

## Interlude 10.k: Dwarf in the Flask

“Are you happy?”

The question bounced around in Amy’s head, volleying back and forth like a ping-pong ball. Every time it rolled, it seemed heavier and more important than it had been before. Like being able to give a true, firm answer to it would change something fundamental about her life.

Was she happy?

Not at all the sort of question she’d been expecting, returning from the Birdcage with Taylor. Of course not — she’d been sure she was going to walk away from the whole thing feeling like she was ripping herself apart, the way she had when she depowered Mama Mathers. Like she was being pulled in two different directions, both of them equally important and both of them equally terrible in their own ways.

Brain surgery was just as terrifyingly easy as she’d always dreaded it would be.

But sneaking in, removing Teacher’s Corona so that he couldn’t pull off any of his ridiculously complicated long games if he ever escaped? It had been *freeing*. In a way she hadn’t expected. Righteous, that might be the better term. Not like she was playing God when she didn’t have any right to even try, but like she was unraveling a tangle of wires in a bomb scheduled to go off and ruin thousands of lives.

It was thrilling in a way that kind of terrified her, not at all like fixing people up with her powers was. Exciting, like going to rescue Dinah had been, before everything went wrong, and heady, knowing that even if she’d been caught out, she could probably have fought her way through whoever found her and tried to stop her.

And then she’d run into *him*. Quite literally, in fact, because she’d been so consumed with escaping the notice of Teacher’s thralls and the thrill of *justice served* that she hadn’t been paying quite as much attention as she should have to where she was walking.

Marquis. Her father, as she’d found out, and she couldn’t remember if it had come up in one of her shouting matches with Carol the last two years or if Lisa had pulled her aside and quietly told her the truth somewhere along the line. There’d been so much going on and things had been so busy that her biological father had just stopped being an important detail.

Until she was literally face to face with him.

“Amy?”

Growing up, ever since she’d understood that she was adopted, she’d wondered what she might say to her biological parents, should she ever get to meet them. She’d imagined dozens of different openers, hundreds of different greetings, all of them refined as she got older and wiser and more mature. Maybe she’d tell a joke, say something about a paternity test, or maybe she’d make a sarcastic comment about being better late than never.

And every single one of them vanished like grains of sand through her fingers when she finally met her father.

There was never any doubt that he was. He had the same kind of mousy hair she did, the same eyes that she saw every time she looked in the mirror, down to the tiny flecks of gold that surrounded the pupils like a faint starburst.

“I’ve been waiting,” he told her quietly, and anything she might have said had died upon her tongue.

Something so simple. Something so blunt. There hadn’t been any accusations or blame. It was just a father welcoming his daughter home.

If you could call the Birdcage a proper home, anyway.

And when he’d hugged her — tenderly, gently, as though he’d been afraid she might break — it had been over so quickly and so suddenly that she hadn’t even had time to decide whether or not she should be hugging him back.

“Amy? Hey!”

A part of her had wanted to stay and talk to him. To find out all of the things she’d never known, to ask all of the questions about herself that she’d always felt like she needed answered. There were a thousand different things she wanted to say to him and a thousand different things she wanted him to tell her, and maybe in another life, she could have stayed and talked and reconnected with the man who had given her life.

But she’d been on a time limit. She couldn’t stay and talk to him, because she’d needed to get back in time for Taylor’s talk with Glaistig Uaine to finish. The window Dragon could buy them to do what needed doing was only so large, and them getting noticed by the rest of the inmates would only cause problems — especially if Lung found out Taylor was there and got it into his head to pick a fight with her.

Barely enough time to exchange pleasantries. Barely enough time to realize she’d found her father. Barely enough time to realize she didn’t have enough time.

And Marquis... Instead of trying to drag it out, instead of trying to take as much of her time as he could, instead of trying to convince her to stay with him, he’d asked just that simple, impossible question.

“Are you happy?”

She’d given him the only answer she could have, because even if she’d been absolutely miserable, the very last thing a daughter wanted to do was burden the father who had far too much to deal with already. Even having no memory of ever meeting him before, she felt compelled to do him that simple kindness out of some strange, filial duty that she couldn’t have hoped to explain.

He’d accepted it, but she wasn’t sure he believed her. Because she wasn’t sure, herself.

“Hey! Amy!”

A hand on hers, shaking. The sudden influx of information from her power jolted Amy out of her thoughts, and she blinked into the face of Victoria Dallon.

“Whazzat?”

Vicky’s nose scrunched up, and as she always had, Amy found it incredibly cute. But her heart didn’t skip a beat, the way it used to, and there was a distance between her and the thought, like she was acknowledging a clinical fact rather than truly appreciating the beauty of Vicky’s face contorting in an attractive way. For the first time in the two years of fighting and half-hearted attempts at reconciling, Amy realized she wasn’t madly in love with her sister anymore.

She blinked, and a muted sense of wonder ballooned in her chest.

Affection, attraction, arousal, but faded and weak, not like she was looking at the love of her life, but like she was meeting the first crush she’d never quite gotten all the way over. Wistful, but not overpowering.

When had that happened?

“Were you paying attention to anything I said at all?”

“Sorry,” Amy said, more for the sake of it than because she actually meant it, “just have a lot on my mind. I zoned out for a minute.”

Vicky visibly restrained herself from making an acerbic comment, probably some snide jab at Taylor or Lisa. Amy could at least appreciate the sentiment and the fact that Vicky had better self-control, these days, even if the impulse itself didn’t really bode well.

It felt a little weird, when she thought about it. Taylor had long since stopped caring about whether or not Vicky liked her, except as it affected Amy’s ability to talk to her family, while Vicky still seemed to be nursing something of a grudge. At a guess, because she felt like Taylor was one of the things still coming between them, when...honestly, that old argument was the least of the things that they still actually fought over.

“Is...*she* having you do a bunch of work?”

Amy chewed on the inside of her cheek. “I can’t really answer that.”

“That just makes it sound more suspicious!” Vicky insisted. “What’s so secret that she won’t even let you —”

“Camelot isn’t the Protectorate,” Amy cut in before she could really get started. “Nor New Wave. We don’t chase after small time crooks robbing banks, not unless it’s happening in our own backyard, we go after the big guys, like the Guild does. S-Class shit. The kind of thing we *don’t* want to know we’re coming, so we don’t go around announcing who we’re targeting. Okay?”

Vicky’s nose wrinkled again as she scowled.

“Anyway,” said Amy, trying to steer things away from Taylor and the CSO, “has Carol changed her mind? About me healing Mark?”

Vicky’s brow furrowed a little. “*Mom*,” she said, emphasizing the word like she was correcting Amy, “still says no.”

Amy rolled her eyes. “It’s not that big a deal. I’d just be fixing an imbalance in his production of neurotransmitters. It’s not *that* different from antidepressants, it’s just a more permanent solution.”

A laughably mild form of brain manipulation. Sure, there would be changes in his personality, but that was kind of the *point*. Erasing his depression would let the *real* Mark Dallan — the man who had tried to be a father to her, but had never managed it properly because his moments of normalcy were so inconsistent — shine through.

Vicky’s lip curled.

“I thought you *refused* to do brains. Isn’t that why you wouldn’t fix *Mom* after the Echidna thing? Because you didn’t want to mess up or screw her up?”

“Things were different back then,” Amy said, and then amended, “*I* was different back then.”

Back then, the scariest thing she could think of was breaking the rules she lived her life by. She’d thought of her deepest, most selfish thoughts and temptations as irredeemably evil, and she’d felt alone and suffocated, and Taylor’s friendship (and Lisa’s, although Amy would deny it if anyone ever even suggested such a thing) had been a pressure valve to help her just deal with it.

Back then, she also hadn’t spent a year and a half watching *Bonesaw* — sorry, *Riley Davis* — and spot-checking her work to make sure there weren’t any hidden nasties secreted away in some compartment she’d built while no one was looking.

“What have they been making you do that made you okay with mucking around with people’s brains?” Vicky hissed.

Amy’s eyes narrowed. “There’s a difference between trying to piece someone’s brain back together and correcting a neurological imbalance. *Worlds* of difference, Victoria.”

Vicky opened her mouth to say something, but at that moment, Crystal reappeared and said, “Sorry it took so long, girls, the line back there was killer.”

She plopped back down into her seat and set the tray she was carrying on the table with a heavy thud. Weirdly, that made Amy realize that, of the three of them, Crystal was the only one who didn’t have some form of superhuman strength.

“So.” Crystal dunked a french fry in the little bowl of ketchup that came with the order. “What were you girls talking about?”

Amy and Vicky shared a look, and for the first time that day, they agreed on something. “Nothing,” they both said.

Crystal's raised eyebrow said that she didn't believe them for a second. "Alright. So what's new with everyone, then? Vicky? How are your classes going up at college?"

Vicky hesitated a moment, and then launched into a rant about the B she'd gotten for her essay in her English Lit course, talking about how unfair it was and how she'd definitely earned an A, but the teacher was ridiculously strict and demanding. Crystal hummed and nodded as she snacked on their food, asking a question here and there, and as Vicky explained her essay itself and what it had been written about — *Frankenstein* — Amy sat silently and thought that, in another life, Vicky and Taylor could have been good friends.

She could almost picture it, even, Taylor sitting with them, offering critiques and different viewpoints on Vicky's essay, laughing that quiet laugh of hers and making comments about the professor's standards.

It would never happen. Amy didn't know why Vicky hated Taylor so much, and she wasn't even sure Vicky could have explained it herself, but ever since the moment they'd met, Vicky had been nursing a grudge that she never managed to get over.

Lisa probably could have explained it, but Lisa's tongue when she was in a mood never helped anyone, and she could be incredibly catty when it came to people who had something against her friends. She would have ripped Vicky apart and rubbed her face in it, and that would have really defeated the point.

The rest of their little get together passed without incident and without argument, mostly because Crystal was there to keep them from sniping at each other. The gulf between them, however, was still abundantly clear, and Amy...wasn't sure they would ever bridge it. She wasn't even entirely sure she wanted to, anymore.

Two years of fighting just felt like it was too much to bury.

"Are you happy?"

The thought remained with her as she left the restaurant and her family behind, and it stuck around, bouncing about in her head, as she made her way back to the castle that was the Camelot Security Organization's main headquarters.

Was she happy, being part of Taylor's little group? Was she happy with how her life was going? Was she happy with the person she was now and where she was in life?

It shouldn't have been that big a deal. Marquis may have been her father, and maybe that was supposed to mean something, but he'd never gotten the chance to be her *dad*. He was basically a stranger who happened to share some of her genes and knew an Amy who hadn't existed for over ten years. Why did what he thought mean anything to her at all?

Except it did. It did, and she couldn't explain why.

Lisa might have been able to put into words. She probably would have done some bullshit psychoanalysis thing and said that it wasn't so much what she told Marquis, but rather what she told *herself*. It was about having an answer *she* could be satisfied with.

“What are you, my therapist?” Amy muttered.

She could just imagine Lisa laughing and saying, “Well, *someone* has to take the job, and it seems to me that I’m the only one here qualified, right?”

Except she didn’t have to imagine it, because Lisa was right there.

“Pretty sorry state of things when *you’re* the one playing doctor,” Amy groused sarcastically.

Lisa shrugged. “We’re still pretty young, as far as organizations go. We’re also kinda short-staffed. Until we get an actual therapist and human resources department? I’m the best we’ve got.”

“That’s a scary thought.”

Lisa’s mouth curled into her trademark grin. “Would you rather have the Beardmaster trying to get inside your head? At least I have some idea of what I’m doing.”

“A week of online courses does not a therapist make you,” Amy said dryly.

Lisa shook her head.

“So how did the little family get-together go, Panpan?”

Amy grunted. Lisa’s smile twitched.

“That bad, huh?”

“Just...” Amy blew a heavy sigh out past her lips. “I’m not sure what they want from me. Crystal’s *trying*, but Vicky just...”

“Ouch.” Lisa gave an exaggerated wince. “You want my advice?”

Amy eyed her dubiously. “Sure?”

“Fuck ‘em.”

Amy choked on some spit and coughed. “What?”

“Fuck ‘em,” Lisa repeated. “That’s what I did, when my parents started being assholes. I said fuck ‘em, grabbed as much of their money as I could, and left. Never looked back.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that’s going to work, here,” Amy said sardonically. Lisa shrugged.

“So maybe don’t do exactly what I did. But you don’t owe them anything, Amy. If they want to be a part of your life, then they have to accept you for who you are, not who they want you to be. That includes that overbearing sister of yours.”

She smirked.

“They also don’t have to *like* who you’re friends with. That also means that you don’t have to listen to them if they try to tell you not to be. You’re officially a grown-up, now. They can’t force you to do squat.”

Amy snorted. “Not sure Vicky got the memo, there.”

Lisa shrugged. “Nothing you or I can do about that. Vicky’s gotta get over herself on her own damn time.” She checked her watch. “Anyway, I gotta skedaddle. Places to go, people to see, you know how it is.”

“Get lost, then,” said Amy.

“This one’s a freebie; next time, I’ll have to charge by the hour,” she said with a grin. “Later, Panpan!”

“Screw you, you shitty therapist!” Amy shouted after her as she left. When Lisa was gone, she muttered, “Charge by the hour, my ass.”

She didn’t say thanks. That wasn’t how it worked.

Amy sighed and kept walking. Alone again, the question that had been bugging her for the better part of a month came back.

Was she happy?

While she thought, her feet carried her to one of the most secret rooms in the entire castle entirely of their own volition, and before she realized it, she had stepped in through the door and walked into the center of what could only be called a mad scientist’s laboratory.

And standing in the middle of it, she found herself staring at the super secret project that was a central feature in Camelot’s plan to stop the end of the world.

It was a grotesque thing. Synthetic flesh stretched over an organic polymer with a consistency similar to that of bone and cords of false sinew and muscle, all laced together with various forms of control devices, some cybernetic and some...well, inexplicable to Amy, at least. The flesh looked real enough, when it came down to it, the muscle and bone did what they were needed for, and everything would *work*, in the end.

But the visage was inhuman. Silver-skinned, with some limbs half-formed and vanishing into higher dimensional space, what Taylor called the Sea of Imaginary Numbers. Grotesque, like a discarded reject in some sculptor’s attempt at creating a human being. It was vaguely feminine, but its bust was barely pronounced, and all of the most important details were missing, like it had no reproductive organs at all.

Of course it didn’t. After all, this wasn’t a living thing, it was a puppet. A marionette strung up to put on a show.

Amy stepped back. The puppet floated in the vat of preservatives meant to keep its body from degrading, staring back at her with unblinking, unseeing eyes and a blank smile, devoid of life. She shivered.

“Creepy, aren’t they?” Taylor asked. Amy had no idea when she’d come up next to her, but wasn’t surprised.

“Like Frankenstein’s monster,” she agreed.

Only this one pieced together from a dozen different disciplines of medical pseudo-science that shouldn’t have made any sense at all and somehow put together a puppet lifelike enough to freak her the fuck out.

A glance around revealed another half a dozen siblings for the monstrosity. They were not all entirely identical, there were a bunch of variations in size, in shape, in the number of limbs. Some had the aborted structure of what might have been wings jutting back from the shoulders, and some ended at the waist, as though their creator had simply stopped partway through.

But they all had long hair. They all had silvery skin that seemed to glow in the light of their vats. They all shared the same vapid, empty smile.

“I’ll be glad when this is all over,” Amy said. “I *hate* these things. Fucking psycho grins.”

Taylor nodded.

“They’ll be gone, one way or the other. Either he’ll destroy them in a fit or they’ll degrade within a week. Not a long lifespan, either way.”

*Homunculi*. Not proper ones, Taylor had tried to explain, because there was nothing to give them true life, no actual brain situated between their ears or organs occupying their torsos, but they were “artificial humans,” all the same.

And Amy had helped create them. Had developed the synthetic flesh, pioneered the polymer that mimicked bone, and then sculpted them to match the pictures Taylor had shown her of that...that *thing*. The Other. The Counterpart.

Amy looked back at the thing, her bastardized homunculus, and shivered again.

“Promise me this is the only time. That this is as far as we’ll go.”

Taylor considered her for a moment. “As far as creating life, you mean?”

Amy nodded. “Yeah. I don’t... It doesn’t feel right. Making people into what *we* want them to be. Making people just so they can fill some fucking role, like that’s all they’re good for. This is... This already feels pretty close to the line.”

Taylor didn’t answer for a long moment. When Amy glanced at her, she was staring intensely at the monster in the tank, glaring unblinkingly into its sightless eyes and its unsettling, vapid smile.



“I don’t like that idea, either,” she admitted quietly. “It’s one thing when it’s just bugs, isn’t it? Something that doesn’t really have a concept of pain, can’t really *feel* how badly you’re screwing it up. When it’s something that can walk and talk and *know* exactly what you’ve done to it, though...”

After another quiet moment, she went on, “The last thing I want is for us to become another Cauldron, experimenting with people, wiping their memories and dropping them off in some random city whenever something goes wrong, always trying to optimize and find the best results, no matter the costs. I want us to be better than that, or else what was the point of Camelot in the first place?”

What are we saving from Scion if we have to sacrifice our humanity to beat him?

That was what Taylor had said, back when she explained what Cauldron was and what she knew of what they’d done. The Camelot Security Organization was going to be the shield in the sun to Cauldron’s knife in the dark, the bulwark that defended against threats to mankind’s future without drowning themselves in blood.

“As long as we know where to draw our lines, I think we can be. Better than that, I mean,” said Amy.

“This is it,” Taylor said. “To answer your question, I mean. This is the worst of it. No actual homunculi, no test tube babies, nothing like that. I can’t promise this will be the last time we ever come this close to the line, but I can at least promise you that we’ll never cross it. I know I’ve asked you this before, Amy, but... Can you stay on, knowing that? Can you live with it?”

The Amy of three years ago would have said no and walked away. Hell, the Amy of three years ago would never have had any part in creating these monsters, whether they were actually alive or just lifelike puppets.

But this wasn’t three years ago, this was now, after two years of pushing the boundaries of what she was comfortable with and finding the things she really, truly wouldn’t budge on. This was the Amy who regularly talked to an ex-supervillain, who was friends with an idealist that was strangely grounded in realism, and who had spent two years out from under Carol Dallon’s thumb.

“And I told you, you’re not getting rid of me that easily,” Amy said. “Like hell I’m going to leave you with only *Tattletale* to listen to. I’d be breaking my Hippocratic Oath.”

A huff of air escaped Taylor’s nostrils, not quite a snort.

More seriously, Amy added, “I’m going to hold you to that. But as long as you can keep that promise? I’m staying.”

Taylor didn’t say anything, but the small smile that Amy spied reflected in the glass spoke volumes.

“Anyway,” said Taylor, “let’s get out of this place and go somewhere a little more welcoming. Staring at these things all day isn’t good for anyone’s mental health, and it’s your turn to make dinner, tonight.”

“Right,” Amy agreed, and when Taylor turned to leave, she fell into place behind her.

As she was stepping out the door, though, Amy looked back at the monster in the vat, with its sightless eyes and empty smile, the work of almost a year of trial, error, and collaboration. She tried to imagine the rest of her life like that — working with the team to pioneer new methods of healing and prosthesis, going out on missions here and there to bring down the threats that no one else dared even try, spending every day using her powers for the betterment of mankind.

Waking up every morning knowing she'd spend her entire day in the company of people who called her friend. Going to bed with the knowledge that she was making an actual *difference* in the world, instead of trying to stem a neverending tide of suffering with nothing but her own two hands.

Was she happy? She still wasn't sure she could say yes and mean it one-hundred percent. She wasn't sure she even knew what happiness was, on Earth Bet.

But...

While the life she was leading now wasn't perfect, she could at least say that there wasn't much she would change, if she could. There were still things she wanted but couldn't have, still the problems with Vicky and her family that needed solving, and life was still *life*, all the ups and downs included, complete with regrets and missed chances.

If she had the choice, though? If she had the choice to give it all up and go be a normal girl somewhere with normal concerns and no powers weighing her down? If she had the chance to dump all of the heavy, heady shit and go live a simple life away from all the craziness? She would have stayed exactly where she was without a second thought.

And maybe that was good enough.