

The Sum of Zero

“W-who are you?” asked a deep and horrified voice. Cipher loomed over a small and defeated man, her mask unraveled, and her face partially revealed. She had her sword to the man’s throat, and the purse he had stolen in her other hand. The sun beat down on her back, and the prying eyes of the average citizen stopped walking down the crowded city streets to stare. As she looked into the eyes of her foe, she did not see the wrath and hatred of a scoundrel, but the fear and hysteria of a coward. A man far too broken to ever be redeemed. The man’s eyes widened, “Wait, you’re-”. Cipher didn’t hesitate. In a single clean move, she slashed the man’s throat. He didn’t even get the chance to scream before he died. Blood dripped from her sword as she turned to return the purse to its rightful owner. The woman who had been frozen as she watched the resulting battle now backed up.

“Stay back!” She cried hysterically. “Who are you? I-It doesn’t matter, you can have it, alright! Just take it and spare me!”. Cipher placed the purse a few steps in front of the woman, before turning to walk away. She wiped the scarlet blood from her blade with a long and baggy sleeve. People stared, intrigued despite their fear. It’s like how people can’t take their eyes away from a natural disaster. They understand the danger it poses, and yet, it’s far too interesting to be ignored entirely. Cipher was their walking disaster, destruction in the form of a woman; and they couldn’t decide whether to applaud or throw stones.

As Cipher sheathed her sword and turned down an alleyway, a young boy ran up to her. She recognized him as the son of the woman whose purse had been stolen. “Hey, miss!” The boy called out. Cipher could see his mother rushing through the crowd trying to stop him. “My mom won’t say this because she’s scared of you, but thanks! You didn’t just get the purse back; you saved my mom! That guy might have killed her!” His words shook with fear yet rang with determination. “Who are you? Please, at least tell me your name!” Cipher’s body stiffened, keeping her back to the boy. *Who are you?* Her mind repeated that question like a broken record. *Why does everyone ask me that?* She had been faced with this problem throughout her entire life, people asking her the same question, one she’s never been able to answer.

“I am Zero, but mine is not a name you need remember,” she muttered, as she stalked back into the shadows. The boy did not give chase, did not press her for an answer, and yet, her mind wouldn’t stop racing. Every time someone asked her that question, she was reminded of her youth. It made her sick to her stomach. Cipher stumbled down the alleyway to the garbage and hurled her guts into it unceremoniously. Her empty stomach didn’t have much to throw up, however. No matter how many times she told herself she’d gotten over her past, it was never true. The shadow of the past stretches well into the future, whether you wish it to or not.

Cipher managed to pick herself up and started to walk down the alley. As she walked, she pondered the same question she had been asked so many years ago. Who are you? In a few minutes, Cipher was asked the same question three times, with the meaning different in each. The problem with the question stems farther beyond its many

interpretations, though. It is a fundamentally skewed question. It deals with human self-indulgence, and the idea that each person is unique and special. Humans like to believe that everyone has a purpose, and to know a person, is to understand their unique motivations and ideals. As if everyone is so straightforward. As if in a single sentence one could give a summary of who they are. As if it even mattered.

Cipher reached into her pocket and pulled out the coins she had pocketed from the woman's purse before returning it. Blood rubbed from her hands onto the coins, and she stared at them, disgusted with herself. She curled her fingers around the coins, clenched fist shaking. She was no better than the man she had killed. It was hard for her to even imagine how she'd fallen so far.

"Mama," her own small and naive voice rang in her head. "Everyone keeps saying I'm special, but I don't get it. Why me? Who am I?" The figure of a shadowed woman, framed by the setting sun, with sharp cheeks and kind eyes, flashed through Cipher's mind. The woman stretched out a hand, and gently stroked her cheek. Cipher reached a shaking hand to the ghostly imprint, the memory so vivid it was almost palpable.

"Do you know why I named you Cipher?" The woman asked in a soothing voice. She did not wait for a response before continuing. "Cipher can mean zero. A zero is a figure, a placeholder. Alone, it is nothing, but if it is placed after other numbers, it increases their value." The woman smiled, warmth exuding from her despite her icy words. "So to must you be, Cipher. One day, you will rule this country, and when that

day comes you must understand that you only exist to increase the value of your own people, and your own country. A ruler with nothing to rule, is no ruler at all. You must protect this place, and its people, at all costs. Lest you become truly nothing.”

A laugh escaped Cipher’s lips as she stood alone in the dark, clutching the bloodied coins that would buy her a hot meal. It seemed her mother had been right. She grabbed her hood and pulled it down over her face. The mask she had been wearing was ruined, so she took it off entirely and attached it to her belt to be fixed later. It was risky, going to the tavern without a mask, but her stomach was howling with rage, clawing at her from the inside.

She slipped down the alley, hopping over a gated fence, as she made her way over to The Alement, the most popular tavern in the capital city of Haldis. She wiped the blood from the coins as she walked through the oversized wooden doors. Just like the rest of the tavern, the door was covered in holes and torn wood. It seemed as if it might fall from its hinges if pushed hard enough. The flooring wasn’t much better. Although well swept and clean, the wear and tear of the old building was evident as soon as you looked down at the chipped and scratched stone tiles. Before Cipher’s eyes could even adjust to the horrible lighting as the door closed, the stench of liquor invaded her nostrils, and the joyous sound of music and laughter bombarded her ears. She never had understood the appeal of taverns, and she reckoned she never would.

She stalked up to the bartender, a large hulking man with various lion tattoos across his arms and neck and tossed the coins on the counter in front of him. “Just give

me whatever hot meal I can get for that much,” she muttered harshly. The barkeeper scowled, but nodded and scooped up the coins, moving to the back room. Cipher’s eyes darted about the tavern, sizing up each person, and ensuring she didn’t know any of them. For the most part, the population consisted of shady characters of various builds and threat levels. Some were huge and hulking brutes, while others were on par with toothpicks. However, the smaller hooded figures scared Cipher far more than the brutes.

After ensuring she had a plan of action in case a fight broke out, which included finding all possible escape routes, Cipher turned her attention back to the back-room doors and waited for her meal. The bartender came back out with a steaming bowl of soup moments later, and Cipher felt her mouthwatering as the smell of it wafted under her nose. She practically snatched the bowl out of the man’s hands as he offered it to her and began wolfing it down immediately. She was two or three bites in when she realized she hadn’t thanked the bartender. She swallowed her mouthful and swiftly declared, “Thanks for the meal.”. The bartender looked surprised at her uncharacteristic thanks but gave a curt nod and continued his work. She had done it reflexively, as a grown habit after being scolded time and again by her mother for her lack of manners. She realized only afterwards how strange it must have been.

She was only about halfway through her meal when the tavern doors swung open. A tall young man, with styled blond hair and chestnut eyes burst into the tavern. He was dressed more finely than anyone else in the city, Cipher imagined, and certainly leaps and bounds above what anyone in the tavern was wearing. He shoved a large man

out of his path as he walked into the tavern, grabbing the man's sheathed sword from its scabbard. The man spun around and sneered, "Hey, who do you think you-?", but stopped himself as he looked at the purple color of the young man's outfit, which already proclaimed who he was before he even got around to saying it.

"I am the crown prince!" he declared self-righteously. He held his head high, and his shoulders back. He exuded confidence and authority. He inspected the sword he'd stolen, nodding his head. "Yes, this is a fine weapon. Where did you get it? Ah, no sense asking I suppose. You certainly stole it, it's far too well crafted. Thank you for your addition to my collection."

"Bow before his majesty!" a short, stout man said from behind him, his voice far too high pitched. Even the most gnarly barbarians knew which fights they could win, and which they had no choice but to surrender. Many scowled, their thoughts on the royal family clear, but bowed their heads despite that. Even the man who he'd stolen the sword from. No one in their right mind would defy the royal family, and certainly not over something as trivial as bowing to the prince. Cipher watched as every person in the tavern gave in and bowed their heads. She watched the prince's mouth turn up at the ends in a victorious smirk. Her blood boiled, anger filling her unlike anything she'd felt in a long time. Despite knowing the consequences, despite knowing what the most logical thing to do was, she found herself turning around and sticking another spoonful of her soup into her mouth.

Even without looking at him, Cipher could feel the prince's eyes boring into the back of her head. In moments, a strong hand was on her shoulder, gripping her firmly. "You dare defy an order from the royal family? Do you have no respect?" The prince snarled. Cipher snorted.

"And what have you done to earn my respect? All I see is a foolish boy playing dress up, as he tosses around his status like a child playing with fire; unaware that he could get burned." The hand gripping her shoulder tightened.

"What would you know about status and royalty, you peasant?" The prince hissed. Cipher watched him grip his stolen sword with his other hand. She sighed.

"More than you ever will," Cipher muttered. "If you buy me a drink, maybe I'll let you in on some secrets." Others in the tavern started muttering to each other, their curiosity outweighing their fear. Cipher knew very well how to poke at a wasps' nest. The prince held up his sword, and four guards that Cipher had not noticed came in through the door came up beside him. The prince shooed them away with his hand.

"No, I can handle this one myself," he hissed angrily.

"But, my prince, you should not put yourself in danger over something so-" one of the guards began.

"You think this woman poses a threat to me?!" The prince cried, his patience clearly at its limit. The guards hesitated, but warily stepped back. The prince turned his attention back to Cipher. "You talk a big game, commoner. Let's see you back it up."

By the time the prince finished his sentence, Cipher had drawn her sword and had it pressed against his throat. The prince's eyes widened, and he stepped back. All the guards attacked at once. Cipher managed to dodge them, but at the expense of her soup she had been holding. She looked from the spilled soup on the floor, to the guards pressing in on her from all sides. She scowled, as her anger turned to rage. Within a few minutes, and with limited effort, Cipher managed to knock out all the guards. She knew better than to kill them. She was already in far too much trouble as it was. Once she finished, she sheathed her sword, and walked over to the prince, who had stood frozen throughout the fight. Cypher held out a hand.

"Five copper," she demanded. "Four for the soup, and one for the trouble." A shocked silence spread over the entire tavern. Just like before, when people had watched her on the streets, the tavern folk didn't know whether to applaud or kick her out. The prince stared at her hand in disbelief.

"Royal swordplay," he muttered. "Specifically, Abaddon royal swordplay." He tried desperately to make out her face beneath her hood, as she drew her sword and stalked closer. He raised his sword clumsily, his lack of experience evident. She disarmed him in three strikes, then hit his stomach with the butt of her sword, knocking him to the ground. She picked up the stolen sword and held it in her other hand.

"W-who are you?" He demanded. Cipher loomed over a small and defeated man, her mask gone, and her face fully revealed. She had her sword to the man's throat, and the sword he had stolen in her other hand. As she looked into the eyes of her foe, she

did not see the wrath and hatred of a scoundrel, but the fear and hysteria of a coward. A man far too broken to ever be redeemed. The prince's eyes widened, as he realized who she was.

“You're the Queen of Abaddon, the fallen kingdom,” he muttered breathlessly.

“No,” Cypher said firmly. In that moment, after being told who she was by a total stranger, she realized what she had been missing. The naive princess, the fallen queen, the disgraced failure. The savior, the slayer, the thief. She was both none and all those things. “I am a result. The product of this tragedy we call life; the sum of zero.”