

Fracture 9.5

My morning started in a way that it seemed like it hadn't for a long time. I woke up in my own bed in my own home, shut off my alarm, and slipped into a pair of sweats, before heading downstairs to put on my shoes and go for a run for the first time in what felt like months. When Dad came downstairs a few minutes later, dressed in his bathrobe, for a moment, I could have convinced myself that the last two months hadn't happened.

But only for a moment.

Dad smiled. "Morning, Honey."

"Morning, Dad," I replied.

It was...normal. I didn't realize how much I'd missed that until just then. Khepri's life had eventually been consumed by being a cape. I was trying to avoid that, to tether myself to at least some little slice of normalcy. But when every day felt like the barest inch forward towards my goals, normalcy was the easiest thing of all to sacrifice for the slightest edge.

Dad passed my seat at the kitchen table, put on a pot of coffee, then set about making breakfast. I gulped down my serving of applesauce, then slipped on the resistance bands that would make my morning run actually worth doing, now that the distance I'd need to run to get an actual workout was prohibitively long.

I'd decided against gravity weights or something like that. Turning up my personal gravity was just *asking* to leave craters behind as I walked, and that was the quickest and stupidest way of outing myself I could imagine, short of walking to school in my costume.

When I finished my little carton of applesauce, I tossed it and got up to grab the orange juice. At the stove, Dad had moved on from bacon to the French toast; he handed me a plate as I passed, filled with steaming, crispy bacon that made my mouth water.

The food at the PRT cafeteria was fine enough and definitely good for a cafeteria, but there was something about a home cooked meal that just made it so much better. Maybe it had something to do with cafeterias making food in bulk? Or maybe it was because it was much more personal, rather than just a job that needed doing. Either way, even something as simple as French toast and bacon seemed so much more appetizing when made by my dad than some nameless, faceless cook.

Maybe it was just because I was finally eating a meal in my own home, again.

Even pacing myself, I'd already scarfed down almost half the plate by the time Dad came over from the stove with two more plates in his hands, each with its share of French toast. He smiled at me, that fond, fatherly smile I remembered from years past, and set one of them down in front of me.

"Here you go. One for you." He set the other one down at his own seat. "And one for me."

"Thanks, Dad," I said as I grabbed the bottle of syrup.

“It’s not much of a homecoming meal,” he began apologetically, “especially since we came home last night and just ordered in — but it’s what we’ve got that didn’t spoil while we were gone. I’ll have to go grocery shopping later today.”

“It’s fine.” I offered him a smile. “I think a simple meal is exactly what I want, right now.”

What with how busy and complicated my life was, right now.

“Oh. Well then, I’m happy to have been of service, milady.”

I snorted, and we settled into a companionable silence as we ate our breakfast.

It felt good, sitting there with my dad, eating breakfast. A good word might be...wholesome. It didn’t quite fit, but it was the best one I had. This morning was just me and my dad, sharing a meal like we were a normal family. Like we weren’t still a little broken, with the empty spot that sat between us.

Like we were healing.

I savored it for as long as I could, but even so, I finished before him, and absent a good reason to skip the morning run I’d been missing for weeks, I stood from the table and put my dishes in the sink. I could have washed them, dried them, and maybe that wouldn’t be so abnormal, but it would just be me trying to prolong this moment of tranquility a little longer.

“Alright,” I announced, “I’m going to head out.”

“Starting up your morning runs, again?” he asked.

“Yeah. Been a while since I’ve had the chance. Long patrols and beating up thugs might get the blood flowing, but it’s not the same as a dedicated workout.”

“Okay.” He offered me a wave over his shoulder, fork still in hand. “Stay safe.”

“Sure.”

I started towards the door to leave, but hesitated and stopped as I passed by him, and then, before my courage fled me, I leaned over the back of his chair, wrapped one arm around his shoulders, and gave him a brief hug.

“See you later, Dad.”

He chuckled and reached up to give my hand a squeeze. “Later.”

My back straightened as I stood and I continued my journey towards the door. I was just about to open it when he called after me.

“Oh. Before you go, Taylor.”

I stopped short and craned my neck over my shoulder to look at him, one hand on the doorknob.
“Yeah?”

“Don’t forget,” he reminded me, “you’re supposed to go and meet up with Lisa later on this afternoon.”

“Right,” I agreed. “Yeah. I forgot about that. Thanks, Dad.”

He waved it off.

“Go on. I’ll see you later on.”

“Yeah.”

I opened the door and crossed the porch, taking the steps down, then raced off at a leisurely sprint and started my first morning run in nearly a month. Only the wind rushing past my ears, the sun beaming down from the sky, and the tempo of my beating heart accompanied me.

I breathed deep and smiled.

— o.O.O.O.o —

It was a little after one o’clock when I met up with Lisa. She was waiting for me just on the edge of town, dressed in casual clothes not unlike what she’d worn when we’d first met up in our civvies what now felt like a lifetime ago. Like then, she was fiddling with something on her phone, though she locked it and stuffed it into a pocket when I came close.

Had it really only been about two months? So much had happened since then, and yet so much more *could* have.

“Hey,” I greeted her.

“Hey,” she replied.

“I see you managed to get back to your old apartment just fine,” I commented. I gave her a deliberate once over. She laughed.

“Yeah, lucky break there.” She grinned. “If it hadn’t been for Leviathan and the state of emergency thing, my landlord would’ve tossed all my stuff to the curb. Doubly lucky, because my apartment is on the top floor, so most of my stuff managed to avoid water damage in the attack. My neighbors weren’t quite so lucky.”

“And your costume?”

By which I meant the purple spandex thing that she’d worn when we’d *actually* first met. Come to think of it, I didn’t think I’d seen her wear that since the bank job; every other time we’d got together since then had been in our civvies.

I wasn’t sure she’d ever want to really wear it again; she’d never really wanted to be Tattletale, and now that she had the option not to be, or even to be something else entirely, did she even have reason to keep the old costume?

“I have a barebones backup that I keep in my apartment, but the main one’s in the loft,” she answered, “which is miraculously still standing, in spite of the beating it took from the waves. Can’t imagine it’s still there, though. If the PRT hasn’t picked them up yet, then the others have probably cleaned the place out and skedaddled. I snuck out a ‘long-and-short-of-it’ message as soon as I could, after our dearly departed water god got fried.”

She shrugged. “Not sure if the PRT got to them first or not. I’ve been avoiding looking into their case files.”

I frowned.

“You don’t want to know what happened to them?”

A part of me still, against all reason, thought of Brian, a boy I’d never met and yet whose scars I could have traced blindfolded. It was, thankfully, a dying part, because what would have been a pang of longing a month ago was now nothing more than wistful nostalgia.

Lisa shook her head.

“I don’t know all the details of how close the Undersiders got in you-know-who’s version of things, but we were really more like coworkers than friends,” she explained. “I tried to do right by them, since I’m the one who basically screwed things up for them by offing their boss, but aside from that, I figured it’d be better to make a clean break. I just want to put Coil behind me, you know? That part of my life is thankfully over.”

I suppose I couldn’t fault her for that. I’d have been a hypocrite to try, since I’d run away from Khepri for almost four months. At least Lisa was moving on, instead of pretending the problem didn’t exist.

“Plus,” she added, grinning again, “I didn’t want to try hacking the PRT servers while Mama Dragon was watching. That’s basically the quickest way to get tossed into a cell. Rowling had the right of it — *Never tickle a sleeping dragon.*”

I snorted. *That* sounded a little more like Lisa.

Maybe it was better that I didn’t keep tabs on them. They weren’t *my* friends, after all. These lingering sentiments had no place in my life, and the more I indulged them, the more I gave them weight they really didn’t need.

...I’ll just check up on them when things have calmed down a little and the Fallen aren’t knocking at the door.

“So,” I said suggestively, “I’m supposed to be taking it easy, today. No hero work or anything, or else one of the three letter oversight agencies will come down and smite Tagg.” Not that it would be all that much of a loss. “Where are we going?”

Lisa shook her head. “What you really mean is, where am I taking you? I figured we’d walk around for a while and see how the city’s doing since Levi kicked our shit in, maybe see if we can’t find a mall or a supermarket that escaped unscathed. We’re supposed to meet up with Panpan in an hour or so.”

She turned and started walking down the sidewalk, and I fell into step next to her.

“Where *is* Amy?” I asked, because now that I thought of it, I would have expected her to be here, too.

There hadn’t been any news about her reconciling with her family, or at least if she *had*, she hadn’t said anything to me about it, and I was the one person she almost definitely *would* have told. Come to think of it, I wasn’t sure where she’d been staying the last week or so, either, ever since Tagg’s thing about their bunking with the PRT. Dad and I had discussed clearing out the basement to make room for her and Lisa, but neither of them had ever taken us up on it.

Lisa shrugged. “She’s taking care of something. A family matter.”

“Some...thing?” One of my eyebrows rose. “That’s...incredibly unspecific, Lisa. And unhelpful.”

She shook her head.

“It’s not any of my business. If she wants to hash things out with her folks and her sister, that’s hers to deal with. I’m not going to stick my nose in it.”

My other eyebrow joined the first.

That...didn’t sound like Lisa. At all. She was the *queen* of sticking her nose where it didn’t belong. She’d built her entire cape persona around the idea, in fact, and her tendency to go snooping where she probably shouldn’t had — and would have, in another life — gotten her into whole heaps of trouble.

But... Maybe this was her respecting Amy’s privacy. I wasn’t sure I could have called what was happening between them as “warming up” to each other, not when their interactions were more akin to a pair of cats hissing and taking threatening swipes at the air in front of each other’s faces, but their bickering was far less mean-spirited than it had been before.

I should probably just be happy they were... I almost used the phrase “getting along,” there. That was definitely too generous.

I decided not to press the issue and changed the topic, and we chatted like that, like we were just a pair of ordinary teenage girls, all the way to our first “stop.” It was...fun. Easy. There weren’t any high stakes involved, there was no pressure, and though I felt the presence of the things that needed doing looming over me, I could almost forget them while Lisa and I talked.

A vacation day... I guess even I needed one of those once in a while.

The first place we wound up visiting was an ice cream parlor on the outer edge of Downtown, a local place called Queen Bee’s with a sign that proclaimed all of their ice cream was made with organic honey instead of sugar. “I’ve been craving some Rocky Road for *days*,” Lisa answered when asked, and she insisted on paying, since it was “my idea.” I went with it and ordered myself some soft serve strawberry dipped in chocolate, complete with that characteristic little loop on the top.

The best part of the entire experience? No one came up to me asking for an autograph or did a double take when I passed.

“Come on,” Lisa said as we left the store. “I bought you your first smartphone. You *know* what kind of budget I’m working with. And your idea of splurging on my dime is chocolate-dipped strawberry soft serve? Taylor, do you even know the *meaning* of that word?”

“I’m not your friend because you can buy me nice stuff,” I replied.

“That doesn’t mean I *can’t*,” she countered. “Come on. It’s your first real day off since the thing with Noelle, and the city is finally getting back on its feet. Relax, take a load off, and stop counting all of your pennies every time you buy something. Or mine, in this case. Treat this like a vacation.”

“And if I don’t?” I asked, more amused than anything.

“Then I’ll strap you to a chair and make you watch *Three Stooges* reruns until you can’t stop laughing.”

It startled a chuckle out of me. “What?”

“See, there you go, that got a smile. Was that so hard?”

Our next stop wound up being one of Parian’s puppet shows, and I was surprised that she was actually still doing them, because I would have thought she wouldn’t have the energy if she was acting like the neighborhood watch. Then again, Brockton Bay was nowhere near as bad off as it had been for Khepri, so maybe she didn’t *need* to fulfill that role, and she was instead just trying to lift everyone’s spirits and help them get through this rough patch.

It certainly seemed to be working, if that was the case. I think the crowd that came to watch her was larger than it had been that first time Lisa and I had come to watch one of her shows, but I wasn’t sure.

I wanted to ask her, because what I remembered of her was a genuinely decent person, but I wasn’t in costume and I didn’t quite know how to address the issue without going through the whole Khepri explanation again. Maybe another time, then. I still had to figure out a way to introduce her to Flechette.

With the puppet show over and our ice cream eaten, Lisa and I moved on and meandered our way through the city. We passed through the Boardwalk, or rather did a loop around its outer edges, and while it was still in disrepair, it didn’t look like it would take long to get put back together. Maybe another month? I guess that was a long time for a business, but I couldn’t imagine the city wouldn’t do something like subsidize the businesses there to keep them afloat in the interim.

In fact, a lot of the city seemed to be better off than I’d thought, now that I was looking closer and not just passing through on patrol. The Docks had been the hardest hit, still, and things were far from perfect — far from even the steady descent into hell Brockton Bay had been in for as long as I could remember — but they *were* improving, slowly but surely.

This was it, I found myself thinking. Proof that I was making a difference. Proof that I already *had* made a difference, and not just for my friends, but for so many people in the city that I would never meet and never know. This was irrefutable proof that I was a hero.

Eventually, we made our way down a very familiar side street, and by the time I realized where we were, Lisa had already led me to an equally familiar little diner, emblazoned with a sign that read AHNENERBE. There were marks on the brick from where the water had flooded the city, but they were faint, as though someone had tried to rub them off, and it looked like it was no worse off than it had been two months ago during my first visit.

“Here?” I asked Lisa.

“It’s been a while,” she answered. “I figured we could use some good tea. Sorry to say I don’t have a good book for you to curl up with, though.”

I gave her a flat, unimpressed look, but only shook my head as I followed her in through the front door, bell chiming to announce our presence —

And came face to face with a large crowd of people on the other side.

What?

Dennis, Dad, Missy, Carlos, Amy, Sam Campbell (Battery in her civvies), a man that could only be her husband, Kurt, Lacey, even a handful of Dad’s dockworkers I hadn’t seen in what was probably years. They were all there, arrayed around a bunch of tables that had been pushed together, with a large cake in the front, and they were smiling at me.

What?

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY!” the crowd cried out.

My brain stuttered to a stop. It was my birthday? I’d been so busy that I’d gone and forgotten about my own birthday?

“What...?”

I stopped myself, then went over the math in my head, and my brow furrowed as I realized that no, I hadn’t forgotten...no, I’d forgotten, but I hadn’t *missed* my own birthday.

“It’s only the fourth,” I protested. “My birthday isn’t for another week!”

Laughing, Dad stepped forward and slung his arm around my shoulders, steering me closer. He was smiling, a big, broad smile that I hadn’t seen on his face in...I couldn’t remember how long.

“No,” he agreed with me, “but, well, Lisa here,” and he gestured to her; she gave me a smirk and a cheeky little wave, “figured that we couldn’t be sure things wouldn’t get hectic again. So we put our heads together last night, called up everyone last minute, and arranged this little get-together, since this is your day off.”

“It was so short notice no one even had time to get you a proper present!” Dennis called over. The rest of the group broke out into laughter like this was the funniest joke they’d ever heard, and it somehow even got me to smile.

“It took a little bit of doing to convince the owner to let us use his shop for the party,” Dad admitted, “but, well, Lisa worked her magic and managed to book the place for the next couple hours.”

“Perks of being a low key millionaire,” Lisa added smugly.

“Well, I guess there are worse ways you could’ve convinced him aside from flashing a bunch of benjamins in his face,” Amy said dryly.

“Wouldn’t have worked,” Lisa shot back. “The owner’s gay as all get-out, so showing him some skin wouldn’t have done anything. On the other hand, I’m sure if *Dennis* had bent over to pick up a pencil —”

“*Anyway*,” Dad cut in, steering the conversation back over Dennis’s protesting squawk. “That’s why Lisa took you out today, to keep you busy while I went and got the cake and the rest put things together here. Wasn’t sure everyone would show, since it was so short notice, but, well...”

He gestured at the crowd.

“Here they are.”

I looked back at the gathered group, all of them here for me to celebrate my birthday, each of them who cared for me in some way, and felt my heart swell. There were only two people missing, but they’d been missing for so long that it was an old wound, scabbed over and long scarred, and I could pretend their absence didn’t hurt at all.

“They’re all here for me?”

“Actually,” said Sam’s husband; must’ve been Assault, because it definitely sounded like him, “I’m just here for the free cake, so...”

Sam elbowed him in the ribs and he let out an exaggerated *oomph*.

“Be nice, you ass.”

I felt a smile break out onto my face, almost against my will, and I turned to Dad. “Let’s get this party started, then!”

The crowd broke out into a cheer, and Dad, laughing, had to raise his voice to be heard.

“Okay, everyone!” he said. “I know it’s a little early, but most of you probably haven’t eaten lunch yet, so we’re just going to start digging in, now!” He gestured to the table; I’d been focused on the cake, which had a pair of large candles that formed the number ‘16’ stuck into its top, but there were some sparse decorations and several large, thin boxes laid out along its length. “We’ve got three

different kinds of pizza here: plain cheese, pepperoni, and the house special, all from Vincent's! Make sure to leave some room for cake!"

Another cheer went up, and then things descended into a sort of organized chaos as everyone grabbed a plate and started lining up to grab a few slices of their preferred pizza.

Again, I found myself thinking as I sat down between Lisa and Amy, it felt so incredibly normal, in a way I hadn't realized I'd been missing so much just yesterday, and yet it was also bizarrely strange. I had my two friends, here, and the family friends who I could vaguely remember being there at my birthday parties when I was a little girl, but it intersected with the Wards and the Protectorate, because Dennis and Missy were there, too, and so were Assault and Battery.

I probably would've pinched myself if Armsmaster had shown.

But it was so easy to fall into the utterly ordinary of talking with my friends — different than they had been when last I'd actually had a birthday party, but my friends nonetheless — while the adults chatted and did things like talk about work or complain about the mayor or the governor. Even though some half a dozen capes were there, our powers and our heroic identities weren't involved at all, and those people I had once looked up to just a few months back were so utterly *human*, once you stripped away the masks.

Time slipped me by, and before I knew it, Dad stood up, clapped his hands, and announced, "Time for cake!"

A chorus of agreements met him, and the clerk manning the counter came over, still wearing sunglasses, to light the candles on my birthday cake. Dad pulled me up and steered me to the end of the table, then sat me down in front of my cake, turned to the whole group, grinning, and asked, "Ready?"

Laughter and cheers was his answer.

"One, two, three..."

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU!" they sang. Half of me wanted to disappear into the floor. The other half burst out into laughter. "HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU! HAPPY BIRTHDAY DEAR TAYLOR! HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU!"

And then they cheered, whooping and hollering, and my cheeks were red but too numb from smiling for me to care.

"Blow 'em out!" someone called.

"Blow 'em out!" the rest agreed. "Blow 'em out!"

I took a deep breath and blew out the pair of candles, to raucous applause. Dad, still grinning as broadly as I must have been, took a large serving knife and started cutting up the cake into equal pieces, the first of which he handed to me. It had a large dollop of thick red icing in the shape of a flower on top.

“Birthday girl gets the first piece,” he told me.

I took the plate he offered me along with a fork, and he turned back to the rest of the crowd.

“Alright,” he said to them, “if you haven’t stuffed yourself full of pizza, line up and come get your cake.”

I got out of the way and stood back to give them room, holding my plate of cake in one hand and eating it with my fork in the other. The cake was cold, almost half-frozen — Dad had bought me an ice cream cake, it seemed — but on the inside, I was warm, and it flickered in my belly and filled up my chest. Right then, I could say without reservation that I was happy.

After everyone had eaten their fill of cake, they started to make a sort of rounds and took turns coming over to shake my hand or pull me into a hug or place a friendly peck on my cheek. Lisa, of course, was having the time of her life, and even Amy seemed to have relaxed a little, because she wasn’t grinning, but she had this content little smile that looked to be glued to her face, at least for now.

Once the adults had all come around to wish me the best, the Wards took their turns. Missy pulled me into a hug with a lot more strength than a girl her size should’ve been capable of (guess my training had really been paying off), wishing me a happy birthday. Carlos was next, and he gave me a much more polite handshake, rather than something as personal as a hug.

Dennis meandered over last. He approached me with a kind of swagger, smiled, and held out his arms. “Birthday hug?”

I rolled my eyes, but my own lips pulled up. “Okay. Birthday hug.”

I stepped into his reach and he pulled me close, wrapping his arms around my shoulders while I wrapped mine around his ribs and gave him a friendly squeeze.

He let go a moment later, hands on my shoulders, still smiling, and then his brow furrowed and his lips pursed as he considered me. Like he was thinking about something very, very hard, or trying to muster his courage.

“Ah, what the hell,” he said.

And then, before I realized what was happening, he’d spun me around, wound one arm around my lower back and leaned us both towards the ground —

He was kissing me, I realized as his lips found mine. It was chaste and uncomplicated, but he held me there for a long moment as I blinked up at him, too stunned to react. My brain had stuttered to a stop; I didn’t know what to think or what to feel, whether I should be kissing back or pushing him away, whether I *wanted* to kiss him back or not. I was completely and utterly frozen.

It felt like it went on forever, and yet passed in an instant at the same time, and when we were stood up again, he cringed when he saw my face and threw his hands up, stepping back to give me space.

It had gone eerily quiet, I realized. Everyone had fallen silent, as though waiting for my reaction.

“Sorry,” he babbled. “Sorry. Just...got a little carried away and...that was supposed to be a birthday kiss, you know, but maybe I went too far, and I’m rambling and —”

Seized by a moment of bravery, I stepped forward, grabbed him by his shirt, and told him, “You did it wrong.”

Then, I spun *him* around, dipped him back, and planted a kiss of my own right on his mouth. The crowd around us erupted into whistles and cheers, and I thought I heard Assault make a comment about a lost bet, but I didn’t care enough to bother with it.

The kiss didn’t last long. I wasn’t experienced enough to give him the full makeout service, and I’d already made enough of a fool out of myself doing this as it was. I didn’t need to try something ambitious and show everyone exactly how inexperienced I actually was.

I pulled back, cheeks flushed and breathing a little heavy, and Dennis blinked at me with a sort of dazed, stunned expression on his face.

“Whoa.”

Off to the side, Missy was cackling, and between bursts of laughter, she might have been saying something about a taste of his own medicine, but it was too incoherent and broken to be sure.

“Does this mean I can ask you out on a second date?”

My cheeks burned, but somehow, I managed to keep a straight face as I told him, “We’ll see.”

After that, things settled back into the low furor they’d been before, and we all carried on for maybe another hour before people started trickling out, wishing me a happy birthday before they left. By the time five o’clock rolled around, almost everyone had left, and it was just me, Dad, Amy, Lisa, and the Wards. They were staying behind, ostensibly to help clean up, but they were probably just trying to avoid having to head back to HQ as long as they could. At least one of them likely hadn’t been given the go ahead by the city to return home to their own house, yet.

I wasn’t going to complain about having more friends around for just a little bit longer.

At last, though, the cleanup was done and they couldn’t delay any more, and then it was just me, Dad, Amy, and Lisa. My family, if I was allowed to be a little sappy, even though it technically wasn’t my birthday for another week.

“Did you have a good time?” Dad asked.

I smiled at him. “Yeah. I think I did. Thanks, Dad.”

Dad slung an arm around my shoulders and pulled me in, planted a kiss to the crown of my head. A great swell of affection surged through my chest.

“Anytime, Little Owl.”