

Brooklyn in Winter

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Brooklyn in Winter

by [OddKid42](#)

Summary

AU where Silhouette lives and decides to mentor the new, angry vigilante calling himself a psychological assessment and copying her costume design. Or, Walter finds himself adopted by two lesbians at twenty years old and the experience isn't entirely unbearable.

Notes

I know Walter became a vigilante at twenty-four, but I thought it would need a longer, more detailed timeline the older he is when he meets Ursula. Besides, he left Charlton Home at sixteen (Who lets a kid live by himself at sixteen?), so I think it isn't too out of canon to imagine that after four years of living in a crap apartment, sewing bras, and realizing there is no economic upward mobility for him, he would become a hero early.

Inspiration from faewrite on Tumblr because I read the idea of Ursula and Gretchen being to Walter what Hollis Mason was to Dan, and went 'oh crap, Walter needs two moms and Ursula would definitively look at this scrawny twenty year old in a trench coat and feel the urge to forcefully mentor this kid'.

Big heads up that because this is Silhouette and Walter, child abuse and protecting children are prominent topics. I will give more details at the start of each chapter, but Silhouette's entire career is hunting abusers.

Warning: Description of someone getting shot, no graphic details but implied

Chapter 1

The hotel door rattled momentarily, someone attempting to open the locked door, before it went quiet. There was a faint scraping sound as the locks were picked then the click as the lock released. The lights of the hallway broke a sliver of illumination into the hotel room where the two women were staying-- a long-deserved vacation for the heroine and her long-term partner and one brought on by the discover of their relationship.

The ejection of Silhouette from the Minutemen had been a blessing in a way. The Silhouette had long felt disconnected from the group with its striving towards publicity while she had focused her attention on ending child trafficking in her adopted city. Gretchen had been wanting her to leave since interactions with the other members began to irritate her without any benefits. The only person she did seem to care for, or have any sense of comrodery with, was Night Owl. Even he seemed to view her goal as sainthood rather than the disturbing reality that the problem existed in the first place. Stepping away from New York City for a vacation, it was long needed. It was meant to be relaxing.

The Liquidator-- a third-rate villain, simply a trafficker who imagined grandness in himself enough to purchase a costume-- eased open the hotel door with gun in hand. Too many time Silhouette had ruined his empire. The announcement of her identity in the news made it easy to track her down to the hotel along the beach, and he planned to end the nuance of her. Gain notoriety in killing her. He imagined there was little she would be able to do, out of costume and asleep with her guard down.

Something broke through his skull, and he found himself on the carpet. It was the hallway carpet, waterstained and dirty. Somewhere a woman was screaming. It stopped. Some movement and then a black-haired woman stood next to his head. A handgun was pointed at his face. There were enough synapses firing in the remnants of his brain to recognize her as Silhouette in a nightgown. She was frowning down at him like he was a mild irritation. Some sensation from his hand and he realized she had kicked the gun behind her.

He couldn't move. She sighed and stopped pointing the gun at him to his relief. She brushed hair out of her eyes and looked behind her. "Babe, can you get Mason on the phone please? I think we are going home early."

There were other patrons leaving their hotel rooms, noise as they exclaimed at the sight of him. He didn't know what he looked like, but the attention was good. Someone would arrest her. She would go to jail. For any number of reasons-- the homosexuality, the firearm, the attempted murder of him. He said as much as well as he was able.

Silhouette stared down at him before a small smile appeared on her face. It was cold and filled with bloodlust. She squatted next to his head, and he felt the rising fear that she would kill him with her hands.

"You know." Her voice was quiet but enough for him to hear. "No one cares about you-- people who hurt children. You are more dog than a man, and dogs are put down when they

hurt people. So don't worry. If you don't die before the ambulance comes, I will find you before the police."

She stood and returned to the hotel room where Gretchen was on the phone with Hollis Mason. The Liquidator died in the hallway that night while vacationers watched. No one helped.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Heads up: brief description Ursula's sister's murder and Nazi mention but no graphic details

Rorschach, twenty years old and angry, lashed out at the Top Knots surrounding him; blind in his fury, fists aimed for noses, kicks aimed at kneecaps, growling and grunting with each blow given and received.

The flurry of enclosed movement around him refused to dissipate, and the opposing blows that landed only incensed him further because they were scum, scum that would hurt someone who could not fight back if he didn't stop them. They always did. They always went for the weak who had no chance of stopping them, so Rorschach doled out violence into the crowd even if he didn't recall how many there were at the start, how many had fallen, and how many had joined.

In the corner of his vision as he fought, he could see a few members drop back. He marked the opened space in his mind but didn't dwell on it. Catching a swung crowbar towards his head in a gloved grip, kicking the punk behind him, returning to kick against the chest of the wielder even with a fist against the side of his face (another flash of fury because it would swell and his coworkers will think he got in a brawl overnight, which he did but not like their husbands).

The third- fourth man dropped behind him in his distraction. He half-turned and spotted the black trench coat before he pressed forward to haul an arm back and crunch the nose of the last man. He didn't waste time and began to zip-tie the arms of injured and unconscious thugs.

Silhouette plucked the cigarette from her mouth. The words came out in smoke. "You are new."

He kicked the stomach of a gang member trying to lift himself off the ground. He handcuffed the man's hands with his foot planted on the escapee's back. He said with the rough pitch he had been practicing, "Rorschach."

"Hm." Silhouette flicked ash, indifferent. "How long as mask?"

She was surveying the gang members, and Rorschach was irked by her inaction once the fighting had ended. Why jump into a fight and not clean up?

He growled, "Not helping?"

She watched him tie the last man, not bothering to resist, to piping along the way. “Not needed.” When he faced her, transmitting a glare, she visibly perked up upon seeing his mask. “Moving ink. Very nice.”

Rorschach held himself cautiously. He knew that meeting Minutemen, those who remained active anyway, in person would be different than the idolizations of his youth, but Silhouette was never a favorite. Even less when she was voted out of the group for homosexual activity. He brushed away the acknowledgement of his uniform’s work.

She set the cigarette on the side of her mouth again and shoved her hands into her trench coat pockets when he didn’t answer. “See you then. Or not. Most new quit. If you do not quit, good for you.”

Their subsequent meetings over the next three months occurred similarly.

Rorschach admitted to himself that he often became involved in more than he could handle at one time, but increasingly, she appeared from some corner to assist the moment the fight tipped out of his control. She would hover around long enough to check he was uninjured or throw a roll of gauze when he was before continuing wherever she was going.

Initially, he wasn’t sure if her appearances were coincidental or intentional. As more months passed, he realized that she would find him within an hour of his patrol regardless of whichever direction he started off from in the Lower East Side and the times when she didn’t appear, the news (the liberal but factual correct one and his own *New Frontiersman*) would print a story about a child trafficking ring or another case of human sewage being destroyed.

He didn’t rely on her for assistance, he told himself, but the newspaper articles eased frustrations when she wasn’t present the night before for a fight he nearly lost. He didn’t rely on her, but he left with fewer bruises when she was there. In the meantime, he learned to strategize on his own and time his approaches.

“You stay out of child cases?” she asked after three months since they first met.

His ears were ringing slightly from a cheap blow, but he had previously thought of the question: why hadn’t he run into her usual prey. “Haven’t found one.”

“You don’t unless you look.” The reply was sharper than seemed directed towards only him. He tilted his head in question. She clarified, “Other Minutemen thought it not good for publicity. No one likes to know of it, so focused on gangs. Put blame on immigrants. Children-- only public can blame self for not protecting children.”

He understood what she meant, about the public and the jobs left undone. The crimes left unseen because they were messy and thus untouchable. He replied, “Could join on your patrol.”

She stood without speaking for several seconds before she said, “No. I don’t want you to. Still a child yourself.”

He bristled. “*Not* a child. Offered for your convenience but do not care.”

She smirked at him, but it faded quickly. “Appreciate the offer, but no. Child cases kill you. I asked to see if intentionally avoided. If you only play superhero or beat people for fun.”

He wasn’t sure how she expected him to respond. He followed her to the next street.

“Brooklyn cold in winter, yeah?” she asked.

She didn’t usually make small talk. He nodded wordlessly.

“Vienna, a bit warmer. Longitudinal differences.” She turned her head back, catching his eyes. “But evil people everywhere you go.”

There was a comic book panel from the Night Owl memoir. An illustration of a black-haired girl at the bedside of a younger, blonde girl. It was inaccurate of what Silhouette had looked like. The illustration was wearing eyeliner and mascara, for one. He supposed that there was more empathy if she looked feminine.

The illustration is of her as a sixteen year old caring for her younger sister. A sister who is tortured to death on the next page. A sister that the sixteen year old Silhouette kills Nazi guards to reach, only to find vivisected behind the door.

Child cases kill you.

Walter set the memoir back on the New York Public Library’s shelf, his memory confirmed of the illustration and description that he had read as a child.

You don’t unless you look.

He told himself that he didn’t need to seek the cases out any more than he sought out other crime. It was her department. He dealt with the violence in progress and drug dealers. The assaults and random, opportunistic crimes he found. He had recently started keeping records of fights to figure out patterns in organized crime (not solely because she did so as well, but like her fighting ability and detective skills, Walter was forced to admit that she had more experience and success in her cases).

Child cases kill you.

He knew his reasoning for not hunting child predators was lacking. To be honest with himself—he squared his shoulders against the winter wind as he left the brick building—and he tried to be, he didn’t want to see child abuse cases. He didn’t want to see the results if his mother had been more malicious or he stayed with her any longer.

Still a child.

Maybe. He was twenty, turning twenty-one in spring. Rorschach had no age, but Walter did. Early on, Silhouette had sensed how young he was behind the mask. Had pressed to confirm

he was older than eighteen and had a source of income.

He didn't think there would be a significant jump between knowing child trafficking occurred, hearing the stories from *New Frontiersman*, and seeing it, but she would know.

As much as it utterly pained him to admit it, she had been patrolling the city by herself before he had been born. Was more experienced. Each time she pointed something out that he argued against, he was later made to admit that she was right. The wordless glance towards him as she was proven right.

Wait for the gang members to continue speaking and hear what names they drop. Do not rush in immediately to fight even if a few leave. Wait. Wait, Rorschach. Wait. Good, now we fight. Let's go.

Regardless of whether she would be proven correct about the gap between knowing and seeing, the tone seemed to imply that one day he would run into a child case and no longer be a child himself.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Warning: d slur and canon-typical homophobic language/beliefs

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He would prefer if she hadn't noticed. The less mentioned of it the better, but after four months of appearing at random between fights (and worse, having one-sided conversations with him while he fought) to nosely involve herself in his patrol and despite his temper flaring at the intrusions, she started the argument.

"Angry each time I light a cigarette."

He was conscious of the lit ember but pushed his observation of it to the corner of his mind. "Bad for health. Drug addiction. Air pollution."

She gave him an unimpressed look. "Didn't know you cared, but none of your business."

"My business when you follow me," he growled.

"Kidsitting you. Kinderguarding." She snorted a laugh at her own joke. "I am allowed to smoke."

Rorschach glared but knew she didn't care. In a way that grated on the twenty year old's pride, she could pin him down before a fight became a fight, so she ignored all of his complaints and ranting as blustery.

There was no changing it. She would smoke next to him as they waited for a drug lord to appear, a cigarette posed between her lips, and he would hold back his discomfort behind gripes about health.

It was another part that he wished he could control: removing his mask for the first time. If he had been able, he would have never taken it off, but he became sick on patrol with her.

He ignored the initial head fog, gritted his teeth through Silhouette's proding looks. Compared to the colds that came on during work as a gradual weakness, this came faster, before he could get back to the apartment, and in front of someone who noticed.

Silhouette watched him without additional commentary after he dismissed her but caught his shoulder when he misstepped on a landing. Before he could recover enough to be indignant, she had pulled off a glove and slipped fingers underneath the mask.

“You have a fever. Go home, Rorschach,” she said firmly while he growled at the intrusion.

He didn’t have the energy to protest, just the private relief that he had an excuse to precariously exit the rooftop and walk the winter night trek back to his apartment.

He knew how to get back, but the streets were wrong. They didn’t lead to where he knew they went. The roads looked the same. After too long walking, he rested against an alley wall and accepted that he was sick enough to have become lost. He tried to think, with his mind fogged, what to do. He didn’t have the energy to walk until he found the familiar route despite his inner vigilante ushering him on.

He gave up and moved deeper into the alley. He curled against the backend of the dumpster with cardboard as an added layer on top of him and hunkered down until the daylight returned or he recovered enough strength to find the route back.

He couldn’t tell how much time had passed, but Silhouette was crouched in front of him. She had shaken his shoulder and said something.

“What?” He wasn’t sure where he was or why he felt disoriented. He hadn’t deepened his voice. He was being pulled upright. She had his arm around her shoulders and was lifting him to his feet.

“Can you walk?”

She was moving too quickly. Even as they stood still, the ground was shaking unevenly, and he knew it was in his head and he had to get back to the apartment.

She said something, and he managed to give a warning before falling into the blurred haze.

He surfaced again in a taxi smelling of piss. The windows were clouded from the body heat in the car. His mask was off. The black-haired woman holding his shoulders was arguing with the driver. “He is not dirtying the car.”

“He smells like trash!”

She growled and shuffled through her trouser pockets. It was a familiar sound.

“You took my mask.” He sounded childish and weak in his own ears. He was still hunched over. He had deepened his voice at least.

“Hush,” she said without gentleness. She handed a bill over with a curved number, 2 or 5, and the cab driver grumbled about cleaning the car but drove.

The car’s sudden movements—speeding up suddenly and hitting the brakes, speeding up again—didn’t give him time to collect himself and protest. He rested his head against his knees and tried to keep the growing nausea down while his body hovered five feet above the taxi. He drifted through levels of awareness while Silhouette—the woman who didn’t speak but felt like her—gripped his shoulder.

“Freckles, wake up. We are here.”

He felt worse from the pinball stability of the taxi but forced himself to out of the vehicle to the driver's angry shouts about his shoes on the seating. He landed onto a precarious balance of two feet. Once there, he threw up his pre-patrol meal of canned beans and sandwich bread while Silhouette kept him from falling. His nose was leaking snot now. He flushed with self-disgust as she firmly maneuvered him towards a small door next to a butchery.

He managed some resistance. "Not my apartment."

She stopped on the sidewalk for him. "I know. It's mine. You could not find your apartment." She pulled slightly to continue forwards, but he braced his feet. She growled and checked the area for pedestrians. She said under her breath, "Rorschach, you think I want you in my home? With my wife? No. But you dying in a gutter is worse than me losing privacy, so walk, idiot. I will take care of you until better."

He could get in another cab, the inner voice growled.

He could barely stand.

He set a hand on Silhouette's shoulder in silence, and she patiently took time for his dizzy spells to pass or for him to push a series of steps on the stairwell before they reached the second floor of the building.

"Keep standing. Try, Rorsch," she urged as she rattled a key into the door lock. He couldn't. His vision was closing in with rings. Sinking through the floor and vibrating. He could feel himself sagging in her grip. He said something to warn her, and she said something back. He half-woke to find himself lying in a bed. It was in a darkened room. With that assurance, he passed out again.

When he blinked awake, light from a window was filtering in. He could feel the cotton sheets and blankets over his arms and legs; cool except for the barrier his tank top and boxers gave.

The woman asleep next to the bed stopped him from immediately escaping. She was in a wooden chair at the foot of the bed, arms crossed in her lap, and head resting on the sheets. Her features—short, black hair; unplucked eyebrows; faint scent of cigarette smoke—seemed familiar in a disconnected way. He realized with a jolt that the woman was Silhouette. He mentally matched the face and uniform, and he found that it fit.

Teetering between disturbed curiosity and a sense of violation, he studied the room and begrudgingly found it sensible. Not decorous but not impoverished of furniture. A window wide enough to slip through with a fire escape outside was next to the bed, and Rorschach recognized it as a likely exit from the room.

He could feel that he only had temporary energy. His mind was clearer compared to last night, but he felt the weakness of his body shutting down. It didn't matter. At minimum, he needed to reach work.

Likely, he was already late.

He pushed himself up against the headboard, and the bed creaked marginally. The woman—Silhouette—inhaled deeply and frowned. Rorschach recollected his anger as she sat up, wiping at her eyes.

“Took my mask.”

She squinted at him, one eye still closed and face skewed like he was an annoyance. “Fainted.” She ignored his discomfort at the reminder of last night to study him. “Was it exhaustion?”

He didn’t answer, so she stood and set a hand against his forehead with a concentrated look. He protested and tried to lean far enough away, but she held her palm against his head for several seconds.

“Fever,” she stated and settled down again in the seat. “What are the other symptoms?”

“Leaving.” He shifted before remembering his lack of clothing and glared at her. “Clothes, Silhouette.”

She reached down for a newspaper and answered as she folded it out, “Not leaving, Freckles. You are sick. Was in the alleyway asleep.” She looked over the newspaper and pierced him suddenly with a scrutiny usually reserved for suspicious strangers. “Are you homeless?”

“No.”

The scrutiny lessened. “Why sleep in alleyway? Followed and didn’t notice me. Could have been killed.”

There wasn’t an acceptable reply for how weak he felt last night. He couldn’t stay in her house. He had work at nine o’clock. He eyed the dressers and wondered if, assuming this was her room, a pair of her trousers would fit him.

“Rorschach.”

He focused back on her and the dangerous look in her eye, feeling caught for having the perverted idea of wearing her clothing. She said firmly, “I promised last night nothing bad would happen and meant it. Stay.”

The phrase only brought vague memories of being carried with his head against her shoulder. Being set into bed with her voice and another woman’s. He couldn’t remember details. It bothered him that he couldn’t remember details. It bothered him that the longer he spoke with her the more disconnected his body felt from him and likely remaining became.

He didn’t look to the window, but its presence was there. The woman called Silhouette frowned in disappointment at him. “If you try to leave, I will not mentor you anymore.”

In that moment, he hated her as intensely as he hated anyone. He wanted to spit back that he didn’t even want her for a mentor. Whore, slut, lesbian bitch dyke. She followed him around. She was the one who wanted to mentor him with her screaming cigarettes, and the image of the cigarettes being put out on him, on another boy’s eye surfaced suddenly. His mother’s

corpse with Drano burning down her throat and how much it must have hurt. How deserved the death seemed. How he had felt vindicated at hurting others who hurt him.

Mixture of violence and shame caught in his throat with the words almost said, and he glanced away to school his expression because Silhouette was looking at him with something he didn't recognize. Her frustration had faded into it. He self-consciously tried to calm himself with deep breaths--the Charlton school's psychologist had given general anger management information that he used without accepting his need for it--and felt the countering shame of losing his temper over what was likely an empty threat. A threat, from her perspective, meant to keep him from running away and becoming lost again. For her to keep him safe until he had recovered. Even if he hated the situation and the memories it brought, she had never hurt him. She had proven repeatedly that she wouldn't.

She exhaled and ran a hand through her hair, the movement catching his attention. Her brows furrowed together. When she set her hand down, she looked tired. "What was that towards?"

He couldn't answer. He didn't know. Sometimes, he was so angry.

She stood and frowned at something out the window. He thought for a moment she would tell him to get out of her house.

She walked to the door. "I'll cook. Get some sleep."

The door crept closed a bit after she left, but he could see the doorframe of another room diagonal. After a moment, metal clangs of pots moving came from another room.

He surrendered, accepting whatever care that she felt to provide as punishment. He moved back underneath the weight of the quilts and shivered from the earlier exposure to the air. The rough internal monologue that he was starting to label as his persona was indignant at the treatment, but he closed his stinging eyes. He was disgusted at himself for losing his temper so easily. Losing it towards her.

Who had been providing advice to him for the past four months? Had he not spent his working time in the factory replaying her movements in fights--smaller frame dodging a punch and retaliating rather than taking it, moving light on your feet, identifying improvised weapons, how to use your shorter stature to your advantage. He never had to ask her for tactics; she provided them when she noticed his imperfect replication. She taught him the city from the perspective of their prey. The docks for drug exchanges. Meat-packing district for homicides. The network of human trafficking that involves finding one thread to pull information on the rest. How to find the thread throughout the city and not miss it when you had a suspect at your mercy.

She provided safety. Young masks were killed entering fights that they couldn't win. For the sake of laying down their lives for a cause. Or simply because they thought of themselves as invincible. She kept him in check. As insulted as he felt at the low status, under the mentorship of a well-known lesbian, she gave him cases for practice and would reconvene with him at daybreak for the report. The feedback was always useful even as he begrudging accepted it.

It was rare--she didn't give them often--but her praise had become its own form of incentive. The mask persona felt insulted and Walter knew it was meaningless, but the praise felt good. Whole body radiating good. In the middle of sewing padding into brassieres—feeling humiliated at touching something that would later touch an anonymous woman's breast—he would suddenly remember Silhouette's lips quirking up and her 'good job, Rorsch'. The praise of his mask—it was a symbol, made from the dress of a young woman assaulted and murdered while her neighbors did nothing but watch. It wasn't meant for praise. But it was his work, the first piece he had made at eighteen when he was beginning to lose the optimism that the brassiere job was a temporary step towards a professional job. When he understood the impact of Charlton House on a job application. She had been impressed on the first night. Saw his work before seeing him.

He woke up to a bowl of soup set next to him. He couldn't remember falling asleep. Silhouette was not in the room. He reached out from the covers, shivering in the cold air, and found the bowl warm. He searched the room for Silhouette again before sitting up and devouring the soup, forgoing the spoon for speed.

It was potato chowder. It was probably from a can, but it was one of the better meals he had eaten in awhile.

After he had scooped the last bits out, he set the bowl down and rested underneath the quilts again. The sheets smelled a bit like cigarettes but also something floral. His eyes were burning, and he closed them for what he planned to be brief. Long enough for his eyes to stop stinging. The warmth and weight of food in his stomach and the quiet of the apartment. Smell of tobacco and rose on the clean sheets.

He blinked awake and had the sense that hours had passed, but he wasn't sure how many. He had a terrible, throbbing headache at the front of his skull. He noticed the back of Silhouette's head level to the bed. He shifted to see spread out maps and scraps of paper across the floor. Clipped pictures of children from the papers. *Have You Seen Me?* and *Last Seen*.

"It is four o'clock." She lifted her head, and he followed her focus to the metallic clock on the dresser. She corrected herself, "4:14."

His legs and arms were aching like he had spent the night running, and he silently stretched them under the covers to relieve the cramps. He tried to think of what to say and found little besides the pounding in his skull. Silhouette was turned partially towards him.

"Do you feel better?"

The leg cramps were better than the disorientation. The headache wasn't a migraine, so he nodded. He wondered if he should thank her, but they didn't thank each other for things. Typically, the routine of patrol made the protection of each other necessary. He wasn't sure how being cared for as a civilian would change their- what they did.

He was likely fired from his job for not appearing, and it sent a chill through him because he had no other job options. The brassiere manufacturer had been arranged by the Charlton Home. It was also a sense of relief that he no longer had to feel perverted touching women's underwear, but he needed a job.

The air was cold, which he understood was a symptom of his sickness. He pulled the covers over his neck rather than shiver for the sake of sitting upright in bed. The embarrassment of huddling like a child under the sheets felt deserved after the morning's incident. Had he apologized for it? No, he didn't think he had.

He swallowed his pride and reminded himself that his embarrassment was deserved. "Hrm, I'm... I apologize- for this morning. Sorry. Shouldn't have..."

Silhouette was staring at him blankly. "Ah." She glanced back at the papers. "It doesn't matter."

"I..." Walter averted his eyes to the clothing dresser and stopped trying to use the deeper growl of his costumed voice. "It does."

"You didn't leave. Still my apprentice." She returned to her papers. Walter closed his eyes that were burning irritably and stretched his arms out to either side of him. Silhouette jarred him slightly when she spoke again. "My lover returns at five o'clock."

Walter tried to process whom she meant before realizing it was the woman she was kicked out of Minutemen for.

Was it the same woman? Unlikely. Silhouette was kicked out when he was four years old. It being the same woman was not likely. *New Frontiersman* said that homosexuals could not maintain long-term relationships. Too much shame and secrecy present. But, at what point does a woman become a lover to another woman? Is there a time period? After a year, a girlfriend becomes a lover? Is lover the word for wife for lesbians since they cannot marry? Or is it that the masculine woman is a dyke and the feminine one is a lover?

"Rorschach." He blinked his eyes open again. Her expression had shifted to faint amusement around her eyes and corner of her lips. "What are thinking of?"

It was her house. He did not want to offend even if he was been kept against his will. But, the word 'lover' bothered him. Beyond the unclear qualifier, it brought the image of his mother. Of a woman in halts roaming the hallway, watching him sleep with eyes not fully present, letting men touch him. If that was a lover, some sexual miscreant, he couldn't stay here with it present.

He asked, careful of his tone, "Is she the same one you were kicked out of Minutemen for?"

The expression shifted in a way Walter was not sure about. Multiple microexpressions. She said steadily, "Yes."

So, over sixteen years of... being together. Illegal relationship but at least not whorish. But then *Frontiersman* was wrong? No, Silhouette tended towards exceptionalism in most traits. It was why he could stand to be around her.

"Be nice to her."

The threat in the tone caught his attention. Walter blinked. The headache was not helping him think. “Your apartment.”

Papers rustling. “Know how you think of lesbians but *cannot* disrespect her.”

Walter’s brain whorled in different directions, but he replied honestly, “I won’t. I don’t- I wouldn’t.”

“I had to stop you being antisemitic.”

Walter remembered the verbal stripping with a wince. Bringing up the idea of a secret Jewish bureaucracy running the city resulted in him being torn apart by her on all the reasons it was untrue, hurt ordinary people, and was a part of the blaming that allowed the Holocaust to occur, which Walter thought was a stretch but didn't feel particularly inclined to argue over when she was holding a gun.

Silhouette sighed. Walter felt too fatigued to give a full explanation beyond, “Don’t know her.”

“I have talked enough for her to know you.”

Walter was not sure how to interpret the idea of the woman knowing him before he knew her, and Silhouette didn’t elaborate. The room was silent again except for the papers shifting. The afternoon sun was filtering in through the window, and he closed his eyes against the light.

“...other than Rorschach?”

“I didn’t ask.” Silhouette’s voice approaching.

“Ursula.” Slight disapproval and amusement.

Floorboards creaking in the room. Walter teetered between falling back asleep and opening his eyes to identify the second voice. A hand was set against his forehead, but it was possibly Silhouette checking his temperature again. His head hurt too much to protest when he could criticize her for it later.

“Fever.”

Silhouette's short hum of acknowledgement.

“How much fluid has he drank?”

“Oh, uh. He ate the clam chowder.”

“Ursula.” A short phrase in another language that sounds like German. The feet shifted and left the room.

Walter was getting tired of the two voices and appreciated the moment of silence before the footsteps returned to the room. A cold, wet something was set against his forehead, and it was the obstructing cold that caused him to fumble to get it off and open his eyes to see who was assailing him.

A blonde woman, lines underneath her eyes and face in moderate makeup, smiled at him. It didn't feel flirtatious, but she set a hand on his to stop him from moving the washcloth off his forehead.

"Sorry, but you need it. Your fever hasn't broken." She had a German accent. It was the second voice, and Walter had the disorienting moment of trying to figure out who this woman was and what she was trying to do to him before something nudged his foot.

Silhouette was watching him, sitting at the foot of the bed where she had been reading the newspaper earlier. "You're fine, Rorsch."

The anxiety lessened until the stranger ran her hand through his hair with a frown. "He hasn't bathed, Sila. Has he been too weak to use the restroom?"

"Ah, he doesn't like touching. Or bathing," Silhouette spoke before Walter lost his composure enough to forcefully push her off of him. He sat up and moved away from the women.

The blonde woman stepped back. The smile was warm and apologetic. "Bad first impression then. I apologize. My name is Gretchen."

Walter looked to Silhouette silently, and she seemed to understand enough in the expression to stand up from the bedside. "Gretchen, switch with me."

Gretchen seemed more curious than insulted and took Silhouette's spot at the foot of the bed while Silhouette sat on the bed with her back against the headboard. She tucked her legs underneath her. "Pull the blankets up, or you will start shaking again." She wasn't looking at Walter, and Gretchen observed her for a moment before focusing on the window.

When Walter had pulled a quilt around himself and recovered enough from the sudden overload of two people surrounding him, Silhouette glanced him over. He met her glaze, and she nodded. "Rorschach, she is Gretchen. Gretchen, he is Rorschach. Doesn't matter, but my other name is Ursula Zandt."

He gave a stilted nod to the woman, Gretchen, who was looking at him kindly. Ursula-- he accepted that the civilian name fit the woman who was his mentor. It was a name without attraction in his mind.-- seemed to glance him over. "I should have woken you when she got home. Are you hungry?"

"No." His nose was blocked completely, and the answer sounded congested.

"More soup?" Ursula's eyes up close were a kaleidoscope of brown and green shards. It was overwhelming. Walter searched for something else to look at and reluctantly looked to

Gretchen. The woman smiled reassuring at the scrutiny. "I could make the cure-all chicken soup. He needs the fluids."

Ursula made a noise like uncertainty. It was the noise to indicate when she wasn't sure if something Rorschach had said was right. "If you don't mind. May help."

"I don't mind. Will be done in an hour." She brushed the dress of wrinkles as she stood and left the room.

The bedroom was silent as Walter and Ursula both listened to Gretchen move around in the kitchen. The quiet din of pots being moved and the faucet being turned on. Ursula shifted and took a glass of water from the bedside table that Walter hadn't noticed was there. She held it towards him without any urgency. "Sorry. Forgot about liquids."

Walter checked there was no discoloration in the water-- it sometimes happened at his apartment complex. The city would have to flush the pipes, and he would go without running water for a few days-- and untucked an arm from the sheets and quilt to accept it. He politely took a sip and realized he was, in fact, dehydrated. He tried to drain the glass as silently as possible while Ursula stared at the bedroom door. He sat with the empty glass for a moment, and she glanced over and took it back. They sat in silence, uncertain what to do with each other when someone outside of their strange partnership was in the house.

"I'm going to help her cook," Ursula said when the silence began intolerable. She stood and walked out of the room, taking the glass with her. She returned a few moments later to sheepishly relay where the bathroom was in the apartment and set another full glass of water on the bedside table before disappearing again. Walter felt a measurement of relief that she was as uncomfortable with him being in the bed as he was. He drained the second glass of water and pulled the covers over his shoulders to regain warmth.

The soup tasted like garlic and onions with tender chicken pieces with bone floating in it. He drained the bowl and begrudgingly accepted an aspirin when Gretchen quizzed out the presence of the leg cramps.

With Gretchen's back turned, he could catch sight of Ursula's smiles at her wife. When Gretchen eventually noticed his focus and followed his line of sight, Ursula ducked her head down to continue working on her journal and spread of city maps with marked routes. Gretchen smiled softly. "Long night?"

"Potentially. Depends." Silhouette straightened and shook the hair out of her eyes. "Are you-" She switched to German briefly.

"Fine with me." Gretchen turned to him. "Are you content staying the night again?"

He could feel Ursula's eyes on him, but he didn't need the threat. He had lost the job at the factory, so another night would not damage him more. "Yes. But update me after."

Ursula released a short laugh but agreed. Her Austrian accent chipping over the 's' in 'of course'.

Before she left through the window that night, she added, "If you still want to go patrol with me, I will bring you when you are better."

He could only nod, uncertain what changed her mind. He was worried that Gretchen would try to talk to him without Silhouette present, but he was relieved when she wished him good night and turned off the lamp shortly after Silhouette left.

He woke up in the middle of the night with snot coating the pillowcase, the muscle soreness and fever gone, and the pressing need to urinate. He stumbled out of bed and checked the room adjacent the bedroom for a toilet, which proved to be correct. With the urgency done, he glanced down the hallway in the gray light. He could only see the kitchen pans hanging from a rack along the ceiling and a kitchen counter. He walked down the tiled hallway cautiously and noticed a figure lying on a couch. He realized it was Gretchen, and by default, he was on the only bed in the house. He glanced back to the bedroom but hesitated in waking her up to change locations even if he was no longer sick. She was likely to refuse the return of her bed. Worse, she might fuss over him again and Silhouette was gone.

He surveyed the living room and kitchen from where he stood. It looked less like a den of vice and more tidy normalcy. He felt relieved and underwhelmed at the residency of lesbians. New Frontiersman's information was proving faulty about the group. He checked that the woman was still asleep and not likely to stick washcloths against his head before he returned to the bedroom.

As he settled back into bed again, he decided to stay until dawn out of obligation to alert Silhouette when she returned from patrol that she no longer needed to host him. Then, in what he was sensing as a pattern with disappointment at himself, he dozed off in the bed waiting for her and woke to the noise of her climbing into the room feet first from the fire escape window. She stiffly asked for an hour to shower before speaking with him.

He sensed that she had been unsuccessful in whomever she had been searching for. He spent the hour debating if it would restore her hesitation to take him on patrols. He didn't get the chance to ask. She returned with Gretchen in a nightgown, who passed him a letter. He read it in the increasing light of dawn as it explained to whomever it may concern that he had been too ill to contact work about his absence and to excuse him. She had signed it 'Dr. Gretchen Zandt'. After enduring a series of questions by Gretchen about symptoms, he found himself a few hours later back at the brasserie factory.

A call to the phone number attached had been met with Gretchen's voice, and Walter had stood in front of his supervisor awkwardly as Gretchen described over the phone finding him disoriented and treating him overnight in her clinic. He had received the confusing admonishment to take care of his health from the man and then told to get back to work. He wasn't sure how to interpret the cover, but he told himself that at least he would not need to rely on them any further than he already had.

Chapter End Notes

Ursula "I gave him soup. What else would he need?" versus Gretchen "Has he drank water? Taken medicine? Do you know his name?" versus Walter "This bed smells like lesbians. Let me sleep."

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

It's incomplete from my original plan, but I have decided it is better to post it finished in its incompleteness than never post the rest.

CW: f-slur used

He had assumed that visiting in the apartment would remain a single occurrence. However, he was invited back.

The Friday night dinners were Gretchen's idea. Silhouette passed the invitation with self-consciousness onto Rorschach. She seemed as unsure as Walter felt about the invitation but shrugged. "Would make Gretchen happy if you came." Walter spent the few days following debating the appropriate answer. On Thursday night Silhouette asked again, and when he didn't have an answer yet, she shook her head at him. "Come. She thinks you are too skinny. If she mothers you too much, you don't have to come again."

If he accepted at Silhouette's insistence... he could not sort through whether a dinner with her and her— he tried to think of a term besides lover— her person was owed in some way. Since he had been cared for by them, did he need to return for dinner? Was staying not the payment for being cared for overnight when Silhouette had threatened punishment if he left? He hoped to God not, but did *he* need to invite *them* to his apartment if he went to theirs a second time?

He eventually decided with irritation that, no, he didn't need to invite them to his apartment even if he went to theirs. It was their request he should come and didn't express any bargaining in the deal. Charlton Home didn't mention the proper hospitality for the situation anyway, so it must not be important. He would go only because Silhouette wanted him to go, and if it was unpleasant as he expected it would be, he had an excuse not to return. He could keep the connection with Silhouette professional, and she could have whoever she wanted in her apartment without the business being any of his.

After work on Friday, he washed himself in his sink with soap and a towel, put on his nicest clothing, and walked the three miles to the apartment with a steeled expression. Gretchen answered with dough crusting her knuckles and an overjoyed smile. The resistance against her depravity wavered.

He sat at the kitchen table awkwardly and watched her continue to knead two large balls of dough against the counter top. Ursula, whom he was relying on as a social buffer, was reportedly in a neighboring butcher shop. Gretchen explained brightly that her wife was very good at haggling with the Russian Jewish women over brisket. He realized that she must have sensed his nervousness because she hummed to herself when chopping vegetables with the

dough rising. Walter focused on the contents of the room rather than watch her in case she tried to talk to him.

When Ursula entered with two paper bags, she noticed at his stilted uncertainty and grinned with amusement. Then she set the meat on the kitchen counter and kissed Gretchen's neck, and Walter studied the cabinets until they were separated by a foot.

Ursula snorted a laugh at him, and he glared. "You act like a little kid when parents kiss."

There was a reply half-formed that he did not complete. He substituted, "You invited me."

"Gretchen did. I only deliver brisket." A smile towards Gretchen who rolled her eyes. Then the focus was back on him. "Have trouble finding the place?"

He narrowed his eyes at her joke, and she smiled. She seemed content having him in her house, he sensed, which Walter attempted to see the justification of. For someone who seemed to begrudge caring for him and only extended the invitation on her lover- partner's behalf, her body language was relaxed.

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"You know, your mask is very impressive. Have you ever considered working as a tailor?" Gretchen started conversationally as Ursula worked through the newspaper stack on the other side of the room after dinner. The brisket, despite Walter never having it before and the slight suspicion of eating ethical foods as a whole, thought it was good. His stomach felt settled in a way that was rare since leaving Charleston Home and he had found it easier to tolerate Silhouette and her- person with the full stomach.

The compliment caught him off-guard to the extent he didn't realize that she was serious, possibly similar to Silhouette's jabs though Walter had noticed that their personalities were different. Gretchen's seemed softer. She looked up expectantly at him after asking about him becoming a tailor, and it was disconnected from his reality enough to be an insult.

"Like a faggot?"

Ursula's head snapped up from the living room and glared at him stone-hard. Gretchen smoothed her features into neutrality. "Just a thought. In case you want a change from the factory. The uniform is impressive."

Ursula continued glaring, waiting, until he reluctantly met her eyes. She narrowed them. *Apologize.* Or possibly, *Don't say that in my house again.*

He glanced away and swallowed his pride enough to give an honest answer. "I don't have the background for most jobs."

Gretchen replied easily, "I have connections. That is, if you are interested."

He tried to imagine leaving the factory with its low wages and long hours. He had considered leaving in times of frustration, but it was never feasible. What would he do for food or rent payments if he left?

“I’ll think about it,” he said neutrally back.

Gretchen nodded. “Let me know. I think you would be very good at it. Maybe happier.”

He wasn’t sure. Sometimes he wondered how he found himself having more-than-weekly dinners at Silhouette’s apartment, Gretchen cooking them meals and giving him leftovers for the weekdays. Why he slept better at night. Why he felt more focused and calm. How working in the factory wasn’t as hard with someone waiting outside after the shift had ended.

Three weeks ago, Ursula began waiting for him outside. It was not meant as soft-heartedness. She was focused on cutting off any gaps incoming human traffickers would fill in the vacancies she left and had decided that if he was eating her food on her wife’s check he could help her at the apartment instead of waiting until night and wasting her time.

Still, her standing against the building across the street, one of Gretchen’s woolen parkas on with her black trousers and the quiet expectation of her face as he emerged, felt fulfilling in a faint way. One of his coworkers mocked him for having his mother waiting for him like a child, and in some cruel irony, over a decade too late, it was true. Walter emerged every workday for the next three years to find a woman waiting for him when he came home.

Ursula set a stack of papers down, similar to the ones she had when he was ill, and looked at him expectantly. He wasn’t excited because there was no reason to be excited. It was work, and she had said she would permit him to patrol with her. If she was lifting her eyebrows as he sat down next to her at the kitchen table, it was not because he was excited and trying to restrain it but because she was a pain in the ass.

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When Walter was nine, his mother backhanded him hard enough to break his nose. The structure throbbed, pain radiating across and stretching the pain backwards into his head like a hot iron poker.

They had both frozen. Walter’s hand hovered in front of it, afraid to touch the wrongness in case the touch made it worse or confirmed the brokenness. His mother’s eyes, wide, watched blood drip onto his shirt and the kitchen linoleum.

It was her shock that prompted him to recover first. He wasn’t sure what part of the scene prompted him, why he was trying to reassure her, but with tears welling up, he said stubbornly, “That didn’t hurt.”

It was enough to snap his mother back into a more reliable, recognizable form. She swept out of the house in the furs bought by an older client and shouted a demand that he do something about the nose and stop bleeding on the floor. It was after she left that Walter let himself cry from being struck and then the pain while examining his face in the bathroom mirror, tugging his nose in starts back into place. Blood and tears and a stain that wouldn’t come out of the shirt, so he lost one more shirt that he couldn’t afford to lose.

In his dilapidated apartment with greased bedsheets and dead cockroaches in the corners, Walter allowed himself to look forward to finishing work tomorrow and having dinner at

Ursula's apartment with its clean, wooden floors and Gretchen's defense of him against Ursula's critiques that never felt harsh.

He could still feel the pressure of Gretchen's sudden hug and her hand brushing against his hair as he left the house earlier. He couldn't bring himself to regret snapping at her for it, even with Ursula's instant reprimand for his rudeness. But the warmth of it, the suddenness of it, made him feel calm in a way he couldn't attribute to perversion despite his self-scrutiny.

You've never been hugged before.

The realization hit him unexpectedly. Had he really never been hugged before? He searched his memory of living at Charlton's and the priests' rare pats on his back or shoulders. Did that count? He knew it didn't. He hesitated on the outside of his memories before seven years old. If there was a vague memory of toddlerhood—the most likely time for there to have been any compassion towards him—it would be corrupted quickly by his mother's later actions.

Alone in his bed, he let himself run his hand against his side through the tank top and then rested it on the top of his head. The touch filled an aching like hunger. It was embarrassing. He felt stupid.

He closed his eyes and pretended the hand nestled in his hair was Gretchen's, setting it on his head silently happy to see him. Or Ursula's, rustling his hair back and forth and giving him a sarcastic grin with the tone genuine when she told him what a good job he had done. He let the hand rest against his head and, without meaning to, fell asleep with it there.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

CWs: brief transmisogynistic language, discussion on terminal illness, details of Kitty Genovese's death

The cicadas-- he hadn't asked what the noise was but didn't begrudge the information in the chatter of his coworkers-- were obstructive during patrol, but Central Park was Silhouette's territory on nights she wasn't investigating. He complained about sitting for the last hour of patrol, but the coffee that she had handed him had milk and chocolate in it. He silently sipped it, sweet and barely tasting of caffeine, and savored the heat radiating through his gloves while complaining about wasted time.

The sky was entering the phase of showing orange and pink after the muted gray of early morning. The early light was diluted through the trees. Silhouette had toasted their coffees after buying them like cheap beers, but it was... pleasant not to be moving. To sit on a bench, sore and eyes burning from exhaustion, and have Silhouette next to him.

Crackling laughter of the transgender whores walking down a parallel path interrupted his quiet contentment, and Silhouette slapped her back knuckles against his chest before he had even shifted in annoyance. "Leave them alone. Haven't done anything wrong."

"Whores."

The side glance toward him that she gave whenever he set prostitutes amongst the other evils for scorn. She returned to tilting her head and studying the trees. "Teenage girls going home, Rorschach."

"Prostitutes."

Silhouette exhaled. She was unsatisfied, and it radiated off of her. "Why be a hero, Rorschach, and save only a certain few?"

Rorschach frowned at the city street from behind his mask. They never talked about their reasoning; hers was well known enough, but he thought sometimes about his in a way that bothered him.

"Only certain few deserve saving. Over thirty people watched Kitty Genovese die. Wanted to do something, so became a mask."

He could see the annoyance fade from her. She tilted her head slightly, thoughtful. "Except she was a lesbian. Did you know that?"

Rorschach hit a mental wall. He stepped back to process it: the young woman in his imagination, based on the picture of her in the newspaper, calling for help was someone like Ursula. No, not Ursula but like Gretchen.

“The friend she was visiting, a gay man, worried he wouldn’t be able to stop the murderer and be killed himself. Neighbors, though. Can’t ask everyone why they didn’t help, but some knew him and her. Sexuality could have been a factor for not helping.”

Rorschach wasn’t sure what to do with the figure of the gay man in his imagination. They were friends, so he would have shouted for her, screamed at the man to stop from his window, held back by the feeling of helplessness. Not apathetic. Empathetic. Crying for someone to help. Just weak. Only flaw was weakness and fear.

The neighbors still stand passive. Now they had a reason for their apathy. They possibly thought the assault was deserved.

Rorschach studied his mental landscape of the incident. A lesbian woman visiting her friend, a gay man, when she was attacked. Nice, lower middle class neighborhood. Friend screamed for her. Neighbors watched. No one helped. Murderer returned. End scene, except no one mentioned who she was and why. No sympathy for lesbian victim but plenty for young woman. Can’t be both in the media.

Gretchen’s warmth radiating outward as she set the bowl of broth down and how when he first visited voluntarily their apartment he was embarrassed of her neighbors’ silent judgements at his presence. They could wish for Gretchen to be hurt because she loved Ursula.

While Rorschach didn’t comment on it, the women weren’t... what he thought of lesbians as. Or sexual women. They were gentler. Kinder to each other.

Rorschach hadn’t bothered arguing his thoughts on ‘LGBT people’ as Gretchen called them or ‘gays’ as Silhouette did. He felt that he was wrong for trying to make the two women exceptions to his rules, but they were different. He couldn’t fully explain to himself why, but Ursula felt different.

Rorschach said quietly, “I didn’t know that.”

Silhouette scrutinized him. He glanced away, at the fall leaves layered together on the sidewalk. She commented, “Gays, Jews, children: the people who aren’t treated like people.”

The girls were at the sidewalk on the other side of the park, waving goodbye and calling out to each other. He wondered how often they met together to patrol the streets for clients. It was safer than entering the night alone, and he instantly thought of his mother alone being made to drink pipe cleaner. Silhouette and himself.

Silhouette watched him. Then she relaxed against the bench. “Gretchen likes you.” She added, “I do too. If outfit and name were not picked, you would be Silhouette number two.”

The meaning knocked him off-guard. “I would be your successor?”

“You are my successor,” she said like it was obvious, “but you had a name before I knew you. Hollis’ apprentice is Night Owl Junior because he didn’t have a costume or name.”

Walter felt odd with Silhouette calling him her successor. He was a Minuteman’s successor. His eight year old self would be ecstatic. At twenty-one, he felt lost and heavy.

Silhouette’s lips were tilted in amusement at his mask’s shifting. “No other person I help.” Her smile faded. “But I worry about you alone. I have Gretchen but not sure if you have anyone.”

It was a clear question. Rorschach felt comfortable enough around her to share some information. “I don’t have... a person except for you.”

“No girlfriend or close friend?”

“No.” Even the idea of having a girlfriend- He had imagined himself with a wife as a child as a teenager, but she was always faceless. He couldn’t name exactly what he would do with her except have her in the house for the sake of normalcy. Now it seemed nonsensical. Asking if he had a girlfriend felt akin to asking if he had a miniature poodle.

“Intentional.”

Silhouette remained silent. “Need someone. A partner.”

“Have you,” he pointed out. Then glanced over to see the unhappy tug of her lips.

“I’m old. Fifty.” The grim amusement. “Never supposed to live to fifty.”

The air was beginning to lose some of its chill. Birds were quieting their morning calls, or the calls were simply being drowned out by the city. The amount of people on the sidewalk had picked up, and Rorschach felt the increasing urge to leave less they were approached beyond the looks given by people passing by.

Silhouette sighed. “Ror, I have bad news.” It sounded disconnected, larger than the age comment but brought on by it. The possible reason for the morning break and coffee at Central Park.

He turned to where she sat, and she looked back at him. The sunlight was in her black hair. The air felt stagnant with a slow anxiousness building in his chest. A taxi honked angrily.

“I have cancer.”

He heard nothing. He heard static. He felt the wash of anger. He wished the world would go quiet. He wished people would stop passing by him. He wished he could run away and escape this. He wished he could move. He wished she would stop gauging his reaction, and when she turned away, he wished she hadn’t.

“It’s lung cancer, by the way. You were right about smoking.” She sounded marginally amused. It was an attempt at humor.

He wanted to scream.

“Ror, hey.”

He stepped out of himself and watched from a distance as his head curled onto his knees on the bench. Tasted the salt of his tears and the night’s sweat against the latex and his mouth, and Silhouette rubbed his back and shushed him gently. Pulling his head to her chest and looping the jacket across his back like she could protect him from this.

He couldn’t lose her. He couldn’t. Fifty wasn’t old, was it? How long could she live with cancer? How long had she known? She stopped smoking two weeks ago.

“How long?” he managed.

“Doctors don’t know.” The circle of her hand against his back, and the tone didn’t hold judgement at his breakdown. He wished it would. He wished she would make him stop crying. “Looked like pinpricks, on x-ray. Worried it would spread.”

“Does Gretchen know?”

“Yes. She made me go when coughing became worse.” Her dryness filled with humor. She stood and rested her hand on his head. She would be running her fingers through his hair if she could. “Let’s go home. Gretchen is making hot cakes. Can talk in front of psychologist.”

Rorschach stood and followed with his face shielded in the latex. The mask was good at shielding his face. There was nothing else to do but continue following behind her.

Chapter 6

Walter was nervous to meet Nite Owl and wished he could wear the mask to protect himself. He thought that he was doing a decent job at hiding the anxiety until Ursula knocked the back of her fingers against his shoulder. "Calm down."

"I am calm." He relaxed his shoulders to show how calm he was.

She gave him an unconvinced look. He glanced back around the coffee shop to check for threats as an excuse.

She returned to her silent watch of the street, and he felt the steady anticipation increase before he realized it was caused by her body language. Three years of partnership and he mirrored what she was feeling by her body language.

"Thought he is an acquaintance."

She seemed momentarily confused before catching his meaning. She returned to her watch. "He is, but not the only mask in the city." Her foot had picked up a controlled bounce. "Comedian may invite himself. Don't want him meeting you."

Walter still looked forward to eventually meeting the Comedian. All of her derogatory talk of him hadn't convinced him away from his childhood vision of the man. Still, he knew that between Silhouette and the Comedian, one would start a fight. He didn't want to find out which of the two were faster in drawing a gun. Better to meet the Comedian on his own.

In the meantime, Night Owl wanted to meet her successor and, according to Ursula, was considering whether to introduce his own apprentice to them. Walter thought it seemed strange to arrange a partnership through mentors, and Ursula had shown her own hesitation. She said that they had remained in touch after she was voted out of the group. Beyond Mason's other motives, it was a meeting of old friends and Walter's opportunity to see Night Owl in person. Get a sense the man that Walter had imagined breaking down his childhood door to take him as an apprentice. Silhouette taking him under her wing would have surprised his child self, but he didn't regret the association. He would never tell her that though.

"There he is," Silhouette said warmly before standing. A thin man with graying temples beamed as he entered and navigated through the clusters of tables to them. Walter couldn't help some feeling of bewilderment as they greeted each other. The man couldn't be more than one-twenty at best. Walter tried to search the man's face for any resemblance to Nite Owl without a prominent feature to base the identity on. Then the man's attention was on him, and Walter self-consciously remembered that he needed to rise as well and shake his hand. As Walter rubbed his hand as the two former heroes talked, he decided looking inconspicuous had advantages.

Walter had expected the conversation to focus a large extent on him, but it didn't. Once the former Nite Owl, whom Silhouette called Mason while he called her Ursula, sat down, he did not give Walter a second glance until Silhouette steered the conversation back towards

apprentices. The expression Mason had when looking at Silhouette was similar to the ones that Gretchen would give her, and Walter grew more uncomfortable and irritated the longer the conversation continued.

He didn't know how to phrase the observation tactfully to Silhouette afterwards, so he didn't. "He is in love with you."

It wasn't as if he questioned Silhouette's fidelity. Gretchen didn't need him to defend her. But the situation was disquietening for her to have allowed Mason's one-sided infatuation.

"He is," she agreed, and he knew from the tone that the fact of his feelings meant nothing to her. He felt comforted by it for Gretchen's sake.

She could work with someone who did not full understand her. She seemed hopeful that the situation would apply to the Nite Owl's apprentice and him.

Chapter 7

“I like Mason and trust him. You need a partner, Rorsch, or you will become crazy. I work by myself. I’m fine. Have Gretchen at home. You don’t have even a cat. You need a partner.”

Rorschach gave her a dirty look, one that he knew she could feel through the mask. She was putting a lighter to the cigarette and ignored him. She had given up quitting. Walter had mixed feelings about the decision that he purposely didn’t think about. She blew the smoke with the cigarette clutched between her fingers. “Hollis boy, Glasses, seems sane. Who knows though.”

She was silent, and Rorschach rolled his eyes at her dramatics. He didn’t need a partner. Not playing into the cliché of a sidekick, but he was content with her as a mentor. With the lessons learned under Silhouette, Gretchen’s casual lessons in psychology, and access to their textbooks and notes. He didn’t want to be dragged down by a stranger in ill-fitting tights and five years younger than himself. If Silhouette died... *when* she died, he was content continuing alone.

Silhouette continued abruptly, “Mason didn’t say why Glasses took the mantle and name. Kept insisting each time was qualified. Rorschach.” She turned to look at him.

Underneath the mask, he felt that she could see his eyes too. “Two reasons people become heroes: fighting for fun. Like Comedian, Silk Spectre, Nite Owl. Any reason to fight without punishment from police. Other reason: saving themselves. Like Hooded Justice. Me. Maybe Silk Spectre in a small amount.”

She turned back to where the city’s traffic was slowing as nighttime approached. “Maybe you know. Not asking. For some, no one saved you as child. No one saved my sister or other children. No one stopped Holocaust for children. Gretchen and I ran. No longer child but... saving others is the way to save self. Pay the price for living when others did not. Become hero you needed as a child.”

She took a drag from the cigarette. “Not asking. But you are not meat-headed idiot or psychopath. I checked. Make sure Glasses is not an idiot or psychopath.” The corner of her mouth screwed up with amusement as she glanced over to him. She meant the warning though.

Walter stuffed the reflection into the back of his mind for later because his first instinct was to rail against the idea that he was trying to save himself. He was too old to be rescued from anything. Walter nodded at the rest of the advice though.

He was willing to give the younger man a chance as his partner if she asked him to try. She deserved at least that much peace of mind if him being alone was so important to her.

Chapter 8

A knock sounded from the apartment door, and Walter and Ursula both startled in their post-patrol naps. Walter sat up from the floor and looked to Ursula on the couch. Both listened tensely for any subsequent noises.

Another, harder knock then a woman's voice: "Ursula Zandt, I swear to Christ."

"Kidding me," Ursula muttered, but the amusement tilting her grin had surfaced as she pushed the blanket to the end of the couch and headed towards the door.

"Silhouette," Walter said quietly, pushing the pillow and floor padding away and looking to her. She smiled easily and tilted her head for him to come with her before thinking better of it and gesturing for him to wait where he was.

She opened the door. "Speak of the devil."

"Lovely to see you as always," the woman's voice said without affection.

Ursula still looked amused and crossed her arms. "Always knew Minutemen would crawl back to me."

A noise like a scoff. "Clearly. But no. I doubt Byron would even look at you."

"He always had bad taste."

A scoff again. "I heard you were dying, but you seem fine."

Rorschach half-flinched at the reminder. Ursula chuckled before asking, "How's your daughter?"

There was a defensiveness that suddenly appeared in the tension of her shoulders and press of her lips. Then it passed. "She's fine." The last of it faded from her shoulders, and the woman exhaled wearily. The corner of her lips tilted into a small amount of amusement. "Stubborn as sin. Fifteen and won't listen to a damn thing I say."

"What a shock," Ursula said with her eyebrows raised. "With parents like hers, I couldn't imagine less."

The amusement left the blonde woman, and she took a drag from the cigarette, watching passer-byers. Ursula didn't seem to have intended to insult her, Walter thought, but he also didn't fully understand if the women's back-and-forth insults, whether Ursula was truly unbothered or simply acting flippant to counter Spectre.

"You are early for the funeral," Ursula said with the amusement still in her voice. "Despite Mason's worrying, I am not keeling over any time soon."

“Oh, I’m not attending the funeral whenever it takes place.” She frowned and flicked the ash. “Mason was bitching over the phone about the situation, and I was in the neighborhood anyway.”

Rage flared up in his chest, but he caught himself. Ursula’s face didn’t change, but he could see the hurt. Her brows lowered at Spectre. “It’s fine. I am not attending yours either.”

Silk Spectre frowned. “It’s not as if I can help it. Schexnayder cares about image, even now.”

“It must be so hard, being you. Listening to someone you don’t love or respect.”

“We can’t all be outcasts, Zandt.”

“Not about being an outcast.” Silk Spectre was ignoring her, and Ursula glared. “Acting as a victim of your own foolishness.”

“Could say the same about you,” she replied sharply.

“No,” Ursula cut her off. “I know what I am. I know who others are. If you want to live with him, live with him, but stop pitying yourself.”

“I can’t live with him *because* of who he is!”

“Then get over him!” They were close to yelling. “He is not going to change! He would have changed at sixteen when he listened to your every word, but now he is a man killing overseas for the government.

“Stupid girl.” Ursula added, holding back a cough. “Tell Mason you said goodbye then.”

“It’s the only reason I came.” She drew herself up in the doorway. For a moment, Walter could see Silk Spectre instead of the cosmetic blonde. The women glared at each other for a last time. “You always were a magnificent bitch, Silhouette.”

Then she turned and was gone, entering the crowds and disappearing. Ursula watched and after several seconds snorted a laugh. “‘Magnificent’. Only compliment she ever gave me.”

Walter was poorly impressed by the drama. He said dryly, “I don’t think it was a compliment.”

“It was.” Ursula turned and grinned at Walter. She entered the apartment again and closed the door. “That was fun.”

Walter shook his head. He hoped he would never endure a woman’s overdramatics. “Glad you had fun.”

“You aren’t thrilled to meet the real Silk Spectre?” Ursula asked in mock surprise. She held back a laugh at Walter’s annoyance.

“I thought she was going to hit you,” he countered her amusement.

“Only verbal fights.” She dismissed the idea with a hand flick. She looked at him curiously.
“Were you going to protect me?”

“If she tried to hit you,” he answered and focused on settling back down. The nap was possibly ruined.

“Ror,” she said fondly, “very sweet. Thank you.”

He switched to studying the room because it was not sweet of him despite the red rising to his face. She should expect him to protect her. “Who were you referring to?” he asked to change the subject and to fill the gap of information.

She thought for a moment before answering, “Private.” He gave a frustrated noise, and she frowned disapproving. “Don’t growl. She deserves her privacy. You are smart enough to figure out, but unimportant except privacy.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

CWs: mention of end-stages of terminal illness

Rorschach isn't certain why Nite Owl has invited him into the living room. His voice is carrying from the kitchen about his ideas for further devices, but the words are for his own thought process. And to offer the constant ebb and flow of 'I am talking because I trust you and am not angry'. A helpful personality trait of Nite Owl is the easy transmission of mood. Happy, he talks. Angry, he is silent and stiff. Nervous, he becomes tense and phrases slower.

Rorschach glanced to the shelving (*The Last Eagle, Raptors, H is for Hawk, Owls of the World, Owls, Nightjars of the World*). He supposed that the invitation to his home is a sign of trust.

"My father was abusive towards my mother and me. I think there was always the draw of a hero appearing to stop him, but- I admired Nite Owl and sought out Hollis. After my father had died," Daniel frowned at the carpet. "No, that isn't accurate. My father started having a heart attack, but I hesitated to call until I realized that I wasn't calling on purpose."

Walter didn't comment. He was certain that Daniel could discern that he wasn't horrified at the action based on the mask's slow swirls. Somewhere in his mind he could hear Silhouette muttering about possible psychopath. He rolled his eyes at her commentary but took note.

He continued lighter, "I think I made Hollis nervous a bit, coming to his house and saying that I wanted to be his apprentice. I mean, it isn't like fighting crime is an internship. He attended my father's funeral and--I'm still not sure why exactly--decided to take me on as- I guess the next Night Owl." Daniel sat for a moment, smiling slightly to himself. "It is embarrassing, but sometimes I imagine that he is my dad."

It hit a nerve.

"Then he is your father," Rorschach growled, and Daniel blinked out of his own thoughts. "Anyone can get pregnant. Anyone can father a child. Easy. Harder work caring for a person."

Daniel seemed to hesitate in accepting it, and Rorschach pushed off the couch in frustration and started towards the basement.

"Is that how you viewed Silhouette?" He was asking out of curiosity more than empathy. Rorschach sped up down the stairs.

He felt angry at Daniel for causing him to say it out loud. He hated himself for becoming concerned enough to try to comfort him. Stupid. If Daniel told Hollis, Hollis would tell Gretchen, who would worry more. Daniel would tell Hollis, not even about his own problem, but Rorschach's.

At least I didn't say anything about Mom, Walter thought in marginal relief, but it was implied in the conversation. What was Gretchen's phrase? Chosen family.

Rorschach wouldn't have said anything, there wouldn't be anything to give empathy towards, if he had not experienced something similar. If he hadn't rejected his faceless father and his mother. If there wasn't something to cling to in Ursula and Gretchen. Their apartment above the butcher shop.

He experienced the flashbulb memory of the medical examiner after he had been taken from his mother, when he was still trying to protect her, asking how frequently she beat him. He had said that she didn't.

Stupid.

He ached, actively and painfully, for Ursula. He missed her like a broken arm. Bone cracked and pushed out of skin. Splintered. It hurt. It hurt so badly, so often. He was so angry at himself for all of the moments that she had given him a disappointment look.

He punched a brick wall, and as much as it hurt, it felt better to have the physical pain match the emotional.

Stupid Daniel. Complaining about his idolization of Nite Owl as if the attachment was a flaw.

He rested the injured knuckles against the wall.

Appear.

He waited, but no one came. He checked the surrounding area and continued walking again.

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He didn't have beers with Hollis and Daniel despite their urging. He did not reveal his identity to Daniel. He showered in the morning and worked as a tailor, came home and slept, and then patrolled. On bad days, he searched alone, either opportunistically or on a case he had picked up. On manageable days, he met Daniel in the basement, and they took the ship around the city for a patrol. He wasn't cold, but he was only sometimes present.

He visited Gretchen in the morning on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On the weekends, he stayed in the house with her and told himself that he was caring for her while she told herself similarly.

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During the first weeks of Charlton Home, he kept waiting for his mother to visit him. At first, it was hopeful. Then he dreaded her arriving to ruin the peace he had created. The thought

that she would appear at some point lingered in his mind. Appeared at night when he couldn't sleep. Then the therapist of the home sat him down and told him delicately that her body had been found in an alley with Drano in her stomach. Then the wait was over, and he knew she wasn't in the city anymore. But he kept seeing her in the hookers and the dog carcasses in the street.

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On the last night they had together in her home, before the hospital, before she lost conscious amongst the painkillers, she said, "Walter, come here."

Her breathing had become more labored, but the steel in her eyes was still there. She was still Silhouette. Gretchen closed the bedroom door, and Walter followed the sound of her leaving for a moment. They had not talked about the cancer between them. Silhouette only spoke about the future in terms of advice. Remember to pay attention to your weight distribution, Rorsch. Don't become trapped in your mindset, or they will surprise you. Prepare for the man in the crowd with the gun.

Now the cancer had set itself as a third party, making her struggle in a fight. She had quit two months ago at his urging. They had fought. The fight lingered in Walter's mind. He did not want her to die in front of him. He did not want to see her like this, but he could not leave her. She had not left him when he struggled. She was waiting sternly for him, so he set down his mask and hat on the dresser. The trenchcoat hung over him, but she had insisted to get one looser. Besides, she had said, you will grow into it.

He sat with his back to her on the bed. Even propped up with pillows, she sat lower than him. She had become weak.

"I said to come here, not turn your back to me."

He stiffened but complied in turning to face her on the bed. She reached out, gripped the front of his shirt, and pulled him towards her. He instinctually gripped the wrist before remembering who it was. He made himself relax in her hold, and she moved the grip to press her hand against his chest. "Listen to me. I don't know what you are carrying. I don't know how long you have carried it for."

He felt his eyes start to burn. He held onto her wrist and stared at the four pillows set behind her. Lungs filled with tumors. Ursula dead in a few weeks' time.

"I had raised concerns for years. I have tried to fix what was broken inside. I have not asked what happened before I met you, but I don't need to know. If you have not said, knowing will not help. But, you need to know that, obviously, I love you very much."

He tucked his head. The tears were hot and felt like they burned landing on his legs and bedsheets. He kept hold of her wrist to tell himself she was still there.

"Do you hear me, Walter?" She moved her hand to touch the back of his neck. "Look at me."

He lifted his head and met her coal gray eyes. They studied his steadily. "You are a good man, Walter. You are going to become a wonderful hero. No matter how difficult it feels and how unyielding, do not compromise yourself."

He shifted forward and hugged her. After a second, she tightened her grip and hugged him back. Her hair smelled like soap and Gretchen's rose perfume. Her breath smelled like soup and blood. "It's not fair," he whispered.

She stroked the back of his head. "It isn't." He could hear her own sorrow reflected back. "It isn't."

Chapter 10

Daniel Dreiburg was visiting from Harvard University for spring break, he said. As a form of learning about each other, he had invited Rorschach to his brownstone after he finished patrol. He had said that he was making a suit during classes and that by the time he graduated next year, it would be finished. Walter felt himself unable to be impressed and only contributed information on the city's current crime rings.

"Hollis told me that Silhouette passed away in February," Daniel said. He was holding a beer and trying to sound sympathetic enough to be polite. It was another attempt at a conversation topic.

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Silhouette had held him when she was in pain but coherent in the hospital. She had asked Gretchen to give the two of them privacy for the night and motioned for him to lie next to her in bed. She wrapped an arm around him, set a hand in his hair, and pressed her forehead against his. They spent time listening to each other's breathing in the dark- hers rough and wheezing and his steady when he did not feel choked up.

It was how he imagined normal parents held their children when they cried. She had become his parent in a way that cut through his daydreams of a father and his mother's abuse. "Don't leave," whispered Walter.

"Sorry." Her fingertips rubbed his cheek. "It hurts me too. I don't want to."

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Rorschach nodded in affirmation. She had died four months ago, and it was too long and too short. Her black boots were still resting next to the front door because neither Gretchen nor Walter felt that they could move them. They were too heavy, and the tread was worn in the heels where she scuffed them sliding down roofs. If they picked them up, they would have to put them somewhere else, and they didn't know where. They should have just buried them with her.

"Hollis misses her too," Daniel offered.

Rorschach did not have room for grief beyond his own and sometimes Gretchen's. The first Night Owl's persistent victimhood for Ursula not loving him back was not a burden Walter cared about. "Mason loved what he thought she was."

"Really. Mason knew her since the 1940s. What was she, if he is wrong?" the nineteen year old said defensively.

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“Hollis always thought I was a martyr.” Her rough, sad voice in the dark above his head. He had shifted to rest his head underneath her chin, and she had wrapped her arms around him. Her hand was rubbing the scars along his back. “He thought saving children was an option. Could be chosen or quit. That I wasn’t selfish saving myself each night and losing Blanche each morning.”

Walter did not have to say anything. Her words about saving yourself by saving others had been confirmed to him.

“God, Walter,” she said suddenly with emotion. “You would have loved her. She was such an innocent kid. She thought the guards were protecting us.”, and her voice broke in a way that cut forty years away from the twelve year old’s murder into something happening as she discovered her sister dying on a table.

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“She was grieving,” Walter answered from behind the mask. “She found her younger sister being dissected alive.”

He was tired of babysitting the boy, even if he was smart. He was tired and wanted to be alone, but Ursula told him not to. The other part, however, was that Walter wanted him to understand. “Mason never understood. She was always grieving.”

Daniel was slow in responding, and Walter made himself wait instead of leaving in frustration at the child. Ursula’s hand ruffling his hair under the mask for his patience. He was doing well.

Daniel answered, “Sorry. I- yeah. I keep forgetting four months isn’t long enough to grieve.”

Walter closed his eyes under the mask. The pattern was likely still. He doubted he would stop missing her though the death was less violent. “Fine. Don’t have room for others’ sadness.”

There was not a way to make him understand him or explain what she meant to him. How he was starting to see what he meant to her, but it was too late.

“Daniel,” he didn’t use his Rorschach voice. Daniel looked to him and waited. “Appreciate Mason while your mentor is here.”

Daniel’s face softened. “Yeah. I will.” The concern appeared again in his face after a while. It always seemed to appear in his face when they met during Daniel’s school breaks. “The invitation to come with me on Saturdays is still open, you know. We can talk and have beers. Hollis has some really great stories to tell.”

Walter nodded. The sun was starting to rise again. Gretchen would be starting breakfast by now. “Don’t have room for more people.”

“Mason’s house isn’t that small,” the boy replied with amusement. Already, Daniel was leaving behind his sadness, Walter thought. Not forgetting it but uncomfortable. He made him uncomfortable.

Rorschach put the fedora on. “Leaving now. Will meet again tomorrow.”

“Yeah, okay. Goodbye!” Daniel called. Rorschach was already descending the stairs.

Teenager. Young, foolishly immature teenager, he imagined telling Ursula and how she would grin. *You better hold his hand then, Rorsch.* Or how she would shrug. *At least you tried.* But that didn't sound like her. She always was trying to push him forward. Never give up so easily on other people. *After all, I didn't give up on you.*

He was out of patience though. There wasn't enough room for another person.

Chapter 11

Gretchen was sixty but looked forty. The blonde hair had become highlighted by gray strands and her eyes were more lined, but next to the window in the twilight before dark, she had aged with dignity.

She smiled at Walter's not-quite-present stare in her direction. He was wondering how Ursula would have looked, if her hair would have been comical gray or if she would have looked grizzled. Gretchen could see the distant musing, and it was rewarding to see him comfortable enough to get lost in thought. See the difference between the paranoid, irritable twenty year old and the calmer, more trusting twenty-five year old.

"Have you eaten dinner?" she asked without prodding.

She could make him eat, had made him the rare times he had pushed himself beyond what was healthy. She knew by taking on a commanding tone he thought of Ursula badgering him - the two of them arguing him her kitchen like water and oil surfaced in her mind. She had no reason to hassle him into eating. As long as he ate at all and continued visiting his three times a week, she was content.

"Ate lunch." Still distracted.

"If you stop by in the morning, I will make breakfast."

The hard judgement in his face at the suggestion and then it faded into something like pain and another part like gratitude. He nodded.

She smiled and sat down with her dinner at the kitchen table. He watched her face before looking out onto the street. "What case has you so busy?"

The tension lined his eyes. Anger surfacing from his nighttime occupation. "Six year old girl was kidnapped for ransom. Perpetrator mistook family as wealthy. Been three days."

Her appetite disappeared. She knew what that meant. "You don't have leads." He didn't respond, which was the confirmation. "You've tried all of Ursula's spots?"

"Found everything but," Rorschach growled. It tapered off into Walter's less affected, more weary voice. "Have been busy with scum while searching. I will try another location tonight."

Gretchen nodded. *If she was still alive*, she thought of saying, but it was a callous warning. God forbid she wasn't alive, but Ursula had known how it was sometimes. Unpredictable--how long someone would keep the kids alive. What condition they would be in.

Instead she said, "I believe in you.", which was not the right answer, but it was close. It was close enough for him to rise and pulled the mask on as he exited from the fire escape in the bedroom.

Gretchen jolted awake and sat up in bed. Walter as Rorschach stood in the door. She questioned for a moment if he was calling for his mentor in disassociation or if he thought she was her.

“She was right. About growing up.” His voice was strained, caught between the vigilante’s rumble and Walter’s quiet Brooklyn accent.

She turned on the bedside lamp. He was fully in the costume, but he was shaking. His fists were clenched by his side

“Walter?” She slipped from bed in her nightgown and approached with a small amount of caution, but he did not move away from her. She took off his hat and scarf, but she stopped at his latex mask. “Can I take off the mask?”

He shook his head. His posture was stiff like he was restraining himself or minimizing movement to lessen pain.

“Walter, sit down with me for a minute.” She pulled him to sit on the floor where they had been standing. She shifted to sit facing him. “What happened?”

The mask was shifting into different patterns, and Gretchen wished the Rorschach cards were a language. That whatever had happened could be conveyed silently through shifting ink because Walter was melting down into nonverbal, and she needed to find out how to help.

“Are you able to nod and shake your head?”

His fists clenched tighter, but he nodded stiffly.

“You mentioned investigating the Blair Roch kidnapping last night. Does this relate to it?”

The barely perceptible head tilt forward for a nod.

She took in the situation and what Ursula had likely said about child cases and growing up. “You found her dead or dying.”

A movement that may have been him leaning his head forwards to breath or him trying not to burst apart.

“Walter, I know it is the last thing you want to do, Ursula was the same, but you have to talk about it. It is going to sicken you if you cannot get it out.”

He clenched his fists again and remained silent.

Gretchen returned to the questions. “Was she alive?”

Strong head shake.

“Okay,” she said to show she heard him. There was relief that at least he had not watched her died. “Did you find who killed her?”

Strong head nod.

She felt the answer but asked. “Did you kill him?”

The head nod.

“Okay.” She knew Ursula killed pedophiles. Walter taking up the practice was something Gretchen felt neither of them would have wanted, but it was not surprising. Given who Ursula was and given who Walter is, there was a low chance of survival for the types of people in Brooklyn and the Lower East Side.

She felt the general reassurances from about how it wasn’t his fault, he tried, and he would grow stronger from the experience, but it was bullshit to how he felt. She remembered Ursula sitting silently at the kitchen table when a case had gone wrong. How the tape recorder and cassettes helped her talk without talking to anyone. She did not know what Walter needed.

She tried to think what Ursula would have done but knew Ursula would have been with him on the case. Then it would have been the two of them sitting silently in the kitchen after murdering someone.

“Walter,” she said quietly. “Please say something.”

The mask started shifting around the blood on it, rolling over on itself. His hands raised enough to push it up to his nose. His teeth were clenched between the lines of tears. “I burned him.”

She caught the meaning. “Did you torture him?” Torture was beyond all the miscellaneous lines in the sand that Ursula had drawn for herself. Even she had grown angry enough to toe it, though there was regret afterwards.

He shook his head. His teeth clenched again. He was gripping the rolled edges of the mask. “She was a child.”

Gretchen sat with him in silence.

“He killed her and fed her to his dogs.”

“So you burned him.”

“Set house on fire. Left him in handcuffs with a saw.”

She could see the balance in his mind. Either he cut himself apart like he had cut the girl, knowing Rorschach was waiting for him outside the house, or he burned alive. His voice was broken into a whispered growl, but she could not take the pain from him. Could not set it into some arrangement of events that erased what had occurred in the house.

“You will be wanted by the police now.”

“Doesn’t matter. Useless anyway. Humanity useless. Heavens are empty.”

“You know that’s not true,” she said quietly.

His grip on the mask gradually tightened, and he pulled it off. He pressed his fists against the wooden floor and grinded them. Gretchen raised a hand to stop him from hurting himself but sensed he would recoil entirely. Ursula was the only one who could connect with him, and Gretchen felt herself a tolerable at best substitute.

“Ursula failed often.”

The grinding against the floor paused. “She didn’t.”

“First starting out? No mentor or other Minutemen willing to help her? Often. In the morning, I would know she had not found who she was looking for or that the child was dead because she would be sitting in the kitchen. I would get home from work, and she would be in the kitchen. Hours later, unmoved. You improve. Trying is better than not trying in fear. Compassion is better than growing cold. But you cannot hate yourself each time you fail.”

“I just don’t know why.” It was Walter’s voice returning. *“Why hurt children? How can people butcher children?”*

She sat silently without an easy answer. She was a psychologist. Yes, clinically-speaking, she knew why. Broadly, she knew why. It was easy to feed the lie that children were human and could be treated as all humans are treated in the world. She could answer that pedophiles fed the lie that children seduced them and had a high likelihood to recommit if they felt no remorse.

There was no proper answer for why people hurt children, and Walter knew it as well. It was the problem with humanity that Ursula had struggled with and the crusade that he had adopted.

“Ursula would have found her faster.”

Gretchen did not argue. They both could wish with one hand for Ursula to still be there and nothing would happen despite them.

“Ursula also would have shot him. Come.” She stood and offered him a hand up. “Let’s get the blood off of you. You can stay here today. Being alone isn’t good for your health.”

He pulled the gloves off and took the hand. “You said you left Ursula alone.”

“I did. I was stupid and scared of her grief. It was a mistake.”

Later, after he had showered and laid in bed long enough to attempt sleep before proving it fruitless, Gretchen set buttered toast in front of him. He ate without tasting, staring at the plate, but he was recovering slowly.

She stirred her coffee for the sake of a stress outlet. She gave up and set the spoon against the cup. “I’m worried that you are only going to see your failures and not your successes.”

He chewed without looking at her. He swallowed and stared at the plate. “Don’t grow from success.”

She sighed and stared out the window. The city was living without notice of the murders. Sometimes she enjoyed the city, and sometimes the largeness of everything threatened to drown her. She couldn’t help but feel that she had put a Band-aid on a puncture wound, and there was a terrifying memory there about Ursula being carried into a hospital by Nite Owl nearly unconscious from a bullet wound. A rare failure to rescue a young girl from sex traffickers who killed her in the gunfight against Ursula.

It was the hospital that had released Ursula’s identity and sexuality. It was what had nearly killed them by providing information the Liquidator used to track down the hotel. The memory of Ursula re-entering the hotel room and distant look in her eyes. Gretchen had wanted to reach out and pull her to her, find reassurance that they both were safe, but Ursula had stood by the window and looking out into the night. She needed to maintain distance after a case to process everything that had occurred.

Gretchen had felt a small amount of jealousy that Ursula and Walter had bonded over the experience of fighting crime. Now she worried that Ursula’s fears were correct. That Walter would keep the distance without a person to talk to. Nite Owl had quit. Walter had stopped reading *The Federalist*. He was strictly professional at the tailor shop. He did not date. Ursula was the only person that he had spoken to fully, but at least there had been a second person around with Nite Owl.

“You can always talk to me,” she said suddenly. She reached out and took his hand. He looked up, confused and on the edge of absconding. She squeezed his hand tighter. “I know I’m not Ursula, but you can speak to me if you need to. I love you.”

He glanced down at the tablecloth before his glance rose back to her eyes. “I know.” His expression was the same worn stone of gratitude and grief that Ursula carried around in her pocket. “I love you, as much as I can.”

She smiled softly, feeling some relief. “It’s enough. Don’t worry. It’s enough.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Last chapter. Sorry it took me so long to post what felt unfinished.

I initially wrote this during the July of 2020, when I had moved five hours from my family to work a job that I did not particularly enjoy but needed. (That's just capitalism in a nutshell though.) Then I got a job closer to home, moved in with my best friend, and using this fic as a place to vent lessened so I never posted what I had.

So, this is the last but the idea that I set out with ending it on from the beginning. I am not Jewish, but I don't believe my ending is too unrealistic within the bounds of interpretation. Still, want to make my lack of authority clear.

Thank you for reading.

In the plain whiteness at the end of the world, he is not compromising because compassion cannot be chosen. Doctor Manhattan stands in front of him, a blue figure surrounded by the white, unaffected, because the ability to connect was lost at the same moment as his fear of death.

If Walter is crying it is because all of the people in his city are gone. Gretchen is gone as well as his landlady's children, and there is nothing in the landscape but silence and Manhattan accepting the need in killing him for not being able to stop caring.

Do it. A scream and a breath. And Gretchen is setting breakfast in front of him as the sun rises and Ursula is wiping her thumb across his cheek in bed as she slowly dies and Ursula is sitting next to him as he drinks chocolate in coffee on a cold morning in Central Park and Silhouette is helping him stand when he is sick and Silhouette is saying, "Moving ink. Very nice." and he is standing in the hallway as Sylvia shouts that she should have aborted him like they all had said.

He bursts apart.

He blinks at the empty whiteness and turns back to Karnak, confused. Ursula is waiting for him in the snow, outside of work. He kept telling her not to wait for him. Expecting someone to be there, he always prepared himself for disappointment in case they weren't and then experienced the sudden, slightly dizzy relief when he spotted her. She is waiting for him after death with her hands in her trench coat and an amused smile.

He makes a noise that had been caught in his throat for over two decades and steps towards her across the frozen ground.

She smiles with a pained happiness when he hesitates in front of her. "Ror, you couldn't have waited?"

She is not disappointed, only sad the meeting did not come later in his life. Ursula sets a thumb against his cheek and wipes one tear streak, then the other, from where he had been crying in grief before Manhattan destroyed him.

She holds his face and observes the new scars and age on his features. He observes her, unchanged. It is her.

“I failed.”

She pulls him into an embrace, her hand resting on the back of his head, and he missed her. He has missed her with an overwhelming ache.

“You tried,” she tells him, and he did.

He did, and he finds it easier now to accept forgiveness for himself. He paid with his life. “What happens now?”

Some word from his Catholic upbringing puts ‘purgatory’ in his mind, but he is a murderer and she was- is Jewish. Both of these should put them in hell, he thinks. Or, separated. Divided. Yet they remain in Antarctica, and she looks at him amused. “Well, what do you think happens now?”

He frowns at her. He had forgotten had condescending she could be. “I am asking since you would know.”

“Well, it depends on what religion you are, Ror.”

“I don’t believe in God anymore,” he says, and it isn’t a bold statement. Last they had spoken, she didn’t believe in God either. Neither of them could.

“I know. That was not the question.” She is still smiling at him and holding his shoulders, and he realizes in delay that she is smiling at seeing him again rather than at his confusion. He gives her a weary look and studies the white landscape for any significant signs of their location. It is the Artic as he initially thought but without Veidt’s base or Archie.

“Are we dead?” It feels like a stupid question, but why are they together? He looks to her. “Shouldn’t you be with Gretchen? And, your sister?”

The smile becomes more recognizable again with the focus. “I wanted to collect you before you got lost. Do you want to go with me?”

“Yes.” He didn’t have to think about it. He frowned. “Where are you, after?”

She shrugged. “Jews don’t know anything with certainty about the afterlife. So far, I have been reliving memories. On holidays and Shabbat, I make challah with Blanche,” It was one of the first times Walter had heard her say the name without pain, “and show her some of my memories.” She smiled with amusement. “The appropriate ones.”

Walter felt the urge to go with her, but the hesitation to stay by himself. Or go wherever he felt he was supposed to go as someone who had been alone for so long. “I’m not Jewish,

Ursula. I don't think I can."

"But do you want to?" she asked, pressing. He remembered the dinners with Gretchen and her on Friday nights. Gretchen's inclusion of him during candle lighting and dinner even as he debated religion with her while Ursula refereed as the person who knew the least on the subject but the most in other ways. The quiet dinners with Gretchen, together, after Ursula had passed.

He nodded.

"Have you tried to repair the world through kindness and fighting for social justice?"

He felt he had skipped the kindness part. He answered so and added a bit deadpan, "Also, I am not circumcised."

She flicked his forehead. "Gross, Walter." She looked at him seriously until his small smile faded. "Have you tried to keep tikkun olam?"

He remembered her discussing the concept during one of their slower patrols. How the world had good and evil, and each adult had to push the balance towards good through individual actions. He did not tell her when she was alive, but he preferred the idea over easy forgiveness of sins or needing to do good with little room for mistake. It felt more realistic to push the world into good rather than waiting for the world to end.

"I have."

"Well," she said. "I guess... do you consider me your mother?"

The world was very quiet. What he had meant to her and what she had meant to him that they never truly named or discussed. He said quietly, "I do. You have... you and Gretchen." Something unspoken but said in other ways.

He felt the rush of emotions he had been holding back. He wanted to tell her everything. That it wasn't only because of Sylvia. On their own, they were good parents. They did not need to fit the positions based on poor competition.

He wanted to tell her about the tailor shop and Gretchen's new recipes and the annual mourning after she died. He wanted to tell her how she made him feel calmer when she was around. How he always felt safe having someone present to protect him after twenty years of having to protect himself. How he had stayed sane by thinking of her advice when cases went bad.

He settled with her embracing him.

"Good," she said from his embrace. "I have been telling Blanche that I have a red-haired son."

As he let her go she said, "Judaism is passed maternally." Her tilted smile of amusement covering genuine joy. "Since I am your mother and no one is here to dispute, mazel toz, Freckles. You are a Zandt."

She turned and stepped back to the East River, holding his hand to guide him, and Walter Zandt followed her deeper into the Lower East Side. It had been a long patrol, but Ursula was next to him again.

She smiled back at him from underneath her brimmed hat, and his heart was lightened. It was time to go home.

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