

Equivalent Exchange in Brockton Bay

Story: Equivalent Exchange in Brockton Bay

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Summary: What can [TRUTH] do when multidimensional beings try to devour everything in their path? Homunculus had tried it before, it didn't work. Instead of triggering, Taylor finds herself in front of the Gate, and following the Rule of Equivalent Exchange, [TRUTH] takes something from her, something invaluable, but what does she gain in return? Alt!Power Taylor. Alchemist!Taylor.

Chapter 1: Truth

WARNING: mention of suicide

(let's be honest here, it's the Worm-verse, if you're reading this shit you've endured worse)

I'm on a roll with Worm Crossovers, deal with it, if you already read my other stories, in particular my Worm-Crossovers, you can merrily jump this author note.

I do one of two kinds of fics: the ones in which I focus entirely on the lore (The Bigger Picture), and ones where the story is collateral for me to explain the Lore (Revolution, Unbound).

Worm isn't that much interesting to play with in regards to the lore, since it's very well explained, and the story in itself it's kind of fixed, given the nature of Scion that imposes a hard, close end to the Worm book. AU or not, unless the author goes 'ok, in this fic won't happen because I say so', the end conflict must be against Scion.

I don't do that. The whole point of my fics is to explore the existing lore, not creating a new one.

So, these two characteristics simply stop me from starting an SI, or simply an AU with an OOC or new OC. Taylor wins in the end because somehow she manages to force a second trigger and 'trick' Scion.

Here the crossovers come to mind.

I have several plot bunnies for Worm in mind, all centred around a failed trigger of Taylor.

I don't know if it makes sense for anybody but me, but a trigger is a process through which the [ENTITY] plants a shard inside of a human. To do so it must create a connection, but a connection can't be established until the [human] is open to receive said connection. During the Trigger, [human] gets opened to form a connection with [ENTITY] which uploads the shard into the [human] before closing said [human] and thus severing the connection until the death of the now host of the shard.

Why do I think it works this way? Because the two space slugs are seen only during the trigger and forgotten immediately after.

Now, to put the MC in a condition of somehow fight back Scion (impossible unless with a cheated second trigger through Panacea), in my head at least, something must go [ABERRANT] during the trigger: either opening the MC to something different than a Shard, or ... stuff that you'll find out if you read the following fics.

Recently I read a bit of Fullmetal, which I had dropped years ago.

I'm not a master of the lore, so if somebody knows what determines which power one gains at the door of Truth, please tell me.

In any case, the concept of ONE and TRUTH explained in the manga is that somehow, everything that begins must at some point end. Even if said End, as it's explained by the Elic Brothers' first teacher, is simply another step of the endless cycle of natural transmutation from living to death to living again.

At the end of the Manga, Truth (the creepy blank-guy), eats the homunculus, and yadda yadda yadda everything goes well, that's great. But in the Worm-verse, how would Truth react to beings that progress through consuming everything in their path without being eventually consumed? Given that TRUTH can deal in something different from sheer matter (The protagonist gives up his own ability to do alchemy in order to save his brother), what can Taylor offer in exchange for knowledge of TRUTH?

Also, obviously, the only path towards being truly relevant in the game against scion is (eventually) Human Transmutation, so at some point we'll be talking about a wet-tinker Taylor.

And sadly, as always, I don't own shit.

AWAKENING

It shouldn't have been possible.

It couldn't even have been allowed.

How could it?

Even for *them*, this was beyond horrifying.

She had known there was something wrong as soon as she had returned to school.

She knew something had been done to her locker, it wouldn't even be the first time. But this...

She even somewhat expected the disaster inside, but to be shoved in and locked inside said disaster...

From the moment she had been tossed inside, there hadn't been any room for 'I knew there was something wrong' or 'I should have expected it'.

There was no room for thought of any kind, everything was squashed under pain-panic-hate-despair.

Taylor Hebert screamed, only to immediately gag and fail to suppress the urge to vomit as the smells overwhelmed her, to trash wildly when she felt 'them' crawling on her legs, over the open cuts caused by her savage flailing, skittering over the metal doors of her coffin, buzzing too close.

It couldn't be real, but even that last hope found no way to survive inside of Taylor's mind.

The blood on used tampons gave a sharp tang to the air, while the rancid scent of her vomit meshed with a vengeance with the strangling flavour of stale shit and acidic piss. All that happened in the dar, the thin beam of light that managed to climb its way inside the locker from the edges of its door was just enough to give her tearing eyes awareness that something was moving over her. No, not something, several somethings, skittering, climbing, biting, burrowing, tearing, stinging, *hurting*.

Disgust quickly left the way free for Panic to rise, Fear and Rage both surging forth, the second building after the first as the walls felt

In the smell of vomit and toxic waste, of despair and panic and *not-enough-room-can't-breath-help-die-I-wanna-die* that completely encompassed the girl, Taylor broke, and her being opened to something... *beyond*.

Vast, amidst the star, moving impossibly in a fractal nightmare of twin raising spirals, there was something beyond the realm of human thought, beyond the scope of mortal understanding. But even in that moment of impossible and blessed detachment from reality, that impossibly brief sliver of time, the body of Taylor Hebert failed, her heart stalling over the overload from her panicked vegetative nervous system, her mind blanking out over the convulsions shaking her body, her muscles spasming out of any form of control and limit, she distractedly felt her teeth biting on empty air so strongly that her molars cracked, but by then, Taylor Hebert was dead.

As she died, [ENTITY] retreated the [Queen Administrator] that it was about to load into the cracking being of the [Potential-Host], and if it could have, it would have felt

dissatisfaction with the loss of [Potential-host]. As [Entity] abandoned any attempt to complete the releasing of [Queen Administrator], and the equivalent of its attention crumbled away from the [Potential Host - Deceased], something else walked in Taylor Hebert through the open connection left behind.

Taylor Hebert didn't realize that she was dying, how could she? And yet she was aware that something was about to end. The primordial state of [SURVIVE] her mind was into didn't realize anything beyond the metal coffin that was related to the *something* which was about to end.

No living being truly understands the concept of death, of the end, of no-more. It can't, because the very definition at the base of every living being is to *be* and to refuse the *not-being*. Oh, humans have come to realize it in their thoughts, some even think that they accept death once it comes, but it's only a lie built and perpetrated to reassure both themselves and the ones around them.

For the same reason people can't hold breath long enough to die, the [Primal Mind] at the core of the human being doesn't accept death. The human body will always choose life over death. Cells burning resources to live just a little longer, unconsciously gulping when water is poured in your mouth.

As she died, the last corner of conscious thought of Taylor Hebert took a direction that no living could have. As nerves fired across her brain signals of pain, as the delirium crept over what was left of the teen, what was left of Taylor Hebert recognized that even as she died, the insects were thriving on her, and a distant memory of the concept of 'cycle of life' briefly flashed in her head.

As her body trashed out of control, her tongue swollen from the lack of water and the acidic presence of vomit almost suffocating her as she didn't manage to breathe, what was left of her only wished for it to end, for the pain and fear and disgust and nausea and darkness to end, and in the frenzied state of her mind, she finally recognized to herself that the only thing she had truly wished, for several months now, was to die, but, impossibly, exactly in the moment that she realized it, she was gone.

To her senses, absolute whiteness screamed 'there is something wrong', but even then fear and panic had somewhat receded. She had, at some point, wished to die, sever times in fact during the months of harassment and heavy bullying. At the time, what stopped her from simply going ahead and killing herself had been a sense of duty to her dad, who without her would have crumbled apart, and something akin to a sense of defiance, something that was mostly born from the thought 'what would mom think?'.

Time and time again, helplessness had struck, leaving her reeling, without direction but going forward. What point there was to simply fall? To let them *win*? So she had kept going.

Yet, for all of her bullheaded blindness to surrender and death, she had never considered a simple thing, oh, she had *known*, intellectually at least, but she hadn't truly realized it, nor actually understood it with mind body and soul, not like she did when the maggots had started eating her alive. At the end of the day, be it the next week or fifty years from now, everyone dies. Even her tormentors, even herself, even her father. Mom's death had demonstrated it clearly enough.

As she accepted with all of herself the concept of 'death', still, in the white emptiness that surrounded her from one hollow horizon to another, something inside of her blazed. Rage, Frustration, Screams of Injustice and Requests of them paying back what they had done. Of Sophia, Emma and Madison suffering for every ounce of pain that they had inflicted upon her. For every instant of loneliness that crippled her, for every push, moment of shame, shard of despair.

Even knowing with all of herself that in the end they would die just as she was, she wanted them to suffer as she did, and not out of vengeance or...

You can't gain something, without giving something in return

Words echoed across the white expanse, through her and beyond her, above and below the edge of her hearing, directing her to rise her crying eyes from where they had landed, and as she did, she paled some more.

In front of her, where an instant before there had been only that empty vastness of nothing, there was a door. No, it was more like a gate of sorts, and part of Taylor's mind clicked at the word, recognizing it as far more appropriate than simply 'door'. The Gate was a pair of doors resembling a set of large stone tablets engraved with a mural that Taylor couldn't quite make out, floating in the endless white expanse where Taylor had been.

As her brain tried to make sense of what she was seeing, she recognized that there was nothing beyond the gate, and somehow, realized that no, she wasn't dead.

Humankind cannot gain anything without first giving something in return. To obtain, something of equal value must be lost. That is alchemy's first law of Equivalent Exchange.

Again that all-encompassing voice of secrets and shouts, of concepts and dreams and knowledge and... *something...* echoed across and through her, but this time her eyes fell on something that hadn't been there an instant before.

It was a blank human-like form, seated, no, slumped against a corner of the Stone Gate, and she could make him out from the landscape (or absence of such) only because of a strange no-nothingness that clung to his profile.

After her brain somehow identified the man-like shape as the owner of the Voice, because seriously, it wasn't like there were many candidates for it, she went ahead with: "What the Hell?"

A rumble of a laugh withheld behind the whiteness echoed through and beyond her once more, and the blank human-like form rose from his slumped position, opening his arms in a grandiose manner as the Doors shifted minutely, letting a pinprick of what was beyond them ripple through.

I am the existence that you folks like to call the "WORLD"

Taylor's eyes fell on the crack of the doors, her sight and focus briefly stumbling in the absolute void beyond, until...

In other words, THE UNIVERSE. In other words, GOD. In other words, TRUTH. In other words, ENTIRETY. I am ALL, and I am ONE.

The Voice belonging to the strange Thing made her snap her attention back to the human-like shape, even if reluctantly.

Her following question, as logic dictated, was: "What."

The toll for this chat is your death in the locker, but not your wish for your end.

She fell on her knees. *I can't even die when I want now...* A wet laugh of despair left her lips, she was a failure even at dying. Sobs collided with self-deprecating laughter in her throat, and it was some time before she actually put together what she had been hearing since the beginning of her stunt in the... void-blank-whatever that was the place she was in.

"Why would you stop me from dying...?" she didn't actually expect an answer, but she received it nonetheless.

You can't offer anything else. You cannot pay the toll for that information.

"But..." Taylor stopped protesting, it wasn't like whatever was happening to her was making any kind of sense, but as she watched the Blank-Humanoid, or Truth, as it apparently called itself, the question in her head slowly changed, turning from "Why did it keep me alive" to "What does he gain from keeping me alive?" since it was clearer and clearer in her mind that everyone simply did what was best for themselves, and she couldn't imagine that a strange not-human being would be any different from the regular adult.

What is stopping me from dying later? the thought came to Taylor naturally, and it raised another question, which she remorselessly posed to Truth: "Why couldn't you take away my wish for death instead? I can still kill myself later."

I don't deal in choices.

Which wasn't an answer at all, at least in Taylor's book. "So you can't stop me from offing myself later?" she asked, just to be sure, but still the conversation didn't make any sense, equivalent exchange or not, one would think that the ones completing the exchange would be aware and willing to trade something, Taylor mostly felt... violated in a way

that was difficult to express. How could it take away even that last choice she had been left with?

"So, I cannot die?" she managed to ask, still trying to figure out what was going on.

At this time, you only wish for death, I'm not taking away that wish, only the prize that you were so close to reaching.

"Why...?" without her consent, the question left her mouth. There was really no progression in the circular reasoning that she kept falling into.

Equal Exchange.

Truth 'smiled' showing off a mouth that Taylor had missed until the moment that Thing chose to show her. That only worked to incense her. What could she do when even death was taken away from her grasp? When Pain and Hunger and Violence and Loneliness had fallen on her like cruel children again and again? What there was left to do...? She couldn't... wouldn't...

"And what did I get in exchange for my death?" she gritted out, glaring at Truth.

Something of equal value.

With those parting words, the Gate' Doors shifted some more, the crack between them growing to a handspan, then a whole armlength, and Taylor's eyes once more fell on the empty darkness beyond it, which was beyond her ability to understand, the contrast accentuated even more because of the absolute blankness that was the place she had found herself in. Then, as she made out an eye deep into the darkness, she went unconscious once more.

Chapter 2: Intervention

INTERVENTION

Stasis of any kind did not exist. Everything that was, had at some point in time not-been, and would eventually not-be once more. It wasn't a law, or rule, or mechanism. It was something that no words in the tongue of any sapient mortal, for the nature of the mortality itself forced a hard limit of sorts upon the expansion of mortality's limits, could describe.

The [Cycle] of change and transformation had been iterated and repeated countless times under every set of circumstances that could be and could not-be, transformation, from the [Frozen Energy] that some relatively savvy sapient race had dubbed 'matter' into the [Flow] itself, which another devilishly sapient race called 'energy', and into [Frozen Energy] once more. Even if considering 'repetition' in relation to the [Cycle] was somewhat a misnomer, because repetition implied a beginning and an end, and [Cycle] was timeless in its existence.

With that consideration, Truth, the sapient-personification of the [Cycle] itself, smiled in the not-place where it would meet those who attempted to break through the Gate. It had grown somewhat amused to using mortal concepts to play around a definition of what could-not-be-defined, if amusement could be ascribed to [All].

Truth, like the Gate that it was, could not be defined by mortal terms. It was. It had always been, and it would be longer than everything that was and was-not. Truth knew that not-being was a mere state of the [Cycle], and Truth, which was both the [Cycle] and its components, knew all of itself.

So, it was with something that a mortal sapient could link to 'surprise' that Truth observed the Parasites (Even if the mortal concept of observation was a misnomer, since it implied that there were things that it did not observe, parts of reality and not-yet-reality that Truth was-not).

Like many before and after, it was a part of the [Cycle] that pushed a limit-that-is, the Parasites were leeches that thrived upon the entropic release of planets and what they contained, of stars and life alike. They had changed along the [Cycle] since their beginning (that was a part of the [Cycle] itself).

However, they had grown to be a part of the [Cycle] that closely resembled Stasis. More mindless program than evolution, more relentless thirst for iteration than a hunger for something to grow with-and-from. Truth knew, like it knew-and-was [All], that they were simply the final iteration of a race that had sought immortality ageless Galactic Ages before.

The warnings against an Aberrant Behaviour had been spread and present in every component of [All], the sapient races all knew that what they perceived as an end of their lives was unavoidable and conditional on their own beginning-to-be.

Yet again, like countless before and countless after, they sought Stasis, and unlike any before them, they had come closer than they realized. Truth that was [Cycle], [All] that was One, [Key] and Gate, observed-and-was the umpteenth iteration

The Parasites were once mere flesh and blood, and in this phase of their path through [All] and towards One they offered a way to transcend their frail bodies to yet another mortal sapient race. Having those that the Parasites entangled with to process and streamline data and change in their stead as the Parasite themselves grew closer and closer to Stasis, thusly becoming less and less capable of remaining in Synch with [Cycle].

In this last umpteenth iteration, the Parasites had stumbled upon *humans*.

Among the countless sapient species that were a part of One, humans were amongst the most inventive, there was no denying it. They burned with original thought and search for more than what they had been given. They were still monkeys, and thusly subjugated by their own biological memory and instincts, parts of them so deep and undeniable that they couldn't recognize, but they were a marvellous part of [All] nonetheless.

Truth understood and respected the idea of Exchange, how could it not? It was one of the Pillars that composed its unfathomable nature, and so the [Key] and the Gate respected humans, since in their many and variegated iterations across [All], more often than not evolved and progressed regulating their lives around the very same concept that 'ruled' One.

As the Parasites came so close to Stasis, a couple of them had stumbled upon humans, offering a fake exchange. One would have defined the act of 'Triggering', as the mortals named it, as a Poisoned Apple, if he were to insist with human terms.

Power to transcend the limits of their mortal race given in their lowest moment, in exchange for a drive for conflict, which admittedly was the most effective way to elaborate and redefine strategies and applications, given the implicit leverage upon the mortal necessity of Survival when confronted with Potential Death. End the unavoidable reaping of the countless planets at the end of the Parasites' cycle was just the last part of the Exchange. A fake one, a wrong one.

Truth smiled once more, knowing that the so devilishly clever humans had immediately exploited the fall and weakening of one of the two leeches, creating a set of consequences that lead to the drinking of vials with random powers at the price of their Hope.

Yes, One and [All] could appreciate humans. And it was upon that action, that umpteenth example of calculated defiance when confronted with an overwhelming opponent, like their ancestors had learned to wield fire against sabertooth tigers, the humans had started to plan. To move and think and make projects and build failsafe and clinging to that hope for a positive next part of the path of the [Cycle] that was the Entropic Expansion of the Universe.

Truth saw-and-was Taylor Hebert. A being as insignificant as countless others, as mortal as all of them, a being with above-average intelligence and almost crippling adversity. With a defect in her eyes and a not-biological inherited disposition towards literature from her mother, as well as another not-biological inherited predisposition from her father towards what the humans referred to a Temper Explosions.

The paradigm was simple enough, One had seen it countless other times albeit in different contexts: he had seen Taylor Hebert rise through the Warrior's Shard that was Queen Administrator and managing not only to break the Parasites (still distastefully climbing towards Stasis), but to make Warrior end itself. The cycle of that parasite in that iteration had been closed beautifully: with the human armed with the Parasite's Shard leveraging what humanity the Warrior had clothed itself until that Parasite chose to break apart and return to the Entropic Expansion of the Universe on its own.

One that was [All] had seen her build magnificent structures that had enabled to walk to the dimension where the Warrior's tether was connected to Life.

The [Key] and the Gate had seen her bring forward manifestations of [Everything] that belonged to other universes. Obtained through Exchanges that were [Aberrant] to the Parasites but that followed in full the growing Entropy that characterized Everything-that-Was.

In countless iterations, One and [All] saw-and-was Taylor Hebert bring and build Change.

In the iteration that [Key] and Gate currently was, Taylor Hebert had a slightly above average mind, like in many of her counterparts across [All], and in this iteration, she had the possibility for Change that so much pleased-and-was One. But in this iteration, she looked for Death.

Truth was... unsettled, if such a mortal word could be applied to it, by that iteration.

Truth was Taylor Hebert, and unlike in other iterations, were the Death of Taylor Hebert had brought forward Change that broke the Parasites that were coming closer and closer to Stasis, Truth was-and-saw that the Parasites would go on for other galactic agast of their empty and hollow cycle. Disturbed and yet empowered by the death of Thinker and the survival of Warrior. But growing and growing like a cancer made of stone that could, eventually, become cumbersome for the Cycle to Change with.

Truth looked at this iteration of Taylor Hebert, and found the broken determination that was Pillar of so many other versions of her.

One that was [All] also looked-and-was the current dealings and mechanisms of Cauldron.

So Truth extended that same human exchange in order to include the mortal Taylor Hebert.

And Truth could do so without any unbalancing of the [Cycle]: Taylor Hebert's blood spilt, and she was willing to pay with Death for the end of the Agony of her life. The price

that she suddenly realized she wished for in exchange for not-being.

Truth that was Taylor Hebert and all of her iterations and more tweaked the Exchange. Flipping it. The toll Truth would take was Taylor Hebert's Death in that locker. And the prize that Taylor would gain was, as Truth that had once been Elric Edward was thrilled to Exchange, was knowledge.

And the Exchange, counting the likely consequence of this Parasite iteration's Death, was Equivalent.

AN

Figuring out a way to explain why Taylor ended up with Truth has been a huge Pain in the ass, I hope I managed to make clear that the intervention of One is more a consequence of the Parasites actions than anything else.

At the end of the day, Truth is the manifestation of [nothing is created nor destroyed, but everything transforms], and so, even if it is similar to a sexless humanoid when interacting with humans, One is, as he states in the manga, both All and You. So I tried to portray [Entity] as an Aberrant part of the [Cycle] that is [Balance], that is [One], and [All], and [You] and etc. ...

I know the chapter results somewhat difficult to read, but my point is exactly that: this chapter is more a representation of the [Cycle] balancing itself. Truth is 'everything', so it is the current instant, which is the instantaneous 'change'.

All of the Past (and everything that has been (ideas, dreams, thoughts, law of nature, knowledge)) is behind the Gate, while All of the Present (matter, energy, and composites of both) is the current multiverse.

All of the Future, and here it becomes tricky, is all the iterations (consequences) caused by differences (minute or big) in the current multiverse.

To Truth, there is no difference between the several Earths in which Worms is written and Alpha Centaury, no difference between the events in Full Metal Alchemist in the manga and Halley's comet.

And given the vastness of the multiverse (all of which in the end is part of [All]), Truth can wager and be payed with consequences that only One and [All] is aware of.

In this case, the Death of Taylor in her locker (only that death had value to her, because she wanted it, so only that particular set of circumstances allowed for the Exchange in respect of the 'Equivalent' tag), had been bettered with Knowledge. One of the consequences of this knowledge is the end of the Bullyism and the pain in the locker, thusly respecting what Taylor has framed (albeit without being truly aware of what was happening) in her contract with Truth.

Truth is Balance and whatnot, the iniquity of a mortal building itself towards Stasis allows for this small loophole.

And given the fact that the Erlic brothers paid more than one arm and a leg in order to bring back their mother demonstrates that the Alchemist doesn't have to know what he's about to pay for something that he wants, it stands to reason that he doesn't have to know what he's going to get if he pays a certain amount.

So this ff is based around the opposite of what the Erlic Brothers did: they didn't know how much they were going to pay in order to get their mother back, and the transmutation wobbled heavily, in this case, Taylor didn't know what she was going to get, and the value that she gave to her own Death (in those conditions) made it enough to get truth instead.

I hope that you all don't need to read my author notes (in any of my works), in order to understand the reasoning behind it, but ultimately my notes tend to be revised notes that I write for myself in order to not loose the 'flow' and 'direction'.

So, thoughts?

Chapter 3: Everything Comes Full Circle

Everything comes full circle

In Brockton Bay, the night was cold and with a persistent wind that howled harshly across the roofs, whistling sharp through the broken windows of the warehouse. In the distance, one could make out the thunderous song of the surf crashing against the land, while the city proper was an amalgamation of police and ambulance' sirens, with a sparkle of gunfights here and there.

Jhon Danver was a free man. He had always been one, born in Colorado, he left school when he was 13 in order to help her mother with the bills, since his older brother had gotten killed in a car crash, only for quickly being dragged into a small-time gang whose earnings barely justified the risks they took. It was a simple enough time of his life, given the relatively modest dimensions of the city. It was mildly stressful, but a bit of weed with friends went a long way to relax you.

Despite his help, his mother had only regarded him with a flat gaze that was neither praise nor condemnation, but that managed to express both her indifferent towards his sacrifices and efforts and her general disinterest of his life choices, the same gaze she had used for everything since the death of Jhon's older brother.

Then, one cape here and there later, he found himself leaving Colorado after having dropped off his mother with an aunt that he hadn't seen in five years or so, along with half of his savings (those had probably gone a long way in order to mend the bridge between the two women he suspected). At least he no longer had to look her in the eyes when he returned home, finding more hateful her lack of reaction to his growing collection of tattoos than anything else.

Since then, he had he kept moving from city to city, doing odd jobs not strictly legal and generally trying to not attract the wrong kind of attention. Jhon smoked the odd joint on his own in that period, but it was alright, it was only a temporary situation.

It was more by chance than by planning that he ended up in Brockton Bay. As a rule, Jhon Danver stayed the hell away from both the capes and their hunting grounds, but boy wasn't Brockton the epitome of Las Vegas. You could be a murderer or a common street dealer, if you were lucky, nobody would ever catch or kill you (from the random Ward to the mildly insane capes of the criminal underworld) but the kind of risks one took (after learning a bit of how things tended to go) were almost never indicative of the likeliness of the cops of the Protectorate of busting your sorry ass.

At 16 years of age, he just kind of... let go once he was in town. He joined the Merchants after barely a week after his arrival, and the kind of stuff he tried since then... oh boy, it went wonderfully with the thrill of being found out and busted. Jhon had never been one for rape, his mama had taught him better, but that didn't mean he hadn't enjoyed the hooked up girls that were always around the Merchants' bases scattered in his gang's territory.

Assuming the saying of 'one man's misfortune is the fortune of another' had turned out to be, if not necessary, the best thing ever happened to him.

In that particular night, Jhon sported a slight sheen of sweat and a heavier breath than strictly necessary despite the coolness of the nightly air and the low-effort activity he was performing, the new drug going around to keep you on your toes, coupled with his first truly important job in the bay would do that to anyone.

Jhon and other six Merchants were following a routine organization of the area, setting up piles of the drugs and making sure that no money went missing, when they heard a *clap*.

"Who's there?" one of the criminals immediately asked, likely supposing that the origin of the sound came from one of the lookouts that thought smarter calling them from within the warehouse than by phone, which was strange but not impossible.

Turning immediately towards the direction of the sound guns raising as an afterthought, Jhon spotted her: long hair and legs, the girl clearly was either out of place, or a cape, and the criminal's mind, muddled by the drugs but paranoid enough to jump immediately to the worst-case situation, made sure that he immediately pulled the trigger.

As gunshot ringing like thunder echoed across the warehouse, the outsider, which was dressed in a dark red trenchcoat slammed her palms flat on the ground remaining eerily silent, immediately confirming that the worst-case scenario had just become reality.

It was then that the concrete under their feet *shifted*. Like a ripple travelling over an otherwise calm surface of water, the concrete behaved unnaturally following lightning-like white light that moved fast over the floor of the warehouse.

By the time the Merchants thought of avoiding the freak's power, it was already too late: sheets of concrete rose from the floor like petals from a man-eating flower, wrapping snugly around the cape' opponents, only to abandon its liquid quality and returning to the hardness typical of the material as Jhon tried to throw himself away from the shaker-effect.

The startled screams and rough attempts at intimidation were muted as the liquid concrete invaded their mouths and muffled the sounds escaping their throats while the unnatural ground wrapped around their fingers, immediately hardening in order to stop the thugs from firing again against the hostile cape.

Only then the cape walked fully into the relatively dim light that was given off by the old lamps under which Jhon and his cohort had been busy working.

Jhon, eyes wide with fear and adrenaline, stopped breathing as the cape walked within the light *without a mask* revealing green eyes behind thick glasses and a wide mouth that was open in order to allow the girl to berth heavily, likely recovering from the fatigue her power taxed her with.

Without stopping her slow walk forward, she took out a small water bottle from one of the pockets of the dark red trenchcoat she wore in order to drink deeply.

Once she had recovered enough, she studied them dispassionately: "You know that human souls of ones who have passed can be trapped and condensed with certain transmutation circles?"

She tilted her head, as if she was waiting for a proper reaction out of the normal people she had just captured: "And did you know that my mother died in a car crash against someone that was running away from an armed conflict of Brockton' gangs?"

Jhon wheezed uselessly in his cocoon of concrete, which left free his face from his nostrils to his forehead, desperately trying to figure out *why* would any cape go around without a mask, and coming out with two possibilities, neither good for him.

"To make an actual Philosopher's Stone, which I kind of need, I need a *lot* of human souls, you see? And I find terribly exact that there are so many involved with the gangs that I only need time to harvest enough." the freaky cape spoke, frighteningly clapping once more and making Jhon squeeze shut his eyes as he and the others simply rolled over the floor in a mostly free area of the warehouse.

Either she's with New Wave, and everything is going well, or we are all dead. Jhon tried to find the cape' eyes with his own, hoping desperately to find her calling the police or anyone, only to be met by a flat gaze that promised no help of any kind.

The same gaze that his mother had adopted since the death of his older brother.

Useless. That gaze seemed to say.

"It is a frequent misconception that the properties of the stone itself allow someone to override the law of equivalent exchange, but this perception is simply an illusion." the cape went on, completely ignoring the panicked breathing of her victims.

Unneeded. Her green eyes clearly expressed.

"The power of the Philosopher's Stone allows one to perform feats greater than what one can do naturally, but the stone gets weaker every time it's used because that power comes from souls, which get consumed in these transmutations."

Jhon's breathing started to come in even more ragged as snot started to fill his nostrils, impeding the clean passage of much-needed air.

"When all the energy is exhausted, the stone also ceases to exist. The raw material of the Philosopher's Stone is a very large number of human lives, ranging from only one human life, to a few dozens, to a few million, or perhaps even more, I don't think that there is an actual upper limit." The green eyes swept blankly over the impotent form of Jhon.

Unworthy of my attention after your brother's death. that action declared.

With the same flat and almost absent tone, the cape went on, moving across the room with a piece of white chalk in her hand: "It is rumoured that the Philosopher's Stone can allow one to complete a human transmutation. However, the abilities that can be performed can range from the completely equal resurrection of another human, to the worthless repairing of an inanimate object..."

"That was the last." she huffed to herself, her eyes landing briefly on the mounds of money and drugs over the tables, "I still need to think about what I can do with that stuff... well, I guess that the drugs can simply become mud, or something stupid like that, I bet that your bosses will go for a wild goose chase since they won't be able to find any of you." the disinterested tone sealed the certainty that they were about to die in the Merchants' minds.

The panicked grunts and subdued screams grew in volume, only to make the cape scoff: "Relax, Everything is One after all." she rolled her eyes as she pulled a new piece of chalk out after having finished the first, crouching down as she started to trace a perfect uninterrupted circle around her prisoners, swiftly adding symbols on the inside of the line before adding a second circle, as if to create a frame of sorts for whatever she had written down.

"The salamander represents fire in case you were wondering." she spoke almost conversationally as she finished the last drawing, swiftly jumping inside of the strange circle and uniting the five drawings she had placed on the edge of the inner circle, creating a pentacle that perfectly skirted around the prisoners.

A part of Jhon simply failed to accept what was happening as real, unable to compute the small speech that was leaving the cape's mouth.

Under the stress, finally something broke, and Jhon's eyes rolled back into his head as he witnessed something larger than the world itself, twin spirals of fractal-like worms moving in an endless dance around him.

Once she was done she rose again, straightening her back with a huff: "But you're unlikely to care." she reminded herself, carefully walking out from the ritual circle while adding a smaller one just outside of it, big enough just for her to comfortably kneel into it with the two circumferences barely touching right under two stylized drawings of a tree and a small flame, which symbolized life and change respectively.

[DESTINATION]

"Besides," she whispered to herself as she walked in the much smaller circle that intersected her bigger creation, "everything comes full circle."

[AGREEMENT]

...Taylor Hebert clapped once more with a serious expression on her face, and slammed her palms flat against the concrete, closing her eyes as a red flash attempted to blind her...

Something otherworldly slipped in the cracks of Jhon's mind, planting a seed that would never leave until death, a shimmer of smoke covering the skin of the newly christened cape...

... Taylor steeled herself against the unnatural feeling washed over her as she witnessed the red lightning-like lines skitter along the lines of her ritual circle...

...Jhon's skin exploded as covered in blue rocks out from the encasing of concrete around his body...

...twirling as liquid her skin and into the gleaming red stone that hovered between her cupped palms.

...Jhon howled in agony as something was torn from him, twisted and subsumed in a quiescent nothingness that was there to keep him from escaping...

After having exhaled heavily, Taylor blinked in surprise: "This doesn't make sense." she had barely collected fifty souls in the previous month, carefully moving across the city in order to not attract attention to a particular area, even if her skillset made erasing evidence extremely easy, but she was hundreds of souls short of creating something even remotely resembling a shard of an actual Philosopher's Stone.

With a single thought directing the direction and purpose of the change, the matter shifted to follow her will, as the floor beneath her sunk deep underground, shaping an amphitheatre-like structure around herself: "It works." she confirmed, finally looking over the bloody mess in the centre of her transmutation circle.

Her eyes widened as they fell over one of the bodies: cracking through the concrete encasing, there was a body that looked made out of jagged blue rocks that simmered, almost igniting the air around with their sheer heat.

"A cape?" she wondered out loud as she took a careful step back. *Why didn't he use his power earlier... new cape?* Her mid immediately clicked, putting together the only thing that made sense in front of her.

She fell on her ass, suddenly acutely aware that she had only survived due to sheer luck: had she been performing an Exchange with the matter of their bodies instead of their souls, the circle would have been manipulating something she hadn't accounted for, becoming utterly unpredictable in the process.

She pushed away the thought, returning to her previous question. *But then why...* She frowned briefly, soon enough zeroing in on the only different element she had encountered in this transmutation against the others she had performed: one of the people in the ritual circle had been a cape, a freshly triggered one at that, so maybe...

"Why would the soul of a cape be more valuable than any other?" she hummed to herself, noting the slightly dimmed glow that came out from the proto-Philosopher's Stone that she was maintaining in a shape with a secondary transmutation circle she had painstakingly written in the paper bracelet she had secured to her left wrist.

Taylor found herself smiling slightly as she contemplated the new piece of information, after all, Brockton was filled to the brim with criminal capes, and once she managed to 'harvest' enough of them, she could do something about Sophia, Madison and Emma: "Everything comes full circle." she repeated to herself, a sickly sweet smile blossoming on her too wide mouth.

AN

Just to make it clear, Taylor was kinda miffed by not dying, and even more by being told that nothing truly ever dies. Given the amount of knowledge she has, what absolute morals that characterized her at the start of Worm are mostly gone, since while Alchemy can clearly be used as a Shaker effect, its more effective uses (on the long term) are those born from the Wet Tinkering (creation of a chimaera from a human, philosopher stone).

To remind you Taylor couldn't die even if she wanted to: like hell she's going to ignore even the slightest advantage she can leverage from her knowledge, that she paid for with more than she wished to.

And I needed a way to make her obtain a Stone in order to give her a sporting chance, after all she's as frail and with reflexes as slow as any human.