic."

Not...entirely true. But they'd be a lot more cautious about a lot of the things involved in sending teams to bring me in — like the PR optics behind it, or the fact that they didn't really know what the walls going up even *did*, or the simple fact that Thinkers would be a lot less reliable when it came to me than most other capes. They'd take a wait and see approach, first.

As much as I hated bureaucracy, there were times when it came in handy.

Sam frowned, but didn't press it.

"How are you holding up?" she asked. "After yesterday? I mean really?"

"I'm fine," I said immediately, even though I really wasn't.

They'd fucking *killed a girl* to draw me out, who *wouldn't* be fucked up after that? But taking down Valefor and Mama Mathers had been therapeutic, in a way, and while I wasn't exactly over it, I didn't really trust the idea of talking to a therapist. Not one that I didn't already know was on the level through Khepri.

Just a shame that I'd never gotten the chance to talk to Doctor Yamada during my brief stint as a Ward.

Sam arched an eyebrow and gestured towards the walls, again. "That? Isn't something you do when you're fine."

I grimaced. “What are you expecting me to say, Sam? This isn’t exactly the time or place to bare my soul, and you’re not exactly a licensed therapist, either.”

“No. But I’m your friend, and I’m trying to understand,” she told me. “Because the next people that come here from the Protectorate or the PRT? They won’t. They’ll have orders to bring you in — by force, if need be.” She spread her arms. “So help me understand, so I can explain all of this to my superiors and help *them* understand.”

It didn’t really work like that. I’d known from the beginning that raising the castle would bring me trouble, and that was half the reason I’d gone to Cauldron, to keep them from piling on more than was warranted. Explaining my reasoning and trying to convince people that it was right probably wouldn’t work.

It hadn’t for Khepri, more often than not.

But if that was my standard of measure, then what was the point of trying to do the things she had never been able to?

I sighed. “I’m tired of my city being a shithole, Sam. The ABB is all but gone, the Merchants have been laying low — although how many of them still has enough brain cells to realize that’s a good idea is beyond me — and the Empire is slowly falling apart without a clear leader. For the first time in years, we have enough room to breathe, and with this being the site of Leviathan’s death, we might finally manage to recover.”

I looked out towards the skyline. When I closed my eyes, I could see the skyline of Khepri’s Brockton, broken and beaten and collapsing. Dying. Limping on, but slowly bleeding out. The portal had been the first real boost they’d had, but even that had a limited effect. A parachute to slow the fall.

“But the Fallen showed up,” I went on. “I beat them off, but it’s only a matter of time until the next gang decides they want to take a shot and fill the void left here. The Teeth and the Butcher, maybe. The Elite, perhaps, and they’ll be a lot harder for me to deal with since I can’t exactly just beat them up. Maybe the Slaughterhouse Nine decide to pay a visit and Shatterbird sets us back more in three seconds than Leviathan did over the course of three hours.”

I took a deep breath.

“I can’t focus on Brockton Bay forever. There’s too much for me to do, too much I have to do, and too much at stake for me to spend all of my time and energy beating off the next jackass who decides he wants to try and take over.”

“That’s what the Protectorate is for,” she pointed out. “What the PRT is for. You don’t have to do all of that by yourself, whether you’re a member or an independent. You can let us pick up some of the slack, shoulder some of the weight. It’s what most of us signed up for.”

I held in a snort. Everyone knew that the Protectorate and the PRT had barely been holding things together, before. With Lung on the scene and the Empire being so numerous, they’d been outnumbered and utterly incapable of doing more than holding the status quo.

“Even the Protectorate can’t do it all,” I told her. “Eventually, if they all start coming in at once, the Teeth and Accord’s Ambassadors and the Nine, if the Empire manages to pull itself back together... Eventually, you’ll get overwhelmed, and then you’ll be back to where you were six months ago.” I shook my head. “I’m going to make Brockton as secure as I can. And then I’m going to move on to the rest of the country. And only once I’m sure I’ve gotten all the things handled that I need to handle, I’m going to start looking towards the future.”

Sam’s brow furrowed. “The future?”

“Of Earth Bet. Of every human being living on this planet.”

Of mankind as a species.

My plan included the fight against Scion, but I couldn’t stop there. Even if everything worked out as I wanted it to, even if all of my contingencies succeeded, even if things went better than I could ever hope, there needed to be something in place for the world *after*. I just had to make sure there would *be* an after, first.

“Never let it be said this crazy girl does things small,” a new voice interrupted.

“Lisa,” I greeted her as she stepped into view, and then amended, “and Amy.”

Probably should’ve expected Amy would tag along, now that I thought about it.

“Can’t say this is the welcome I was expecting,” Lisa said with a fierce grin. She made a show of looking around. “No PRT hit squads, no Protectorate teams, no lines of police cars demanding your surrender. A girl can only take so much disappointment, Chief.”

“Speak for yourself,” Amy grumbled. “The very last thing I want is my mugshot on the evening news.”

“You wouldn’t look good in orange anyway,” Lisa said flippantly. She turned to Sam. “And I can’t say *you’re* the one I was expecting to come out and give her this talk. Beardmaster too busy giving himself a trim to show?”

Sam grimaced. “The Director had him put in Master-Stranger quarantine.”

I shifted. I was more surprised than I probably should have been. “For covering for me last night?”

“It’s basically punishment for that, yes,” Sam admitted uncomfortably. “Armsmaster...he looked like he’d been expecting it.”

My lips twisted into a frown.

Lisa snorted. “No good deed, I guess. Although considering what he’s been like, Tagg probably even believes that you *did* Master A-M.”

“He’s paranoid,” I agreed unhappily. “And it’s exactly the reason he got the job.”

“Wait, really?” Lisa looked at me, searching for something. What she found, I didn’t know. I wasn’t even sure how my crown interacted with her powers, since they functioned somewhat differently from the likes of the precogs I was more worried about. “Holy shit. They *actually* assigned him the spot because he was the one most suspicious of you? What the fuck? Do the directors — no, it’s the Chief Director. She *really* hates you that much?”

Amy reached out and poked her with one finger, and Lisa reacted as though she’d been slapped. “Fucking ow!”

“Context,” Amy scolded her dryly. “And remember where we are and who we’re with.” She frowned at me. “Although if that’s true, that’s really fucked up.”

That didn’t even begin to cover it, Amy.

“You’re sure about this?” Sam asked me.

I hesitated. For an instant, I thought about explaining the whole thing, but the thought had barely entered my head before I discarded it. Too much. Too many secrets. Not enough of it was mine to tell, and this wasn’t the time or place, either.

“Yes,” I simply said instead.

Sam looked torn, and after a moment, she shook her head and said, “This is... This is way too big for me. It’s... This isn’t something I can deal with myself, I’m going to have to...”

“Suck it up,” Lisa said a little cruelly. “That letter of complaint you’re thinking about drafting won’t do squat. That petition that was your Plan B? That won’t work, either, even if you got the whole team to sign it. The Chief Director is the one calling the shots, and she’ll just — ow!”

Amy retracted her finger again.

“Don’t be an ass.”

Lisa stuck out her tongue childishly.

“Don’t forget, I can make everything taste like shit for you if you keep that up,” Amy warned.

Lisa sucked her tongue back in so quickly that she could have swallowed it.

“Sam,” I said, turning to her. “Do what you feel you need to do. Even if it winds up meaningless, that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try.”

Sam didn’t exactly seem happy with that, and I knew it wasn’t especially comforting, but there wasn’t much else she could do. She was a junior member of the Protectorate, three or four years out of the Wards, and in no position of leadership. Alone, she had almost no weight to throw around.

That didn’t mean the act of trying wasn’t important.

“Whatever happens, you won’t get railroaded for this,” she promised, and then she bade her goodbyes and left. I watched her retreating back, silent, knowing that she couldn’t make a promise like that anyway.

But it was nice to have people on my side.

“So,” Lisa began once it was just the three of us, “let’s see this big, bad boogeyman, huh?”

“Yeah.”

I took both of their hands and led them back into my castle, and we stepped through the gates without any fanfare.

“That’s *still* disorienting as fuck,” Lisa mumbled, rubbing at her temple with one hand.

“Sorry I don’t have a rainbow bridge,” I commented, “but I think the Protectorate would have something to say about me building a bridge that went right through their HQ.”

Because it was miraculously still standing. I hadn’t thought about it before, but the Rig had survived Leviathan, somehow, and that put it right in the path between my castle and the shoreline — or at least close enough to it that they’d interfere with each other if I *did* try and build a pathway to the shore.

Plus, well, my castle was also more secure, this way. There was a reason the Rig had a forcefield bridge that could be turned on and off instead of a physical one.

“She’s over here.”

Unsurprisingly, Mama Mathers remained right where I’d left her in the same condition I’d left her. Being bound like that for so long couldn’t be comfortable, but I didn’t really care overmuch for her comfort.

“This is the Fallen’s boogeyman?” Lisa asked.

“The spell she’s under isolates her, so for at least as long as she’s right here, her power won’t work on you.”

“But it will the instant she leaves, right?”

“Wait, what?” Amy squeaked.

Lisa shook her head. “Anyway you could make this more permanent?”

“If there was a way to make it mobile,” I began. Lisa sighed.

“Yeah, that’s about what I figured.”

She pursed her lips and started pacing, circling Mama Mathers as though to examine her from every possible angle. I had no idea what her power was telling her, but from the grim look on her face, it probably wasn’t anything good.

“Sure you can’t just kill her?”

“Fuck no am I sitting here while you do that!” Amy snapped.

“She’s not that much of a monster,” I said quietly. “And it’s not... I don’t want that to be my first act after breaking away from the Protectorate.”

“Which means you considered it,” Lisa noted.

It was my turn to sigh. “Yeah.”

“What?” Amy squawked.

“I’m coming up with a blank on how to deal with her,” I admitted. “And I can’t just turn her over as she is. She’ll compromise basically the entirety of the PRT.”

“You can’t just pull a Noelle and take her powers away?” Lisa asked.

Mama Mathers’ eyes went wide and her struggles renewed. We ignored it.

“If I was sure it would stick? In a heartbeat. Noelle was in the unique position of her and her passenger having both driven each other half mad. Mama’s power is properly connected and healthy. It’s not entirely out of the question that her passenger could find a way around my block, if I just tried to block her outright.”

“Which is naturally the worst thing that could happen in the middle of the PRT’s prison system,” Lisa added. “Any other ideas?”

“Limitations or restrictions?” I hedged. “Except I’m not sure her or her passenger couldn’t figure out ways around *those*, either.”

“Have you thought about changing *her*, then?”

Amy started. “What?”

“I thought about it, yeah.”

“Wait,” said Amy. “You mean changing her *personality*?” *Like I can*, she didn’t add, but I heard it nonetheless.

“Yeah,” I said. “But then I thought about my own experiences with that sort of thing and I decided that I wouldn’t do it. Reforming someone is one thing. Remaking them in my image of moral righteousness is another. Better for them to die as they are than be forced into another’s shape.”

Amy breathed a sigh of relief.

Lisa made a sound in the back of her throat. “You’re not giving me too many options here, Chief.”

“There aren’t many to begin with,” I told her a little defensively. “Her power works by infecting people through the transmission of information. *Memetically*, remember? Even if I try to impose

limitations on that, I can't change the core of her powers without the ability to directly configure her passenger, and I can't *do* that."

Amy might, I didn't say, or at least she'd be able to tweak things by messing with the Gemma and Pollentia. But this was *my* Amy, not Khepri's, and she wasn't comfortable with touching the brain at all, so that was almost immediately out the window.

"Then why not just mess with the way the information transmits?" Amy suggested.

Lisa and I both stopped and turned to stare at her. She blinked and drew back, eyeing us suspiciously. "What?"

"Amy..."

"Panpan, that's *genius*," said Lisa, grinning. She looked back to me. "Can you do something like that?"

I hesitated a moment and dipped into my power: was there an ability like that? One that could prevent or affect the transmission of a person's data, so that Mama Mathers couldn't affect anyone that easily anymore?

Yes, it turned out. And, fittingly enough, it belonged to an assassin: Jack the Ripper.

"Information Erasure," I said aloud. "All personal data revealed during an encounter is automatically erased from any witnesses at the end — including memories and digital recordings."

"Whoa." Even Lisa seemed taken aback by how effective that was. I couldn't blame her; that was the sort of thing that would make a serial killer an absolute *nightmare*. "Who the hell had *that*?"

"Jack the Ripper," I answered.

She opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again and said, "That makes sense."

"It does?" asked Amy.

"Jack the Ripper was never identified," said Lisa. "He didn't leave any identifying marks or evidence. He didn't leave anything that could distinguish him from a crowd. He was nameless, faceless, and the only reason the police even knew he existed was because he kept sending them letters claiming to be the killer."

"Well, when you put it like that..."

"I don't think that's going to be enough on its own, though," Lisa added. "You'll make her power basically line of sight like that, but that won't stop her from using it against anyone *within* that range, which, in prison, is going to be a lot of people, so..."

She had a point.

"What's your suggestion, then?"

She grinned. It wasn't a nice expression. "Well," she said, rubbing faintly at the spot above her heart, "speaking as someone who's been under one herself, a geis can be a pretty terrifying motivator to keep yourself from breaking it."

I hesitated, because I'd been trying to move away from those. Maybe not entirely consciously, but I'd been trying to actually *trust* people, rather than securing that trust through the threat of a terrible fate. That was my biggest regret with Lisa, that I'd forced her into a geis that had nearly gotten her killed.

But would that be a permanent solution? If she broke it, it would seal her fate, but if she waited to break it at the opportune moment and caused a lot of damage before the curse punished her, then...

"Instead," I said slowly, "let's make it go both ways."

"What?" said Lisa.

"It'll be a lot like...what's the term for being unable to recognize faces?"

"Prosopagnosia?" Amy suggested.

"Like that," I agreed, watching Mama's face get increasingly distressed. "Everyone she meets from here onwards will be unable to remember her name or face afterwards, and vice versa. Her ability to exercise her power over anyone else in the future will be all but crippled, and her power won't be able to do anything about it. She'll be all but neutralized as a threat."

A moment of silence greeted me.

"That's..."

"That sounds...cruel," Amy said.

"But effective," Lisa added grudgingly.

"There isn't much else to be done," I lamented. "We have to look at it like this: is her comfort, the comfort of a known criminal whose list of crimes includes numerous instances of kidnapping, rape, and murder, or at least accessory *to* those, more important than the future safety of basically the entire country?"

"You can't punish someone for what they *might* do," Amy said defensively.

"Am I?" I retorted. "The function of a prison is to prevent criminals from causing further disruption to society, isn't it?"

Lisa snorted. "In theory," she said. "In practice? Not so much. But for someone like her? Yeah."

"Then doing this will prevent her from causing further disruption to society and keep her from escaping jail, too."

Amy's brow furrowed.

"That's...not..."

"She would already be Birdcage-bound," Lisa reasoned. "And that's basically life in prison without parole."

"And I don't want to imagine what her power would be like working together with Teacher," I said. "What they could do together."

Lisa gagged. "Oh, fuck, I hadn't thought of that!"

I shrugged. "So there's not much else we can do except cripple her power, even if that cripples her, too."

"It's more merciful than killing her, at least," Lisa agreed. She clicked her tongue. "I... Fuck, I really don't see a way around this that doesn't come back to bite us in the ass. Can't say I like it, but this looks like our only option. I say go for it."

"Fuck, are you serious right now?" Amy snapped. "You're saying we should give a woman the equivalent of a serious, degenerative neurological disorder just because her power is inconvenient?"

Lisa held up her hands. "Hey, I don't like it, either. But there aren't that many options that would work here, you know? The kinder we are with our solutions, the more ways it'll screw us over somewhere down the line. You aren't exactly popping off any better ideas, too, so unless you can think of something that we haven't..."

Amy was quiet for a long moment. She didn't seem to have an answer for that.

In a way, I couldn't blame her. I understood her position, even, and I didn't really like this any better than she did. The difference was, I understood perfectly that I wouldn't be able to always make the perfect moral decision. I was going to try like hell and exhaust every option I could think of, first, and some situations would simply have no perfect solution from the beginning, but I was under no illusions that it was always going to be as easy as I wanted it to be.

Lisa sighed. "Yeah, that's what I thought." She turned back to me. "I'm gonna need a shit ton of comfort food to make me feel better about this, but... Go ahead, Chief. Do your magical lobotomy thing."

I nodded and, heart heavy, took a step towards the struggling Mama. "I'll remove her memory of this conversation, too. That way, she won't remember our names or faces when she can use her powers again."

"Wait," Amy said quietly. "Just wait."

I stopped and turned to her.

“What if...” she began haltingly, biting at her bottom lip. It looked like saying the words was physically painful, and her face was screwed up in indecisive agony. “What if I...destroyed her Corona?”

A moment of dead silence answered her.

“Holy shit, Panpan,” Lisa whispered at length.

“Amy...” I said softly.

“*Just* her Corona,” Amy clarified sharply. “Not... Not messed with her head or tweaked her personality or anything. Just destroyed her Corona, so that she didn’t have any powers anymore at all.”

“You don’t have to do this, Amy,” I told her. Her face screwed up for a moment, nose wrinkling, lips pulling back, brow furrowing. Then, it settled back into a disgruntled scowl.

“You told me before, didn’t you?” she bit back sourly. The bitter heat in her voice was only half-hearted. “I can’t avoid it forever. Eventually... Eventually, I’ll have to...”

I had. It seemed like forever ago, now, but back before Leviathan, when Brandish was still injured from the fight with Noelle, I’d told her that it wouldn’t be possible to keep to her rule about brains forever.

“But it doesn’t have to be like this. Not for her. Not for this reason.”

Because I’d meant it about healing brain *injuries*, not doing a powers-assisted lobotomy.

“It does when the other option is letting you guys cripple her,” Amy said. “So... Rather than letting you do the ‘hard but necessary’ thing... This time, I’ll do it.”

I searched her face, but there was no sign of indecision, now. She didn’t look happy about it, but she also looked like she’d made up her mind and wasn’t going to budge. Even if I wanted to protect her from this for just a little bit longer, I had to respect that, respect her decision, her autonomy. I wouldn’t be her friend if I tried to coddle her every step of the way or force things my way every time.

“Okay.” I stepped around Mama Mathers, then came up behind her and took hold of her head and her jaw. “I’ll hold her still for you.”

Mama Mathers’ efforts to escape redoubled, and she struggled against my grip, but even if she’d been well-nourished and completely healthy instead of the malnourished waif she was, I doubted she’d have been anywhere near strong enough to pull free.

Amy hesitated a moment longer, and then her face set and her mouth pulled into a determined line and she stepped forward, reaching out with one hand to cup Mama’s cheek.

I almost felt like it should have been a dramatic moment. Like there should have been some deep, ominous rumble that signified what had happened, what was happening right in front of me, or

maybe the audible snap of Amy's rules being broken. Something, anything, to fit the gravity of the situation.

But there was nothing. Just a long, silent minute as Amy carefully and for the first time performed brain surgery.

...That really should have sounded more ridiculous than it did.

Finally, Amy said, "Done," and pulled her hand away, face wooden and closed off. Mama Mathers sagged and collapsed in her bonds, looking like a clay sculpture that had been hollowed out and fell inwards. I let go of her and her head lolled around and dropped to hang, impotent and defeated.

Some part of me felt bad, she cut such a pitiful figure. How powerless she must have felt, now that her powers were forever gone, after who knew how long at the top.

"Is it strange that I actually feel kind of sorry for her?" Lisa asked quietly.

"No," I said simply. Neither of us tried to continue that thread of conversation, we just stood there awkwardly, staring at the matriarch of the Fallen's cult, reduced back to an ordinary human.

I guess that was the point. Even with our powers, we were still just human, weren't we? They didn't make us gods or sages, they didn't elevate us to a new realm of existence, powers just let us be more, *magnify* our best or worst traits. Which was which just determined whether you became a hero or a villain.

"I'll hand her over to the Boston PRT this afternoon," I said quietly, "let them figure out what to do with her, now."

"And until then?" Amy asked.

"Until then, we have some things to discuss about the future." I held my gaze on Mama Mathers for a moment longer, then turned away. "Come on. Let's talk about this inside."

I started walking. After a second or two, I heard the two of them fall into step behind me.

"It's not going to end here, you know," Lisa said quietly. "Turning in Mama Mathers, beating the Fallen, it's not going to stop the PRT from questioning your every move or the other bigshots from trying to take a stab at you. It won't even really kill the Fallen movement, either."

My lips pursed. "I know," I said.

I'd known from the beginning. I'd planned for it, even. I wasn't naive enough to believe it could be that simple or that easy.

"That's exactly why I can't let it stop me from moving forward."

Because the future I wanted, the future of a world without the struggle and hardship that we suffered now, a future where the people of Earth Bet could finally flourish and rebuild... I was going to keep racing towards that.

I'd started all of this with the dream of being a hero. I'd thought, with my power being what it was, that was the natural progression. My power to call on the spirits of the heroic dead, wasn't it only right that I used that to become a hero myself?

Now, I knew it couldn't be that simple. I'd seen behind the curtain, I'd had to come to terms with the inherent gray that coated this world. I couldn't stop at just being a hero, anymore. I had to think bigger, I had to think beyond Brockton Bay, I had to think beyond myself. I couldn't afford to blind myself to what was to come and what needed to happen to weather it. I couldn't afford to fall into comfortable patterns of thought simply because they were comfortable. I had to grow. I had to be better.

The time for indecision was over.