

Depravation 8.4

“No,” Piggot said immediately.

“No?” I repeated incredulously.

“That’s what I said. No. No, you are not to be a part of this case.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

Her lips thinned and her eyes narrowed, and even with my sparse interactions with her, I could read the displeasure in that expression, the anger at my disrespect. She was the director, and she would not be spoken to like that.

Well, tough. Today wasn’t a day where I could be a properly deferential underling for her.

“If you’d come to me about this a month ago, I might have been in a position where I could say yes,” Piggot told me bluntly. “Now? Too much scrutiny. Too many eyes. You’re incredibly valuable as both a hero and a PR icon, Apocrypha, but that brings with it *attention*. If I let you in on this, people are going to notice. People who don’t like it when regional directors start bending the rules for the sake of convenience or expediency.”

My lips drew tight as I scowled.

Fame. Reputation. It all came back to that, didn’t it? Killing Leviathan had saved the city and not a few lives, and the reputation, the *clout* it gave me to have been the one that did it would likely make my voice heard more keenly and with more weight than it would have otherwise. But the fame that came with it, the increase in attention paid to everything I did and everything I said, that was a double-edged sword.

Because it meant that I had much more than just the city or a handful of cape geeks on PHO watching me, now. I had the whole country watching. The Fallen, the Elite, probably, Dragon and the Guild. The bigwigs who could give even Piggot orders. Senators, congressmen, maybe even the fucking *President*.

Fuck, I was going to have to get used to that, wasn’t I?

“You *are* still a Ward, after all,” she went on. “You’re underage. Technically, despite whatever your powers might let you do or what skills they might impart, you’re underqualified. You haven’t even been through power testing so that we can even establish the *idea* of what credentials you should or can hold. Without that, any testimony you might give in court would be completely invalidated, and all of the effort you put in would be for nothing. Worse, the rules of double jeopardy would mean any case we lost as a result would be something we couldn’t pursue again.”

“But the symbol on the wall,” I protested, “it was *Excalibur*. It was *me*. Whoever did this, they’re using *me* as part of it.”

Another downside to fame like that: people acting in your name without you ever granting your approval. Selling merch made in your image was one thing, and I didn't really care if someone was going around selling Apocrypha t-shirts or Apocrypha action figures, but committing murder and plastering your symbol at the crime scene wasn't something I could just fucking *overlook*.

"All the more reason why you shouldn't be involved," came the reply. "You're too close to this. Too invested. The instant this gets out and someone notices, there's bound to be some uncomfortable questions as it is. They'll be *more* uncomfortable if you're part of the investigation."

"Director," spoke Armsmaster, "I urge you to reconsider. The matter of credentials may be cleared up with relative ease. It would take only a few days to set up the required licensing examinations and power testing; the paperwork could be filed and processed by the end of next week."

Piggot's eyes flashed as she sent a squinty glare his way. "You're deliberately ignoring the issue. This isn't a simple matter of filling out the proper forms, this is about how I literally can't afford to skirt regulations. In spite of whatever utility her power might have, I *cannot* have an underage Ward be the lead investigator on a gruesome *double homicide*."

My brow drew down. "That isn't what we talked about when I agreed to become a Ward. One of my conditions was that you wouldn't *sideline* me."

"From a *homicide* investigation?" An eyebrow raised.

"Better than walking around and posing for pictures," I said bitterly.

"And yet, you did more good in an hour or two of walking around and posing for pictures than you could even if you solved this case single-handedly."

"On a PR stunt?"

"A PR stunt that showed you alive, well, and on patrol," Piggot corrected. "Tell me, what do you think that's going to do for the city, once word gets out? How much more money and resources do you think the politicians in Washington are going to appropriate for Brockton Bay, with everyone talking about you and what you did?"

I grimaced, because I couldn't refute the idea.

It was true, I couldn't deny that, that my fame and my being seen out in public were likely to have made things easier for getting Brockton Bay back on its feet. Certainly, even if there had ever been talk of condemning the city as there had been in Khepri's world, my presence alone was probably enough to quell it, all things considered.

(Wasn't that a fucking trip? I was setting national policy without even *meaning* to, now.)

But. That wasn't the kind of hero I wanted to be. It wasn't the kind of hero I'd *signed up* to be.

"What if it's the Fallen?" I asked instead of trying to argue her point. "What if they put that symbol on the wall as a declaration of intent?"

“I’ve already consulted our Think Tank,” Piggot said. “We’re as certain as we can be that this isn’t the Fallen.”

“The Slaughterhouse Nine?” Armsmaster rumbled grimly.

“Last sighted halfway across the country. Is there a particular reason you might be expecting *them*?”

He turned towards me without a word. I closed my eyes and let out a breath.

“They attacked Khepri’s Brockton Bay, after Leviathan,” I admitted. “Targeted Panacea, Hookwolf, Armsmaster, and a few others. For recruitment.”

A flash of memory, of a blonde girl with a bloodstained smock and Grue splayed out. The feeling of utter helplessness, because my powers weren’t working. The dreadful knowledge of what was to come, that she was going to turn *me* into one of her works of ‘art.’

Piggot’s eyes pierced into me, like she was trying to read my mind. “Do you have reason to suspect they might try again here?”

Not for sure, no.

“Maybe,” I hedged. “Jack Slash loves theatrics. He loves twisting people, taking paragons and turning them into monsters. If he was going to come for someone here, to try and turn them, it’d probably be me.”

It would be a warmup for him. Take the Endslayer, the Hopebringer, and make her into another of his band of traveling killers. It would fit his particular brand of nihilism, the idea of turning me into a monster to match any of the Endbringers. Twist a symbol of hope for the future into a beacon of terror and dread.

It wouldn’t *work*, but it was the kind of thing he’d want to do.

“But he’s also not an idiot and Brockton Bay is getting a lot of attention. We’re miles better off than Khepri’s Brockton Bay was. I can’t say for sure that he wouldn’t try, but the fact that we’re not down half the Protectorate and Wards teams and struggling to pick up the pieces might convince him things are too hot up here.”

The Director didn’t exactly look happy about that, but I didn’t think I’d *ever* seen her truly happy. The closest I could recall was the triumphant little smiles from that meeting after the Echidna incident.

“Regardless,” she said, “I’ll put in a request to have the Think Tank keep an eye on the situation, so we can be prepared if the Slaughterhouse Nine *do* decide to pay us a visit.”

“And in the meantime, I get to sit around and go on PR patrols to drum up support for the city?”

Piggot leveled a glare at me. “No. You get to go on *television*.”

My brain short-circuited.

“What?” I managed to choke out.

There was no way I’d heard that right.

“Several networks have been sending requests to have you on for an interview,” Piggot elaborated. “We’ve been stalling them until we could get permission from your father to let you go on and file the request with Image for a consultation to prep you for it.”

“You... you’re putting me on tv?”

I... What? I mean, sure, Leviathan and everything, but, just... What?

“You’re the most famous person in the world, right now,” she explained like she thought I was being stupid. “Everyone wants to know more about you. Everyone wants to *meet* you. That gives us a lot to work with, a lot to *leverage*, and if we capitalize on it, we can use that leverage to get more money, which means better equipment, more supplies, more personnel, and more aid for the reconstruction of Brockton Bay. The more aid we get, the sooner we get the city back on its feet. The sooner we get the city back on its feet, the more tourism and in-coming business we can expect. That means a revitalized economy.”

I understood the idea enough. I wasn’t an economist or a lawyer or whatever, but I *was* the daughter of the Dockworker’s Association’s Head of Hiring, and that meant that I, better than most, understood the driving factor of crime: poverty. It was like with Gerry; if you didn’t have a better way of getting money (read: *a stable job*), then the only answer available was to become a henchman for Uber and Leet or join one of the gangs and peddle drugs.

The point the Director was trying to make was that crime would go down as the economy improved, and the rate at which the economy improved was something I could influence.

“And you want me to plaster my face on national television to do it,” I concluded.

But the only way I could influence it was by doing more PR stunts, like going on television programs and being interviewed by talk show hosts.

“And in doing so, you’ll do more good for this city than you would investigating street level crimes.”

Fuck. Fuck. She was right, but that wasn’t the kind of hero I wanted to be. That wasn’t the kind of heroism I signed up for.

Then send me after bigger threats, I wanted to say. If street crime is beneath me now, send me after national level threats.

Like the Slaughterhouse Nine or Heartbreaker.

But I couldn’t bring myself to say it. Not because the idea didn’t appeal, but because I wasn’t ready for it. I wasn’t ready to leave Brockton Bay behind, to be defended only by the people already here, without me to prepare them for the storms to come.

The Teeth and the Butcher, the Fallen, the Slaughterhouse Nine; if *they* came and I wasn't here to face them, I would never forgive myself.

"Director," rumbled Armsmaster, "I agree with Apocrypha. While a public appearance or two and an interview will be vital to our recovery efforts, her abilities are wasted on pure PR. We'll certainly need her if the Empire reconstitutes itself or the Fallen decide to avenge the death of one of their idols, especially if this is enough to unify their different sects."

"It's not as though this is a permanent arrangement," the Director said. "In a month or two, the furor will have died down and the media appearances will be less important. At that time, we can have a more thorough conversation about the direction of your career as a Ward."

A month or two? A month or two of being in the spotlight, of having people asking me for interviews and autographs and having to smile for cameras when I just wanted to be out there *doing* something?

"I can rebuild the city." The words left my mouth before I could consider the wisdom of the idea. "In a day or two, at most."

Piggot's eyebrows rose. "*How?*"

Hesitation held my tongue for a moment, because I already knew this idea wasn't going to go over well. Especially considering her history.

Piggot wasn't the type to let me just drop it, though, so, I guess, in for a penny...

"It... It wouldn't necessarily be permanent," I hedged, "but I'd have to make the city part of —"

Her eyes went wide.

"No," she interjected. There was something like panic threading through her voice. "No, you stupid girl, are you *insane*? You were recruited into the Wards program after Mastering two whole Protectorate teams, and your solution to property damage is to take that to its furthest *extreme*? Are you out of your goddamn *mind*?"

"It's the easiest and most efficient solution," I argued, even though I knew she would never agree to it. "Quick and even free. It would free up the money slated for reconstruction efforts for other things. I could even set up defenses to guard against hostile invaders, like the Fallen or the Slaughterhouse Nine."

"And easily classify yourself as an S-Class threat, you *twit*," Piggot spat. "The US government tends to frown on private citizens or even their own agents laying claim to the entirety of a city, no matter *what* the logic used to justify it."

"If you gave your permission —"

"If I gave my permission, they'd kick me out of this chair in a heartbeat!" she countered, slamming her hands against her desk as she rose. Red was flooding her cheeks. "And then they'd throw me in Master-Stranger quarantine for making such a colossally stupid fucking —!"

The Director cut herself off, and she visibly restrained herself, taking a long, deep breath before she sat back down. The splotches of red on her face and the narrow set of her eyes told the story of her anger, but the grim line of her mouth spoke just as much of her efforts at control.

Admirable, really, considering how many buttons I had to be pressing, including probably the Nilbog one. If nothing else, I could respect her ability to rein herself in.

“Perhaps a compromise,” Armsmaster suggested smoothly. “Apocrypha is right that two months of inactivity is a waste of her skills and abilities, so instead, would it be possible to put them to use repairing the buildings on an individual basis? It may be a less efficient method, but it would allow her to very publicly help the city in a way that would also allow her to make use of her powers to do so.”

He’d turned to me halfway through, as though the suggestion had been made in my direction just as much as Piggot’s.

I didn’t like it. I knew what he was suggesting and why, and I knew the importance of it, too, but all the same, it still felt like a waste, especially when a quicker, easier method was available.

It was still miles better than walking around doing nothing and sitting in a studio having talk show hosts ask me all sorts of questions about my life for the next two months.

For what it was worth, Piggot didn’t dismiss it out of hand immediately.

“I could do that,” I said reluctantly. The words tasted like ash in my mouth.

The Director gave me her squinty-eyed look, and at length, allowed, “I’ll consider it. I would have to, of course, receive favorable test results from a sample in the lab, but provided the powers Apocrypha used to repair these buildings have no adverse side effects, I can’t foresee this being a problem.”

“And the murder case?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

“No,” Piggot replied sharply. “The reasoning hasn’t changed and nothing you’ve said so far has given me any cause to change my mind.”

“And Tattletale?” Armsmaster asked. “Are we able to use her for this case?”

She turned to him.

“I haven’t heard back from legal, yet,” she said, “but I wouldn’t expect so, no. I went over our consultation agreement with her and there’s no room for this situation outlined in the terms.” Her lips thinned. “Even if there had been, we likely wouldn’t have been able to use her anyway. Thinker-derived testimony and evidence that acquires data through extrasensory abilities needs to be corroborated independently of any parahuman powers in order to be admissible in court.”

“I see,” said Armsmaster, sounding a little frustrated. “I wasn’t aware we’d determined the nature of Tattletale’s powers, yet.”

“It was considered mandatory during her Master-Stranger screening after the Echidna incident,” Piggot explained. “The official results have not yet been added to her file. The decision has been made to classify her as a Thinker 8.”

“So high?” Armsmaster murmured.

“As I said, extrasensory powers require independent corroboration. Testing concluded that Tattletale’s power goes beyond simply enhanced perception and allows her to discern details that she should not be able to identify with the human senses. According to the examiners, her power is closer to psychometry than deductive reasoning.”

“So you’re not going to get help from her, either?” I asked.

“Legally, we can’t,” Piggot admitted. “Even if she was a Ward, our hands would be tied. Unless some evidence has shown up that I’m unaware of?”

Armsmaster’s lips pulled tight. “The scene is still being processed, but given the amount of contamination, it’s unlikely we’ll find a clean enough sample for comparison. Furthermore, Miss Militia’s hunch on the bloody shower appears not to have borne fruit. No hair samples were found in the drain and no fingerprints were discovered on the faucet.”

A sudden idea struck me.

“What if I could train someone like that?” I asked. “What if I trained someone to notice all of the small details, to pick out the things that other people wouldn’t see with superhuman competence? Trained someone to be as good as a Thinker without actually being one?”

Trained someone to be a detective on the level of a man whose name was still synonymous with the term?

Piggot turned to me with a suspicious eye. “Can you?” she demanded.

I didn’t answer right away. Instead, I closed my eyes and reached out for my powers.

As embarrassing as it was to admit, I hadn’t really thought of it before. After all, Sherlock Holmes was fictional, wasn’t he? Did that preclude him from my powers? There was a sense I got from my powers that the heroes I had access to had something of a prerequisite: if they hadn’t ever been real, then people at least had to have *believed* they were real, and believed it strongly enough to imprint that hero’s presence on history. I didn’t have any clue who was which, because every single one I’d used so far had felt like a complete person with a complex, unique life and circumstances.

Except, by that metric, wouldn’t Sherlock Holmes count?

People had once believed in him as a person. Mom had told me about it back when she had first introduced me to the novels. Whether he was real or just a piece of fiction, people had once believed in him strongly enough to send letters to 221B Baker Street, where Sherlock Holmes was supposed to have lived.

Was that enough?

And even if it hadn't been, I thought as touched upon the vast halls of myth and legend, could there be a world where Sherlock Holmes actually had been a real person?

I half expected it not to work, for there to be a great void instead of a person. But when I reached for him, he was there, patient and serene, as though he'd been waiting for me the entire time.

And if he existed, his skills could be taught by Aífe.

My lips quirked up to one side. "It's elementary, Director."

She frowned. I could almost see the cogs in her head grinding together as she debated whether or not to agree with the idea.

"It would have to be done on your own time," she allowed, "when you're not on the clock with the Wards program. Whoever you taught would still have to undergo the proper certifications and pass the relevant tests."

"I can do it," Armsmaster volunteered immediately. He sounded almost eager. "I already have training in forensics and crime scene analysis, with the necessary backgrounds and certifications in the relevant machinery and programs. Adding another certification would be simple and quick."

The Director slanted him a look.

"We'll see," she said. "It'll have to wait, regardless. Apocrypha, you have a meeting with the head of the Image department tomorrow at ten a.m. sharp. Your interview is already scheduled for Friday morning; you'll be flying to New York on Thursday night."

My cheek twitched. The smile on my face dropped and pulled tight into a grimace.

"The head of Image?"

"Yes." A smirk curled her lips. "You've heard of him?"

"You could say that, yes."

A nod. "Ah. Khepri?"

"She...had an encounter with him. After she became a Ward."

"Then you'll know exactly what to expect."

Fuck.

"Yeah..."

Glenn Chambers. The man who had told Khepri that she had to fight using *butterflies* and cutesy things, rather than just swarming villains with the more dangerous, more *effective* bugs in her arsenal. The man who had the power to tell me that punching villains wouldn't be good for my image and wearing pink would make me more approachable. The man who could single-handedly determine

what heroes I was allowed to use in public, and whether or not my favored Installs were “PR friendly” enough to pass muster.

A sour note of anxiety curled in my belly.

Ugh. This was gonna suck.