Kintsugi
by OxfordOctopus

Summary

In Asylum East, a Taylor Hebert who triggered as a consequence of Emma's Master power makes her best effort to recover, to become whole again.

It's difficult, though, when your power wants you to fall apart.

Accept it, you're pathetic.

The blanket was off before Taylor even knew she was awake, her hand scrambling for purchase as she pitched off of the side of her cot and onto the floor. Her knees skidded painfully against the concrete, the sensation muted as gorge festered in the pit of her throat, her chest going strangle-tight. A heaving sob, retch, and gasp escaped her all at once, the noise inarticulate and incomplete, but loud enough that it jarred the remainder of her sleep-heavy brain into fitful awareness.

You're simple, it's in your nature, Hebert.

She barely even recognized that she was awake when her arm impacted the door to the bathroom, a pulse of power riding the bone and then spreading out out out. She felt the entire arm, all the way up to the shoulder, fracture, cracking with the sound of shifting ice as it fell away into a wave of glass-but-not-glass. She didn’t watch it as it fell, only heard the slam of her feet as she stumbled across the bathroom floor and into the toilet, last night’s dinner coming up as just so much runny heat. Her chin chipped against the lip of the bowl, and she felt it fracture more than she heard it.

Don't you understand? You're weak, a worm, beneath me. Play. Your. Role.
Her stomach tried for a second time, flipping and twisting until nothing came up but acid, scalding her throat and the roof of her mouth. She felt the cracks spread, felt as they sought to consume her shoulder, and just barely managed to rein them in, to push it away on instinct alone. Her body screamed in frustration, her mind too. She wanted to fragment, to disappear, but whatever small part of herself that’d woken up knew better than to do that.

*Hands, grasping and touching. A smiling face, pitched into a gleeful sadism. Emma cooed, she was cornered, yet the bathroom door opened and her former friend’s focus slipped away, brief, but enough for something to change.*

Taylor hated mornings, hated sleeping. Nothing ever came easy when she slept, the memories of a fun childhood bleeding so deeply into the abuse and trauma, the fake memories-but-not-memories so often taking precedence over the ones she still had, the true and real ones. Not the ones crafted by hands that reached for her with ill-intent, not the ones whispered into her ears so frequently until they were so real, but of memories of a time before it all, before she changed for the first time.

Before she became so very simple.

She reached to flush, but whiffed on account of her dominant arm missing. She winced, felt as the connection to her power reasserted itself, a pulse of need to shape the broken bits of herself into a new whole nearly taking her, nearly consuming an already fragile balance. She managed to flush the toilet without forming a minion to do it for her, using her left instead of her right. Breathing came easier once she did, after the intent had bled out from her focus and instead had been replaced with simple being, something her power didn’t try to provide answers to.

Rising to her feet was difficult, but she managed. The sink helped provide stability when she leaned into it, letting her eyes shut for a moment to hopefully pull her back into the present wholesale, pull her back enough that she could stop thinking and start being. She tried the deep breaths Dr. Nora had taught her all those months ago, felt for the way her chest rose and fell, fleshy in ways that she wasn’t when she broke, felt as her lungs filled and deflated, felt as the panic and the nausea and the pain pain pain grew less intense, less roused and hard to ignore.

Opening her eyes, Taylor let herself sink completely back in. The lit bathroom - after the third, maybe fourth? Time she’d ended up in it without either of her arms, alone and panicking in the dark, they decided to make the bathroom light up on entry - wasn’t much to look at in terms of appeal. White tile walls, white plasticky floor, a sink with a cabinet both beneath and above it, a bland looking toilet and a shower that was recessed into the wall, separated by a semi-translucent glass door.

The mirror on the wall wasn’t flattering. She still looked like she always did, those memories or the ones she knew were real, long and gangly, a too-wide mouth, curls of black hair that nearly reached her ankles, and thin eyes that sat on heavy, bruise-like bags. The only difference this time around was her missing arm, the contents of which floated to her right, a shifting amalgam of glass drifting between vague shapes and abstract ideas, sometimes forming something close to an animal before she yanked it away, other times remaining stock-still, as though locked in that place and that place alone.

“Arm,” her voice came out as a rasp, revealing an ache that she didn’t know she had. The glass-but-not-glass complied, though unwillingly, shifting and creasing as it pulled itself away from the air and started to fit itself back together, clicking and shifting almost hypnotically. She didn’t need to actually say the word, or the intent, really, but it helped. Dr. Yamada had asked her to try it, to reinforce her demands towards her power with more than just her thoughts, things that could be so easily derailed. Apparently a similar method worked with limited success on Sveta, though never as
The arm that took shape was hers, but it was fragmented. They so often were when she forced herself back together, unwilling to be her, so eager to be something she wasn’t. The arm was fragmented, shifting and pushing against itself like ice floes, with the gaps in between defined by ragged veins of silver, forming an almost patchwork, glued-together appearance. She flexed her hand a few times, and when she didn’t cut herself on any of the edges and when her arm didn’t fall apart, she finally felt safe enough to keep it out of her sight, to let it rest at her side.

A breath she didn’t know she was holding left her, passed out from clenched teeth. Reaching out to grab hold of the mouthwash, opening the cap with the pad of her thumb, Taylor haphazardly dumped some of it into her mouth and swished, working the bitter fluid in circles around her teeth and tongue and all the other places the puke could’ve lingered, before spitting it out and pressing her free hand into a raised metal button on the counter; the faucet sputtering as it turned on and washed away the ick. She repeated the process twice for good measure, or at least until her tongue felt a little raw and her teeth came back warm, before finally closing the tap and setting the bottle back down in its corner.

Again, she lingered. Her eyes bore back at her from the mirror, drifting to look at the fragmentary nature of her arm before slipping back again. She could put today off, let herself break – they wouldn’t blame her for it, nobody ever did. They understood, right? She could just, curl up and let all the hairline breaks in her body pull apart, form wide canyons where she was supposed to be. She’d done it before, she’d done it for less, for bad memories instead of bad dreams, and she wanted to, she wanted to vanish and turn into – things instead of herself. It would be a relief to do so, to slip into the dozens of creatures her body could make, reforming at a later time, on a later day, no longer haunted by things that weren’t and would never be real.

Yet, and yet she couldn’t. She stepped out of the bathroom, tugging on the handle as she went, forcing it to set into the doorframe, a click defining the moment when both the door itself was fastened into place and when the light inside went off. Her own room was bland, but not as much as the bathroom: a half-carpet, half-concrete floor, the carpet filling up the half of her room where her bed was, with white walls framed by two windows, both of which let filtered white light in. A desk sat far off to the side, with a chair shunted beneath it, and a television sat further away from that, turned just enough so that she could see it. The news was on at the moment, though the sound had been muted.

Taylor passed over the carpet and onto the concrete, step-by-unsteady-step leading her to her desk. She leaned forward, flicked the lamp on, and caught herself grimacing.
It always hurt to look at her calendar, something she was told she needed to keep up to date, if only because it reminded her of how long she’d been in here for. The sixteenth of November, twenty-eleven would make this her eighth month as a patient in the Asylum, and for all she could say about improving - and she had, she knew that well, Dr. Nora would never let her play the improvement down - it still hurt. She’d lost eight months of her future at this point, and god knows how many years from her past.

She turned her gaze away from the calendar and, instead, towards the LED clock that she’d stuffed away against the wall. 08:43:29 AM, that wasn’t bad. It meant she didn’t get a lot of sleep last night, but it was better than waking up at five or six in the morning and having to wait hours until she could leave and go out into the main patient area. She drummed her fingers along the table, reaching out to quickly flick off the alarm she’d set for ten o’clock, before returning back to her calendar and the few pieces of schoolwork and other miscellany around it.

One of the papers on the top of the pile made her blink. KINTSUGI, it read, all bold and sharp. A list of names, hers among them, crept down the length of the page, with a note on what she’d need to bring and what was expected of her. Her fragmented hand reached out and toyed with the edge, looking for a date, which happened to be the sixteenth. A quick glance at her calendar told her, yes, she had forgotten to put it down, she’d forgotten all about it in general. Maybe that’s why she’d brought in the page? She'd been having a rough couple of days, and it’d make sense if she’d signed up for it and then decided in a moment of clarity to bring it in to ensure she knew she had to go to it.

Still, the thought of her-but-not-her, of – of the moments when the memories-but-not-memories became too much, it bothered her. It crept into her throat quickly enough that she needed to swallow it back down, to reassure herself, to stop her arm from cracking any further than it did. She
could do this, she was \textit{here} and she was \textit{herself}. That’s all that was important, right?

Reaching out, she took hold of a blue marker. Just in case, though, just because she needed this, needed to be \textit{sure}, she’d jot it down. The blue would go against the red and that was – was really problematic, but it was less problematic than things-that-weren’t-things and actions-that-weren’t-actions.

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\textbf{Sunday} & \textbf{Monday} & \textbf{Tuesday} & \textbf{Wednesday} & \textbf{Thursday} & \textbf{Friday} & \textbf{Saturday} \\
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Taylor steadied her breath, pulling her marker away from the changes she made. She’d drifted a little, doodled some, but Dr. Nora had encouraged that, it was why she did it so often. So long as she could be sure that they were her drawings and not drawings that weren’t, she was fine. Marking things down like this, making sure that she knew she made them, little \textit{brands} that she inflicted on herself and her things? They helped.

But she couldn’t be in the room any longer, not really. If she stuck around, part of her knew she’d break, that the fear, unfounded, a thread of not-logic that she didn’t like thinking about but lingered regardless, would eventually take her, make her think the world was false and too complicated to be real. Her breath came as a shudder, she pried her fingers off of the table and tugged her discarded sweater from the back of the chair, pulling it down over her head if only to hide what little she had in terms of a naked top half, and stuffed her hands, now tightly-wound fists, into her pockets.

She’d be fine. She hadn’t broken yet this morning, that was big, a triumph in a time where she had so few. That was good, that meant she was \textit{doing good}, she was a good – a \textit{good person}. She’d be fine.

\textit{She’d be fine.}
Pacing over to the door, she brushed a thumb against the intercom. There was a short delay and a hum of static before three quiet beeps went off. Three beeps was the code for her wing, the one that said they’d be down with a nurse to help bring her to the main commons area. Every wing had its own problems, though with varying intensities, and while hers wasn’t one of the more intense ones, where they stored away Jamestowners or Lab Rat victims, she did belong to the ‘caution’ wing, meaning she had certain things she couldn’t do without a chaperone. They’d assured her it was for her own safety, both mind and body, but she knew that it was also to protect the nurses and other patients.

The door clicked open after a little while, and she stepped through. A male nurse in white - Jeremy, if she wasn’t mistaken - smiled brightly at her, a clipboard clutched in one hand. He was one of the better nurses, some of the few who worked in the caution wings without breaking, without seeing things as rote or routine and being upset when that routine faltered, even when that routine faltering was a good thing.

“Good morning, Murrina.” He spoke her ‘cape’ name with a quiet sort of accent, one that reminded her of a texan accent but not quite. “No mask or glasses this morning?”

Taylor shook her head. She didn’t need her glasses anymore, not after her trigger event, and a mask was voluntary in her case. She wasn’t expected to wear it as a result of her profiling in the building. She was more or less in the same ‘stream of expectations’ that Case 53s were, with how her body often times did things without her consent, splitting and falling apart. They’d wanted her to wear it when she first came, but after the sixth or seventh time it fell away due to chunks of her body breaking apart they’d decided to simply rely on the paperwork and agree that she probably didn’t need to wear one.

“Are you excited for the Kintsugi Class?” His voice was eager, and that was what broke her. “I heard from Dr. Nora that you’d spoken a few times ab—”

Her arm, held together by sheer force of will alone, cracked. The nurse flinched, his face bunching up in concern, eyes flicking to her sleeve as it deflated and all of her-but-not-her fell, shattering against the floor. Taylor managed to spare him a whimper as she crumpled against the wall, the arm that’d supported her leaning no longer there and now seeking to rectify that. It took shape without her will, even as she scrambled to reject it, to push push push and to get it to stop.

It didn’t, and a second set of eyes told her more than enough. A fat, basketball sized hedgehog took shape out of her detritus, made up of creaking glass prisms, retaining a glossy sheen that resembled ceramics. The color bled into the translucent minion, filling in the quills with brown, the underbelly with beige, the nose with pink-black and the nails black-orange. She felt as its legs fully bore the weight of the porcupine, then when they didn’t, the construct slowly drawing up, floating until it came to rest against her shoulder. She wanted to urge it back, to push it away, but the emotions already rode her hard, and so instead her minion bunched up, lengthened ever-so-slightly until it was stretched out across both of her shoulders, forming a collar of spikes and fear.

“I’m sorry.” The words were more of a croak. Taylor felt her throat tighten, watched as the nurse recovered from his flinch, a placating smile slipping over shock and just a little bit of fear. “I – I had a bad night, I wanted to, couldn’t think, about things.”

Jeremy shook his head. “It’s okay, Murrina.” His voice was soothing, comforting. “I understand. Sophia is up and about, would you like to go and see her? I know that you two tend to feel better around each-other.”

She took in a shuddering, pained breath. “Wh – when’s the, the class?”
“It won't be until three o’clock, dear.”

Taylor bobbed her head, or as much as she could with the minion occupying her shoulders. “Yes, then – then Sophia. Maybe? If she’s okay with it.”

Jeremy nodded. “Of course. Do you need help getting there?”

She thought about it, thought about the scattered focus, about how part of her was her hedgehog and how part of her was her, how distracting it was as her mind flashed back, dwelling on Kintsugi. She thought about how the minion weighed down on her, how she could feel the tug of power, the promise that she could cover her entire body in arm-length spikes, how she was just a little more durable now, not a Brute, but also not a fragile person anymore. She thought about how if anyone threatened her, she could break more of herself off, gain more minions, spread her focus out further, break and break and break and gain more powers, more ways to defend herself.

She thought about how part of her was so needy for the chance to shatter.

Taylor nodded, too afraid to speak.

Jeremy’s smile was chipper and a little sympathetic. “Right, then, she’ll be just this way. Please follow me?”

She did.

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