

## Overture 1.4

Armsmaster leveled his halberd at me, tension and readiness to fight evident in every inch of his body.

“You gonna fight me?”

Against you...

“It wouldn’t even be an actual fight.”

The words slipped out of my mouth before I’d even realized what I was saying, and as they registered with my actual brain, Armsmaster across from me was already preparing to do battle. Nonono, that wasn’t what I wanted *at all*.

*Damn it, Siegfried! Damn it, damn it, damn it!*

As though it were poison, I dropped immediately out of my Install and back into my base Breaker form.

“Oh my god,” I said, horrified. “I’m sorry, that wasn’t even me — Siegfried was the one who — it just kind of slipped out before I could — I didn’t even — oh...”

Exhaustion suddenly hit me like a brick to the face, and as my head throbbed and my muscles ached, my knees shook and gave out from under me. It was like all of the strength in my body had fled with my Install, as though the only thing propping me up had been Siegfried, and the moment I had discarded him, he’d taken all of my energy with him.

Right then, right there, in front of a hero whose emblem had been printed on a pair of underwear I’d once owned, I collapsed. I thought for sure it would be right to the ground — great, not only had I insulted a hero, I’d fainted in front of him, too.

Except a pair of surprisingly gentle arms caught me, and I found myself with my face pressed against the cool, metal chestplate of Armsmaster’s power armor. His hands were incredibly steady — he probably had some sort of gadget or something in his gauntlets to help with that — and it was only with his help that I managed to stay standing.

“You okay?” he asked a little gruffly.

“Sorry,” I mumbled again. I refused to look up into his face — I could feel my cheeks burning, and I thought then that that would be one of the advantages to a full face mask: no one could ever see when you were embarrassed.

“D’you need to sit down?”

I shook my head.

“No,” I said, rather weakly. I cleared my throat and tried again. “No, I’m...I’m fine.”

Then, to prove it, I pushed myself back up to my feet so that I wasn't half-lying on his chest and put my weight back onto my legs. After a moment or two of wobbling and shakiness, I managed to regain enough strength to stand without his assistance. Armsmaster, proving that he was a hero for a reason, let his hands linger for a few moments longer, as though he was waiting to catch me if I fell again, before they dropped back down to his sides.

I cleared my throat again. "So."

"Right," he grunted, but he didn't ask if I was going to fight him, again. The only guess I had was that my bumbling apology had convinced him that I was a hero — thank goodness for small mercies.

He looked me up and down, as though inspecting my costume, and for one wild moment, I thought he was looking for stray hairs or pulled stitches or something equally inane and stupid. Then, I realized he was probably checking me for injuries and making judgements about how good I was or what my powers might be based upon my costume.

Finally, he said, "You're new."

"First night out," I admitted, and I immediately regretted it. *Gosh, Taylor, why don't you tell him your three sizes, too?* It couldn't have been any more embarrassing than what I'd already said. "I mean, um...yeah."

Armsmaster gave a grim nod. "You got a name?"

"I...thought of several, actually." They'd all been in that notebook Emma and her cronies had ruined. "I think, though, I'm gonna go with Apocrypha."

He tilted his head a little.

"Apocrypha?"

"Because...legends are hard to prove or disprove, and some myths might have actual basis in real life people and events?"

*Yes, of course, regurgitate some of the stuff you've read online, like you actually know what you're talking about.*

"I guess that has something to do with your power?" he asked.

"Well, I mean, isn't that...kind of personal?"

Very few capes I'd read about on PHO had come out and described what their powers were. Presumably, it was because it kept their enemies guessing, but it might just be because most of them (especially the heroes) had very obvious powers. Was it rude to ask? I didn't know.

Armsmaster grunted and shook his head. "It's fine. Apocrypha it is, then."

He looked behind me and nodded in Lung's direction. "I suppose that's your doing?"

“Yeah,” I said. “I, uh, overheard him telling some of his goons — uh, they’re back down the street, somewhere, we, uh, kinda moved away from them as we fought — to kill some kids and I decided I couldn’t let him do that, so…”

I trailed off lamely, unable to think of any spectacular or intelligent way to describe what had come next, aside from the obvious, “we fought,” which probably wasn’t very helpful.

It seemed like enough for Armsmaster.

“So, you fought him,” he said, something like a scowl pulling at his lips, “on even ground?”

I couldn’t stop myself from snorting.

“Maybe in the last few minutes of it, yeah,” I said with a bit of pride. “But before that, the only reason he didn’t go down was because I wasn’t willing to kill him and everything else I hit him with wasn’t enough to put him out.”

Armsmaster grunted again and gave a pointed look at the limbless Lung lying on the ground. “You certainly seem to have gotten over that concern.”

It sounded almost like an admonishment, and to be entirely honest, it felt like one.

“I held back as much as I could,” I said, a little defensively. “Even then, whether it would kill him or whether he’d just get back up and keep going was something I wasn’t a hundred percent sure of. He certainly proved willing enough to kill me, though. Tried to fry my head off of my shoulders.”

Armsmaster gave my head a look, as though checking it for signs of burns. There weren’t any, of course. Lung hadn’t actually managed to do anything with his attempt at cooking my brain inside my skull, but if he’d gotten to a high enough temperature, it would’ve been an entirely different story.

Once he’d inspected me, Armsmaster turned his gaze outward and swept it around the street.

“How far along was he?” he asked, moving on. “What did he look like?”

“Twenty feet tall or so,” I answered. “Wings. Tail. Snout. Elongated neck. He even had a second set of arms. He caught me by surprise with those.”

Armsmaster stilled and turned back to look at me.

“That far?” I heard him mumble, disbelieving.

I took a little bit of pride in that, too. Hadn’t I thought that the Lung I was facing was probably so strong that entire teams of heroes would have fled rather than face him? To hear Armsmaster’s disbelief only validated that.

After a moment, he seemed to gather himself and scowled, looking around at the street.

“I’m guessing most of this was his doing, then?”

I paused and turned around to look at what he was talking about.

Destruction.

That was the only word to describe it. The entire road had been destroyed, ruined beyond repair. The paint was chipped, dried, and outright peeling on some of the buildings — which had already been in disrepair when I'd gotten here, made even worse, now — the road that had been in the path of my sword's attack had been torn up and scattered, leaving a finely ground dust and chunks of asphalt that hadn't been completely disintegrated. The street beyond that looked twisted and soupy, melted — from Lung's fire, no doubt.

There were also windows that had been shattered, though, probably from when I'd dashed past them at full speed. Chunks of road had been torn up from my running and kicking off of the ground, leaving great craters that were too deep and too wide for any car to drive across. There were even street signs that had been warped by the heat and curled now towards the ground.

It looked, all in all, like a warzone. The only reason it didn't look worse was probably because I'd tried my best to keep the fight limited to that one street, so that we weren't dashing through the Docks and smashing up buildings as we fought.

I did this, though. There was no escaping that thought. I couldn't even begin to imagine exactly how much repairs would cost, if they were even done and this street wasn't just given up as a lost cause, but I knew it would be expensive. More than my dad's yearly salary, at least. Maybe more than what my dad made in *five* years.

And I'd done it. Oh sure, Lung was responsible, too, and the lion's share probably went to him, but looking at it, I knew I'd done some of it, too. In fact, most of the stuff I'd done was probably only unnoticeable because Lung had simply destroyed whatever I'd already damaged.

There was even a few buildings that had collapsed, somewhere along the line. Lung hadn't done *that*. In fact, they looked more like they'd been blown over by a sudden wind or chopped in half by a giant —

Oh.

So, when I swung Balmung with nothing held back...

I suddenly felt nauseous. What if there'd been *people* in there? What if this had happened *downtown*, where there *would* have been people in these buildings? I would have killed them like that, wouldn't I? Entirely without meaning to, I would have —

I swallowed thickly.

"Yeah," I said a little faintly. "Yeah, Lung did most of that. He was flinging fire everywhere, when he wasn't melting stuff just by standing there."

I hoped he wouldn't ask, that he wouldn't request clarification, but Armsmaster was too smart and too experienced for that.

"Most of it?"

“I, uh...” I swallowed again and thought about lying, but that probably wouldn’t solve anything. “This was my first time using my powers in a fight. I did some tests earlier, but I guess I never realized...”

*Just how powerful are my Heroes, anyway?*

“That’s why I collapsed, too,” I admitted. “I’ve never...*pushed* myself that hard that fast. I...didn’t know it would take that much out of me.”

Did Armsmaster have some kind of “truth” aura? Why was I telling him all of these things?

“That’s what the Wards program is for,” Armsmaster said. “Help you figure out your powers, help you find out where your limits are, help you out when you’re in trouble...”

He stopped halfway and stared intensely at me for a moment, then seemed to have an epiphany and abruptly changed tacks.

“But you don’t need that, do you?” he said. “You fought Lung to a standstill up to a point where any other hero, even entire *teams*, would have turned tail and retreated — to the point where even the *Protectorate* gave it up as a lost cause.”

He glanced back down the road for a moment, then asked, “How many limbs did you chop off when you were fighting him?”

“I...don’t know?” I said, caught off guard. It felt like this should be a trick question, but the way he’d said it sounded like an honest curiosity, or like maybe he was driving towards a point. “His right arm, his left arm, a wing, his tail...I think I got almost everything but his head at least once.”

“And you fought him like that while keeping the fight contained to a *single street*,” Armsmaster said emphatically. “*You* don’t need help, no, but *we* do. Aegis, Vista, the Wards, even Miss Militia and myself — we do the best we can with what and who we have, but sometimes that’s not enough. Sometimes, we have trouble or we’re spread far too thin. Even with the PRT as backup, there are things we can’t do or places we can’t always be. People we can’t always save.”

In my head, I could see the image coming together: a beleaguered Protectorate fighting a long battle against Lung, with the Wards there in the background as support. PRT troopers would be trying to put him down, only for everything to glance right off of Lung’s scales like it was nothing. They were losing, and losing badly.

Then, I was there, as Medea or Lancelot or Siegfried. I’d cast spells that slowed him down or made my allies stronger, healing their wounds, or else I’d charge through to the front, shrugging off everything Lung threw at me and forcing him back. The troopers behind me would cheer, and the Wards and the Protectorate would rally in my wake, taking advantage of the openings I made with my sword.

It was a tempting image, to be needed like that, to be able to help people like that. I’d given it a little bit of thought, before. Not much. If I had to try and say why I wasn’t excited about the idea, I might have said that I was afraid of fitting in, of whether or not I could be a part of the Wards without

being too *big* for them. I didn't want to...to make them look bad, just because I'd hit the power jackpot. I didn't want to outshine them.

I didn't want to be anything like Emma.

And a part of me, I think, was afraid that the Wards might hate me for it, if I was just so much more powerful than they were. And being part of a Wards team that didn't want anything to do with me...I couldn't help but think I'd be miserable, like that.

But the way Armsmaster put it, like they'd be happy to have me on board, and I could do *so much good*...

"I..." For a moment, I thought about saying yes immediately, but something, some uncertainty, held me back. "Can I think about it for a few days?"

Armsmaster gave me a smile, a very warm, very human smile, and nodded. "Of course," he said. "This isn't a decision anyone should rush into. Take a few days or a week or two, talk to your parents about it, and if you have any questions..."

He produced a business card from somewhere in his armor and held it out. It had his logo, his official Protectorate email, and a phone number printed neatly on a thick, sturdy cardstock.

"Feel free to give me a call."

I took the card without a single moment's hesitation. "I'll do that," I promised.

He nodded again. "If you'll excuse me a moment, I need to call this in."

"Okay."

He stepped away and lifted a hand to his helmet, and I heard him say, "Console," before he turned around and his words became inaudible.

Me, I just stood there, unsure of what to do or where to go. I'd beaten Lung. Armsmaster had invited me to join the Wards. What next? Should I just...go home, after all of that?

It felt weird, like something this big and this life-changing should mean...I had no idea what, but the thought of going home after that seemed strange and alien. Maybe not trumpets and fanfare, but it felt like there should still be something...more, some indescribable thing that should happen, now that I'd finally gone out and become a hero — and taken down *Lung*, of all villains, in the process.

But...no. There was nothing special happening. I was just standing there, feeling vaguely cold and wondering why *I* had changed, but the world seemed hell bent on staying the same.

"Apocrypha."

I blinked and turned back to Armsmaster. "Yes?"

“PRT transport for Lung will be here in a few minutes,” he said. “If you’d like, you could stay and watch. Get firsthand experience with our procedures and see them in action.”

Sort of like the PRT version of a police ride-along?

“Uh,” I stuttered, “sure.”

That...actually sounded like an invaluable experience, and if I did eventually decide to join the Wards, well, it’d be pretty useful then, wouldn’t it?

He gave me another nod, then we fell into silence as he headed back over to his bike and moved it to the side — to make room for the PRT vans, if I had to make a guess. He set it up so that the headlight shone directly on Lung, probably to make the troopers’ jobs easier when they showed up, and it gave me a much better look at the burned-out stumps of Lung’s arms and legs.

I really *had* come pretty close to killing him, hadn’t I?

It felt like an hour passed, but a few minutes later, flashing green and white lights came down the street almost silently — no sirens. I guessed that since they weren’t responding to an emergency and it had to be one or two o’clock in the morning, there was no need to blare them and wake up everyone in a five mile radius.

The large vans that pulled up were white with purple stripes stretching diagonally down the sides. “PRT” was stenciled in big, blocky letters overtop. It was simple and relatively nondescript; but for the lettering and the color of the lights, it could have been just about any other emergency service vehicle.

The moment they came to a halt, the back of one burst open and a squad of men in what looked like military uniforms hopped out, jogging around the side of the van. They lifted the nozzle of some strange device, connected by a hose to a container strapped to each of their backs, leveled it at Lung, and started shooting some bizarre, greyish goop at him.

“Standard operating procedure for capturing villains,” Armsmaster explained from beside me. “If they’re down and in no need of immediate medical attention or if they haven’t already been contained, then they’re sprayed with containment foam, which expands and hardens. Durable, resistant to impacts, fire retardant, and porous enough that targets can still breathe. It’s the standard nonlethal response.”

A few moments later, after Lung had been completely covered and the goop had begun to harden, a trooper, decked out in body armor and complete with a visor that hid his face, came over and saluted Armsmaster.

“Sir,” the trooper said, “prisoner secure and ready for transport.”

“Good work,” Armsmaster said. “I’ve loaded him with a sedative that should keep him out for a few hours, yet, but for any more details regarding his condition, you’ll have to ask Apocrypha, here.”

He turned to me expectantly, and after a second to stare at Armsmaster, the PRT trooper did, too.

“Ah.” I fumbled for a moment, feeling like a deer caught in the headlights as I was suddenly put on the spot, but something else kindled inside of me — a bit of satisfaction and some pride, that Armsmaster had acknowledged me. “I mean, that is... I hit him with...I guess you could call it an anti-dragon attack. Since he’s not a dragon anymore, he should...recover like normal.”

The trooper nodded. “Ma’am,” he said, “I’ll take that under advisement.” Then, after a moment’s pause, he added, “And congratulations, Ma’am, for bringing down Lung.”

He snapped off another salute to Armsmaster, “Sir!” and turned away to help load Lung into the van he’d come from.

“Armsmaster.”

My head swiveled around to the newcomer, a woman in fatigues with an American flag scarf draped over her lower face, as she came towards the man standing next to me.

“Miss Militia.” Armsmaster acknowledged her with a nod.

“Quite a catch you made tonight,” she said, and from the way her eyes crinkled, she must have been smiling. She glanced past us to the place where Lung was, or where he’d been before he’d been showered with...containment foam, Armsmaster had called it. “The knight in shining armor rode in on his valiant steed and slew the big, bad dragon. Without taking a scratch, at that.”

She rapped his chest plate with her knuckles, producing a slight, metallic *clink*.

“I can only take credit for the sedative that’s keeping him out,” Armsmaster told her. He gestured to me, again, making a slight bow. “Sir Knight is to my right.”

“Oh?” Miss Militia looked at me, scanning my costume up and down. She laughed. “My apologies, then — *Lady* Knight. Unless you have something else you’d rather I call you by?”

“I, ah...”

Damn it, Taylor... You would think I’d gotten used to being introduced to all these new people in one night.

“It’s her first night out.” Armsmaster saved me.

Miss Militia turned surprised eyes his way. “And she’s already beaten Lung?” She offered me a friendly smile. “Quite the feather in your cap.”

“I, ah, yeah. Um.” I forced myself to focus. No more stuttering. I might be working with this woman in the future, so nervousness and hero worship would just get in the way. “I mean, yes, I beat Lung. Not for the glory of it, though.”

Armsmaster grunted and folded his arms. “She said that Lung was talking about killing kids,” he said by way of explanation. “Not that I’m entirely surprised, given what the ABB gets up to.”

“Oh?” said Miss Militia, and she favored me with another smile. “A knight in shining armor, indeed. Might Milady Knight grace me with her name?”

If only she knew. She’d probably get a good laugh out of it when Armsmaster told her how he’d found me, still using Siegfried, armor and all.

“Apocrypha,” I said firmly. I’d have to live with that name, now. Own it. All of the other names I was thinking of were no longer important.

“You certainly are a bit mysterious,” said Miss Militia. “Apocrypha. Not a bad name. Have you thought about joining the Wards?”

“I, ah, wanted to think about it...”

“I see.” She nodded. “Armsmaster has already made the pitch, then. Sorry — I didn’t mean to push.”

“It’s fine.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, though,” she said, “is there any particular reason you *wouldn’t* want to join the Wards? Any...concerns you had?”

“I...”

For a moment, I thought about just not saying anything and asking her not to pry. The more I considered it, though, the more I had to admit that no one else could answer a question if I didn’t ask it. No one could tell me whether or not my concerns were well-founded if I didn’t voice them.

That had been my relationship with Dad basically since Mom died. Sure, mostly I just didn’t want to put more pressure on him, especially because I didn’t think he could solve any of my problems at Winslow when my enemy was my former best friend, her cronies, and her lawyer of a father. That didn’t change the fact that I hadn’t told him anything about the bullying, nor even that it was still going on, even after the locker.

But I didn’t want things to be like that in my superhero life, too. I didn’t want every part of my life to consist solely of grinning, bearing it, and muddling through.

“I...guess I’m worried about fitting in,” I said, echoing my earlier thoughts.

“Fitting in?” Miss Militia asked.

“My power,” I clarified, “is, well, uh, Triumvirate tier. Which sounds really arrogant, I know —”

“You defeated Lung by yourself,” she reminded me, not unkindly. “I don’t think that’s an unfair comparison to make.”

“Right.” I shifted a little nervously. “Yeah, um, well. My power is, uh, I guess you could say I draw strength from myths and legends —”

“Hence, ‘Apocrypha,’” Armsmaster chimed in.

“Right, yeah.” I nodded. “So, uh, I take on the powers of heroes from mythology — any of them, really. Heracles, Medusa, Achilles, Sigurd or Siegfried, the Knights of the Round Table... I, uh, haven’t...actually found a limitation, yet? Every hero I’ve come across has been an option, for me. Celtic, Greco-Roman, Slavic — I even have a few Japanese heroes I’ve come across that count, too.”

“That’s what you meant by an anti-dragon weapon,” said Armsmaster. “And that form you were in when I pulled up — one of those heroes?”

“Siegfried, actually,” I clarified. “I had other options, like Saint George, but when it comes to his other advantages, Siegfried was just the better option.”

Miss Militia suddenly broke out into laughter, and Armsmaster and I both turned to stare at her. “Sorry,” she said when she noticed us looking, “it’s just...a *literal* knight in shining armor.”

Armsmaster snorted, and even I had to smile a little bit. Like I’d thought before — she certainly seemed to enjoy the irony.

“So,” she started once the laughter had died down. “You can take on the powers and abilities of any hero from mythology, regardless of origin or culture. Yes, that certainly sounds like quite the power; calling it Triumvirate tier isn’t really a stretch.”

She tilted her head to the side a little. “Why does that make you worry about fitting in?”

“I guess...I was afraid they’d be jealous?” I fidgeted a little. “I mean, a power like mine is hard to compete with. The only cape I know of that I can compare to is, well...”

“Eidolon,” she finished for me.

“Yeah. I just thought, well, it’d be pretty intimidating. If they were afraid of me or jealous of me or whatever and didn’t want to work with me, well, there just...wouldn’t be much point to joining, would there?”

“It’s certainly a valid concern,” Miss Militia said. “I don’t think any of our Wards would react like that, though. In fact, I think they’d be quite glad to have you.”

She glanced back towards the PRT vans, which had already finished loading Lung. I could see one of the troopers making gestures at her and Armsmaster, like he was trying to tell them something but didn’t want to interrupt us.

“It seems it’s time for us to head back,” she said.

Surprised, I asked, “That’s it? That’s all there is to it?”

Miss Militia sent me a questioning look, but Armsmaster chuckled.

“This is the easy part,” he said. “Now that he’s captured, we have to do the paperwork and process him through the system.”

“Ah, yes,” said Miss Militia dryly, “the more tedious side of crime-fighting: dotting your t’s and crossing your i’s. The enemy that gives trouble to even the strongest, most seasoned of heroes: paperwork.”

“Mouse Protector’s greatest nemesis,” Armsmaster added, smiling sardonically.

Miss Militia gave a quiet little laugh, then shook her head and turned back to me. “You could ride back with us, if you wanted, and continue our conversation,” she offered. “We’re not allowed to show you some things, like where the cells are located or what our security measures are, but we could show you how we sign him in, and if one or two of the Wards are still in, we could arrange a meet-and-greet for you.”

“I…”

It was tempting. Very, very tempting. I’d probably make up my mind right then and there, if I got to meet the Wards. It’d probably make or break my decision. If I could meet the Wards, if they really were as nice as Armsmaster and Miss Militia had implied, if I had the chance to meet some of the people who were in a similar position to me — if with not nearly as much power to throw around — then…

“I can’t,” I said regretfully, shaking my head. “I’m still kind of tired from fighting Lung, and I really should be getting home, soon. Plus, it’s a school night…”

“Ah, the bane of teenage superheroes everywhere,” Miss Militia said sagely. “School.” She offered me another smile. “It’s no trouble, Apocrypha, we understand. Have a good night. And remember: you did a very good thing, tonight.”

“Good night,” I replied automatically.

She gave a nod to her colleague, a quiet, “Armsmaster,” and then turned around and climbed back into the second PRT van. A moment later, both had pulled away, and it was just me and him left on the street.

“I’ll be heading back, as well,” he told me. “Will you be all right, making it home by yourself?”

A surge of affection and gratitude swept through me, and I wanted to smile so badly that my cheeks hurt. He really was a hero, wasn’t he?

“I’m gonna sit down for a few minutes, get my energy back,” I said. “I’ll head home after that. Shouldn’t run into any trouble.”

He frowned. “If you’re sure…”

I gave him a smile. “I’m a little more durable than I look. Promise.”

He still didn't look entirely happy about that, but I guess being told that the girl who took down Lung could take care of herself made some kind of sense to him, because he gave me a nod, went back to his bike, and after giving it a rev to warm the engine back up, he took off after the PRT vans. Alone in the dark, for the first time since the whole ordeal began, I sat down on the sidewalk and let out a sigh.

It still felt kind of surreal. I'd beaten *Lung. Lung*, the biggest, baddest monster in the Bay, so terrifyingly powerful that entire Protectorate *teams* were forced to retreat rather than take him on at his best, and I —

“Is he gone?”

The voice stopped me cold and I froze.

The girl, and with a voice like that, it could only be a girl, let out an exhausted sigh, and as I slowly turned my head to look into the alleyway behind me, a slender figure in purple spandex walked out of it.

“Ah geez,” the girl said, combing her fingers through her blonde hair, “I swear, I was holding my breath the entire time!”