

Interlude 10.g: Ave Victoria

Thirty years, she had been Contessa.

For thirty years, she had hidden her old, real name away, locked it up in her mind, and given herself over to her Paths in order to see to it that mankind didn't go extinct. With them, she had done a great many things, a great many terrible things, a great many horrible, awful things that had stained her soul and made her wonder if it could all ever be worth it.

Thirty years.

It seemed like an impossibly long time, when she really sat down and considered it. And yet, it had all passed her in the blink of an eye, a single instant filled with days, weeks, months, *years* of juggling so very many balls that it boggled the mind. Actions whose meaning and purpose she hadn't always fully understood, actions whose impact and casual malice she had understood perfectly well and done anyway, and even actions whose small, innocuous nature had spiraled out into grand ends in ways no one else could have predicted.

And after thirty years, thirty long years, she was well and truly blind to the future.

Not completely, of course. In fact, the vast majority of her Paths still functioned as normal, and even those that *did* intersect with one of her blindspots did not suddenly abort so much as veer off in unexpected ways. Further still, her "softer" Paths didn't even require understanding the powers that threw hers off, only the natures and personalities of those who possessed them.

But lingering on each of those paths was the uncertainty, the wonderful, terrifying possibility that any one of them might intersect with Apocrypha and be derailed before her agent could even begin to recalculate. Just like that, as sudden as a bullet or an oncoming car, she could fail.

It was exhilarating and horrifying in strange and incomprehensible ways, both simultaneously. Whenever she stopped between the steps of a path to consider that it might all go wrong, her heart thundered in her chest and her breath drew short, and she felt alive and mortal and human, in ways that she really hadn't for nearly thirty years.

It was wonderful. It was terrible. It was proof that there was indeed a person beneath the mountain of Paths that made up her life, that there was more to her than just a shell guiding her power towards a final goal, but she couldn't afford to be that vulnerable, not before the end had come and humanity's fate had been decided once and for all.

She could not stop the thrill of it in her chest, all the same. To know that any moment could be the end, that any move could be her last, that a single mistake could mean her death... Carrying that burden was what it meant to *be* human.

It would not be much longer now, in any case. The deadline was fast approaching; in less than a year, the final Path terminated, and the battle against Scion would begin. At long last, the war she had been fighting for nearly all her life would conclude with a final, climactic battle to decide whether or not mankind would survive, and one way or another, Contessa would be locked away to let...whatever else laid beneath her a chance to live and breathe.

That, too, was equal parts exhilarating and terrifying. The idea that there would soon be nothing telling her what to do, when to do it, or why, nothing structuring her life and her day to day actions, nothing to give her drive or purpose...

What would be left for her once the world was saved and Scion dead? When she was no longer needed to stop the end from coming and she would finally be completely and utterly *free*? Just thinking about what the answer might be was enough to send her heart racing.

A rectangular pane of light described itself in the air, pulling her from her thoughts, and then it unfolded and opened inwards. A moment later, as Contessa stood from her decrepit bench in the abandoned little park, a young woman stepped through and came out, tall and lithe and dressed in purple, black, and gold.

There were no Paths which featured this meeting. Even at its best, her agent could only make haphazard guesses on what this young woman might and could do — models built on Contessa's own knowledge and observations. Otherwise, every attempt led to a broken Path.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me here,” Contessa said.

The girl did not smile, for they were not friends. In fact, Contessa was quite sure that Taylor Hebert didn't like her at all, and yet was also strangely grateful to her, for reasons that she was almost certain neither of them completely understood.

She was tempted to ask exactly what it was another version of herself had done to Khepri to result in such a bizarre regard between them. What was it the Contessa of that far flung alternate future did to the Taylor Hebert of that time to leave such a lasting impression that it had even carried over to this Taylor here?

She didn't. Maybe one day, she would, but for now, it helped nothing and sated nothing except her own curiosity.

“I may not agree with all of Cauldron's decisions or methods,” said Taylor, “but I can at least do you the courtesy of not appearing unannounced, again. Needless antagonism won't help anyone.”

“I'm grateful,” Contessa said simply. She chose not to mention that the original meeting she'd dropped in on might itself deserve the title of needlessly antagonistic. That wouldn't help anyone, either, though.

She gestured towards the empty air as though out at the decrepit park with its dead plants and bent, broken playground, a pale shade of what it once was in the days before capes and Endbringers. They both knew she wasn't.

“Shall we go, then?”

Taylor glanced out at the landscape all the same. What she saw and what she interpreted from that, Contessa couldn't know. She had chosen this site because it had that symbolic meaning and it would have a specific impact on a person *like* Taylor, but if Taylor herself had since moved past the person who would have felt that impact so keenly was another question Contessa couldn't answer and one she knew better than to ask.

“Yes. Let’s.”

“Door me,” said Contessa.

Another rectangular pane of light described itself in the open air, only this was a pale silver to Apocrypha’s brilliant gold, and it unfolded to reveal the inside of a chamber, deep and dark and lit only by harsh, artificial light.

Contessa stepped forward first, putting her back to Taylor, and felt Taylor step after her.

This message, however, was one that she knew would not be missed: *I trust you not to stab me in the back*. A calculated manipulation, but not entirely an untrue one, because if there was one thing that she could absolutely trust, it was the heroism of Apocrypha.

The room they came out in was a long, wide corridor, lined along each wall with an almost endless seeming series of glass vials. Some were empty entirely and sat, lonely and hollow, but many were still full, filled to the brim with multicolored fluids in equally as many hues, all of them ghastly and vile. Where light shone through, it cast a prismatic shadow upon the bland, gray walls.

Cauldron’s stock of formulae. This close to the deadline, it would soon be time to start giving them away for free, to stop demanding steep prices and steeper favors and instead choose those most deserving and most compatible and hand off whatever they could spare.

They were not alone. Standing in the room in front of them was the dark-skinned woman known as the Doctor, hair drawn up into a tight bun and clipboard in hand as she took stock of their supply. She startled when they stepped through.

“Contessa,” said the Doctor, surprised, and then her eyes slid to the girl next to her and went wider. “Apocrypha!” She glanced between them as though seeing them both for the first time. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Hello, Doctor,” said Contessa. “I’ve brought her here to fulfill the favor she requested a year ago.”

“Favor?” the Doctor repeated. Her face twisted as she looked at the room around them. “You mean formulae? You intend to hand her some of our strongest vials, kept in reserve for emergency?”

“Once upon a time, I would have asked for that, maybe,” Apocrypha said, gaze sweeping through the collection of vials ambivalently. Disinterested would be the better term. Detached, like she was seeing something she’d once heard about for the first time, but didn’t particularly care for it. “Or maybe, in another life? But these don’t offer me anything I want.”

“You aren’t here to get more powers for your organization?” the Doctor asked disbelievingly. “To try and turn your father into the next Alexandria —”

“And risk *deviation*?” Apocrypha said pointedly, one eyebrow rising. “I won’t deny that some part of me looks at these vials and sees *opportunity*. I’d be insane not to think of how useful it might be to have a power like Hero’s on our side, or another Legend or Eidolon. But attempting to rely on simple brute force was one of the mistakes you made against Scion, in Khepri’s world.”

“As opposed to...what? Mind games?” The Doctor shook her head. “Scion is alien, above all else. A being built of abstractions. If there is a way to beat him, would it not be with his own weapons?”

Apocrypha sighed. “And there’s the biggest problem. What makes Scion a threat so immediate we have to deal with him *now*, instead of shunting the responsibility off to our distant descendants three-hundred years in the future, is humanity, and so it’s *humanity* that will be the end of him.”

“Humanity? *Humanity* will kill Scion?” the Doctor mumbled. “What sophistry is this...?”

“It’s the same thing that makes him so dangerous,” Apocrypha answered. “He’s spent the last thirty years pretending to be human, hasn’t he? Discovering the breadth and depth of human emotion, the weight of loneliness and despair... What Jack would have taught him is the childish cruelty of taking pleasure in the act of destroying others’ happiness.”

Her lips quirked to one side.

“How do you defeat someone who hasn’t learned how to deal with their own emotions? Someone who lashes out because they haven’t learned to do anything else with their own pain? By attacking the very emotions that make them so volatile.”

It took the Doctor a second to realize what that meant. “The flesh garden. You intend to show him the *Other*.”

“Yes.”

“Are you daft? You intend to lure him here, to the heart of Cauldron, and show him the corpse that we’ve spent the last thirty years harvesting for powers? Do you expect him to do anything else besides tear us all apart for it?”

“I expect him to give up, actually,” said Apocrypha. “I’m not just going to drag him here and wait for him to implode, I’m going to hammer it in. Make him feel every last one of the thirty years he’s been here, alone, aimlessly wandering around while he clung to the forlorn hope that maybe there might be some trace remaining of his counterpart, that just maybe it might be possible to continue his cycle. If it’s done right, then he won’t even fight it when the time comes for the final blow.”

The Doctor stared at her, utterly bewildered.

“Are you even listening to yourself? You intend to...to *bully* Scion into...what, assisted suicide? *That* is your plan?”

If she was honest with herself, it didn’t sound like an incredible plan to Contessa, either. It seemed too...human a weakness for Scion to have, that they could play on his emotions so viciously and use that to leave him open to the finishing blow. Especially when Scion’s species was not like the aliens of popular media, so close to human so that the audience could find something relatable, but something for which humans had no true frame of reference. Scion was truly an alien.

But.

And there was the crucial hinge.

But Khepri had fought Scion. Khepri had *killed* Scion. The idea of an afterlife where the great heroes of the past, present, and future ascended to after death seemed fanciful in ways that Contessa couldn't even begin to describe, but there was no room anymore to deny anything that held even the slightest possibility of their success. And if such a place existed, it only made sense that the one who killed an omniscient god would wind up there after she died.

They had so very little hope. Contessa wasn't willing to strangle this one, simply because it was a little hard to swallow.

"Scion has no filter, Doctor," Taylor said quietly. "You, me? We live with pain every day. We take it. We accept it. Sometimes, we bottle it in, and sometimes, we find a time and a place to let it all out. We've learned to handle it, even harness it, use it to fuel ourselves and make great works of art."

She spread her arms out.

"Scion *hasn't*. Everything he feels is stark, raw, powerful, because he never learned how to process it and deal with it. You're right, he's not human. Not enough to think of himself as one. But he had to *become* just human enough to walk among us, and that little, incomplete bit of humanity makes him just human enough to destroy him."

"The survival of the entire human race, not just here but on countless parallel worlds," the Doctor said, "and you want to hinge it all on Scion being *human enough*?"

"You've spent thirty years trying to concoct a miracle that will act as his perfect counter," said Taylor, "and you're no closer now than you were when you started. Do you think *your* plan is any less of a longshot than mine?"

"I think it makes more *sense*," said the Doctor. "Certainly more than relying on human emotions to cripple an alien."

The debate ended there. It was obvious in the way Taylor's face smoothed out, how her arms fell back to her sides. Not surrender or retreat, but a refusal to keep arguing. "I'm not here to convince you. You can keep searching for your silver bullet, if you want, if you think you can find it in the next half a year or so. I just came to cash in on the favor I said I would need a year ago."

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. "And if I were to refuse?"

One of Taylor's eyebrows rose. She swept an arm out. "This is me being polite. If I'd wanted to, I could have Doored myself in and got what I needed before you could even think to try and stop me."

A long moment of silence followed. The Doctor kept staring at Taylor, unblinking, as though merely the act of doing so could convince her that she was wrong and the Doctor was right. If she had believed that Taylor cared at all for the Doctor's opinion, Contessa might have called it a battle of wills.

Finally, the Doctor sighed and stepped aside. "I hope you know what you're doing."

They walked past. Contessa half-expected some cheap, parting shot aimed the Doctor's way; most teenagers wouldn't have been able to resist getting one in.

But Taylor Hebert wasn't most teenagers, was she?

"I can't afford not to."

Contessa led the way down the corridor, through the locked doors, and eventually down several flights of stairs. Deeper and deeper they went, further underground, further into the facility, until they came to a final door, tall and vault-like, akin to something out of a bank or a heist movie. As she had at each door prior, Contessa opened it, and with a low, grinding noise like the slow, inexorable movement of a mountain, it swung inwards to reveal the final room.

The Other's room.

Vast, like the hangar for a fleet of aircraft, it stretched out what seemed like miles, with a tall, high ceiling that disappeared into darkness and walls so far separated that it felt like a day's hike just to walk from one side to the other. The far end of the room, if it could have been seen, would have been such a great distance away that one could reach up and cup it with their hands.

But filling the empty space, consuming nearly all of it with its bulk, was the Other. An enormous, towering form, comprised of a tangled mish-mash of flesh. Limbs jutted out every which way, half-formed, some thin and gangly, some thick and muscular, and some so malformed they couldn't even be recognized as human. Grotesque patches of bulging meat connected them like the trunk of a grand tree mottled with cancerous growths; in some places, those patches were covered with perfectly normal looking skin, and in others, it was as though it had stopped halfway through, leaving raw muscle and vein exposed to the air.

It was like God's assembly line: parts here, ready for use, ready to be put together to form a human being; parts there, discarded, defective, not fit to belong to a person. There were enough to form an entire army, or perhaps, as Contessa had seen so long ago, each was an attempt at constructing the "perfect" avatar, each an experiment towards an ideal, each a prototype for the Other's final image.

Taylor did not idly watch; she stepped up next to Contessa, pulling a device from her pocket, and then the device clicked as she began taking pictures. Sometimes, she would step a little one way or the other to get a slightly different angle.

"Those are...?"

"Reference pictures."

Contessa could take a few guesses what for. She didn't bother querying her power — she was likely to get either an error or a non-answer. The reflex to do so anyway took a moment to squash.

Eventually, Taylor's hands dropped, although she didn't put her camera away, just yet. She gestured forward. "Lead on."

With that as her cue, Contessa stepped forward and into the jungle of human body parts. Behind her, Taylor carefully followed every step. It was, in a strange way, endearing to see her attempting to mimic the way Contessa moved. Like a child tracing the footsteps of her mother.

Every now and again, Taylor would stop a moment and take some more pictures, and then they would move on and keep going deeper and deeper in. The further they went, the more “complete” the body parts became, until it wasn’t simply legs and arms and miscellaneous small parts like eyeballs, but instead torsos and heads that went along with them, sticking out of the masses of flesh like aborted sculptures, always unfinished.

It had always been eerie, grotesque, ugly. When she looked too long at any one place, even Contessa sometimes found herself shivering to imagine what might have come from this mountain, what abomination would have stood opposite their golden man to drive them even further towards the end.

It made her feel...small. Impotent. The way she had in the beginning, paralyzed by the wall of fog that kept her from knowing which way to go and what to do to go forward.

At last, they came before the final figure, the half-formed body the Other had intended to use to blend in amongst mankind. It was completely androgynous, without any sex characteristics to distinguish it one way or the other, although it was svelte enough that the end result had likely been intended to be female. Strands of silver hair fell the entire length of its body and beyond, and spiraling fractals wafted off of its half-finished parts, vanishing into some other reality.

Here, Taylor took yet more pictures, taking care to get even more angles so that every minor detail was captured for later use.

After a long, silent few minutes, filled with the click of the camera, she had apparently gotten everything she needed and her arms slowly came down.

“This is it, is it?”

“Yes,” said Contessa.

“Seeing it for yourself, in person, is...”

“Indeed.”

Taylor took another few steps forward and leaned in, as though she was examining some fine detail that had caught her attention, and then she stepped back, stashing her camera away, and pulled something else out from some hidden compartment or pocket in her costume. She held it out in offering, and Contessa found herself reaching for it almost before she could stop herself.

She looked down. Blinked, not entirely sure what to make of it.

“Here.”

Taylor handed her death, shaped like a knife. The blade was callous entropy. The hilt was decay. Even only looking at it, Contessa could tell that this was a weapon meant for one purpose and one purpose only: to kill. Not maim. Not injure. Not even simply cut. This was death. The knife was simply the form it had been bound in.

“What is this?”

“A curse,” said Taylor. “It doesn’t matter who you are. It doesn’t matter what powers you have that might regenerate your body or repair damages done to your flesh. If you are struck with that knife, you will die.” A grim smile stretched her lips. “A parting gift from an old god who liked to meddle far too much.”

An old god... Why not? If heroes could ascend to Valhalla from all across time and space, why wouldn’t there be old gods, now long dead, as well?

Contessa took the knife. It was light and nimble, but it felt inexplicably heavy in her hand, like a lead weight. There was some metaphor in there somewhere, but Contessa didn’t care to tease it out.

“Now, finish what you started.”

She took a step forward. Her fingers tightened on the grip of the knife as she looked up into the half-formed visage of the Other, the companion who had crashed here on this Earth and changed Contessa’s life. From memory, she found the cut that had been made what felt now like a lifetime ago, where a much younger Fortuna had, with the aid of the Doctor, severed a key part of the Other’s consciousness.

Back then, so new to her powers, with her vision of that key spot shuttered by the Other’s twisting of her agent, she had needed help to deliver that blow. She hadn’t been able to do it herself, not without the Doctor’s guiding hand. She’d been paralyzed by the fear, by the unknowing, by the wall of fog that blocked her other sight, her mind’s eye.

Now...

She breathed in deep through her nose. In her throat on the back of her tongue, something settled, sour and sweet and musty. It tasted like closure. Revolution. Completion. Like she had come full circle and found herself back where she’d started.

She held Death in her hands.

And then she plunged it into the Other’s neck.