

An Alternate Essence: Of Gold and Glory Act 1

Awakening came suddenly. The blackness of unconsciousness fell away like a parted veil, and he rose swiftly to full cognizance, eyes snapping open. A sea of stars and inky darkness stretched out above him, dimmed by the glow of the city on whose outskirts he laid.

A breath came through his nose like a sigh. He gave an exasperated hum, close-lipped.

“How annoying,” he said to the open air. “I really do detest blind spots. They lead to situations such as this.”

The sand beneath his body shifted. He set his feet down under himself, propped out his arms, and as he pushed himself up and stood, he turned his eyes to gaze out across the bay.

“How disrespectful, as well,” he continued, even though there was no one around to hear him. “It would be uncouth of me to interfere in the plans of another of myself, and yet he dropped me in this world so unceremoniously, as though I were a bag of luggage to be hauled and dragged around. Though...”

He turned back around and looked into the city — not at it, but through it, staring into its personality, its soul, the identity that all cities came inevitably to hold, amalgamated from its inhabitants — and were he a lesser man, his belly would have roiled with disgust.

“...if I had had an analogue in this world, it surely would not have become this festering pit. I know myself well enough to know that I could not have stood to see such rot take hold. Perhaps, this once, I can forgive that insufferable meddler.”

He turned another time and gazed back across the bay, which was strewn with the decaying remnants of boats and ships of all kinds. There was more rust than pristine metal, and they clogged the harbor so completely that there was no doubt the shipping lanes had been closed. A sneer curled his lips.

“And of course, that will be what must go, first. Such an unsightly eyesore — it offends me simply by existing.”

Not because it was disgusting to look at, but because its mere presence served to strangle the life from the city, because the clogged bay had directly caused the city’s wounds to fester. It was not the sole thing wrong with this world, no, but it was a symptom of a greater disease which stunk like an infected cut.

And how did you deal with an infection? If you couldn’t cure it, you cut away the diseased flesh.

For an instant, however, he did not move. There was still time to turn back. There was still time to shy away from this world and let it fix itself — for it would, as his eyes saw, fix itself. There would be trials, there would be hardship, and the world itself would hang on a thread more than once, but it would inevitably be saved. It would be battered, it would be worse for wear, but still, it would be saved.

As he'd said, he was not in the habit of interfering. People could not grow and the proper path could not continue if he intervened at the first sign of trouble. How would the world cope if he solved all its problems? How would people become stronger, cleverer, more able to take care of themselves and their own problems if he swept in to save the day the moment he glimpsed turmoil? Each hero and villain had a role, and *his* role had long since fallen from the spotlight; he was not meant to do great deeds and inspire hope and heroism in people, anymore. He was merely the correcting force that provided the necessary nudge here and there.

Once, he may have slain the dragon. Once, he may have challenged gods in the name of mankind. Once, he may have had his name sung to the high heavens and his deeds praised throughout all the land. Once, maybe, but that time had long since passed him by. There was no more room for his name on the lips of his people.

That was the simple truth. He was no longer the knight in shining armor charging forth on his great steed, he was the puppeteer waiting in the background, changing signposts and altering pathways so that the knight could reach his goal and rescue the princess. A tug here and a twitch there to ensure the optimal outcome, he pulled the strings behind the strings. That was his role, now.

And yet...

In spite of that...

"It's been a long time, old friend."

Reality fractured. Though the distance was greater now than it had been before, the pathway between mirrors creaked open, and the air twisted as space was sheared and torn. What was occurring could be called nothing less than a miracle, an act of God carried out with the sacred right of divine providence.

In the ancient days, this was how the Earth was split.

An instant later, it was gone, and the fabric of reality reasserted itself. In the place where the tear had once been, there was a glimmer of gold that glittered from his hand. A supreme power, a sublime ability that no man could hope to possess or replicate with base, mortal hands, and all that was produced from it was such a small thing.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, savoring the feeling of his reunion. Fondness and longing in equal measure lingered in his chest, and not for the first time, he lamented a friendship lost, a friendship which *this* friendship had, perhaps foolishly and impossibly, been created to replace. There was nothing which could be done to replicate that lost friend, and even this bond was simply a glorified method of talking to himself.

Nonetheless, he indulged, for this friend had been forged in the image of his other. Sentimentality was one of the only things tying him to sanity.

"I apologize for having neglected you these past years, but I have simply had no need of you. After all, one does not require a superweapon to sweep away the dirt on his floor."

His body lit up, glowing a bright, brilliant gold.

“Having said that, what is required in this instance is expedience. Working on my usual timeframe is impossible, so it is necessary to act quickly and decisively. The subtleties and sleight of hand must be cast aside for something decidedly flamboyant and far more noticeable.”

He felt a grin tug up at the corners of his lips. A strange feeling, one he hadn't felt in what seemed now like forever, was coiling impatiently in his belly.

“It is quite exciting, actually. Thrilling. I find I cannot remember when last I had the opportunity to take the starring role. So, let us enjoy this moment. Let us rewrite the script. Instead of a tragic drama, let us instead write the anthem to mankind's victory.”

He raised his hand and held it out before him. “Wash it away.”

A flash of golden light. The roar of the waves as they rushed to fill the empty space. In an instant, in the space of a second, *less* than a second, the decadent corpses of ships long dead were wiped away, like an artist taking an eraser to a blemish on his masterpiece.

It should go without saying that the ships had been torn apart at the molecular level and scattered as their composite atoms. It should also go without saying that such an act would almost certainly release enough energy to wipe the city off the map. However, the device he wielded and called “friend” was a superweapon the likes of which had been used casually in an everyday fashion by its original designers, and in the face of such power, containing, absorbing, or redirecting that released energy was a trivial matter. For such a thing, even the laws of physics could be bent to suit its needs.

In these days, it was one of a kind. The transcendent civilization who had once wielded those devices so easily and so casually was long gone, long gone even by time of *his* birth, and in fact, it might never have existed on this version of Earth, this...Earth Bet?

Ah, he thought to himself. Named after the Hebrew letter, rather than the Greek letter. How quaint, and refreshingly original.

He lowered his hand. The glow surrounding his body dimmed and faded away, and he was left standing there, staring out at the bay that was now free of its grotesque graveyard. A feeling of satisfaction, different entirely from the kind he usually felt, coiled inside of him at a job well done. That eyesore was gone.

But this was just the opening act. What was required next was some exposition, something to give clarity to the story that was beginning to unfold, now. That meant that there were some places he now had to visit.

“Well.” He turned away from the bay and looked into the city. “Let's see... First, I suppose I should visit the star whose position I usurped. Then, some of the key figures in what would have been. The Tower, for instance, perhaps the Master of Arms, maybe that fool who calls himself Emperor and the pretender who thinks himself a dragon... I think I will save their Goddess of Victory for last.”

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he started forward, walking leisurely into the cesspit that was Brockton Bay.