

Pendulum 0.3

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There were few things more terrifying — or more motivating — than a gun scare at school.

Someone had brought a gun into Winslow, today. Probably some punk from one of the gangs, posturing for his pals or bragging about how he was important enough to get a piece from one of the higher ups. *Maybe* someone like me, only lower on the totem pole and treated even worse (and the idea that that was even *possible* frankly boggled my mind), who had grabbed his dad's pistol so he could feel protected or something.

Not that it made it okay, but in the second case, I could relate better than I would have liked to. It was a special kind of hell to feel like half the people around you found happiness in your misery and the other half would just as soon walk past your cooling corpse without a second glance. When even the principal and the teachers didn't seem to care about your suffering, I could understand bringing a weapon to school so you could feel at least *some* kind of security.

Winslow tended to overlook that sort of thing, though. Hell, I knew half a dozen gang kids — if not by name — who regularly carried knives into class, and it was a bit of an open secret that half of the gang kids had *some* kind of weapon concealed somewhere on their bodies, even if it was just a pocket knife. As long as it wasn't showing and nobody was showing it off, the teachers tended to pretend it didn't happen. I guessed it was easier that way, since Winslow was too much of a hellhole for them to actually enforce their "no weapons" policy.

In either case, as with all rumors and wild stories, by the time *I* finally heard it, it had been blown *way* out of proportion. To hear some of my classmates tell it, some buff, burly, tatted-up skinhead had walked into class with an AK-47 slung from one shoulder and a rocket launcher held over the other, then shot up his entire math class (which I knew wasn't true, because Emma and Sophia were *fine*, more's the pity).

In some ways, I was glad it had happened, because it got me out of my daily torture session with my personal trio of tormentors. In other ways, it was terrifying that the kid who'd done it could just as easily have shown up in *my* classroom and pointed his gun at *me*.

"Just what I need," I mumbled to myself. "Some punk who thinks he can get into Emma's pants by shooting me in the face."

In a situation like that, the only choices I would have would be to use my powers and out myself in front of *everybody* or let him *shoot me*. It sounded like an easy decision, but when Emma and her cronies could find a way to use a *broken zipper* on my *backpack* to belittle me, the idea of putting the knowledge of my powers — and the fact that I even *had* them — in her hands made it anything *but*.

Of course, once I started on that train of thought, I eventually realized *exactly* how vulnerable I was in my normal, everyday life. As a hero, I could do incredible things, and while I had no concrete measure of how strong my base form's barrier was, well, whoever heard of a forcefield that couldn't stop at least *one* bullet?

As Taylor Hebert, though? It would only *take* one. Just one stray bullet from a gunfight that broke out nearby — a distressingly common occurrence in Brockton Bay — or one ganger from school who thought I'd looked at him wrong or one down on his luck mugger who didn't like the fact that I didn't *have* any money to hand over. If it happened fast enough, I wouldn't even have the *chance* to transform.

So, I'd decided on my way home, I needed a way to avoid that, something to protect me in my civilian life on the off chance anything like that ever happened. Something unnoticeable that I could carry with me, that wouldn't draw immediate attention, that I could wear without anyone batting so much as an eye.

Fortunately, myths and fairy tales were rife with trinkets and charms that provided things like good luck or protection from magic spells to the person wearing them, and one of Medea's many talents was *creating* that sort of thing.

(I had a vague thought that maybe I relied on her too much, because I'd been using her to do most of the preparations I was making for my debut as a hero, but she was versatile, talented, resourceful, and easy to relate to, for someone like me, so that was only natural. Besides, it wasn't like she was always a hair's breadth away from convincing me to destroy the world or anything like that.)

Eventually, I'd decided on a pendant or some sort of necklace, because it would be something easy enough to hide and something that would very easily go unseen — and that was *exactly* what I needed. A ring, that would be hard to hide, not without wearing gloves everywhere and that would get noticed and prompt questions that were difficult to answer. A pendant, though, *that* could be hidden under my baggy clothes and hoodie, where no one would see it — and most importantly, where Emma and her flunkies couldn't *steal* it or “accidentally” knock it off my finger.

Medea could *definitely* do that. She could do the transmutation of materials, too, although there were other heroes who specialized in it more than she did, so even if the rest of it was something I handled with her, the initial creation was something I could do with another caster.

That was where I ran into the first snag, though: materials. There were a lot of things magic could apparently do, but conjuring materials from thin air, especially high grade ones like gold, seemed to be a limit. I couldn't just say an incantation and make a golden necklace pop into existence.

Which meant I had to *make* one. Either that, or buy one, and while that was easier in some ways, it was also... Yeah, no, I just didn't have the money, and I wasn't about to *steal* one. I was going to be a *hero*, I wasn't about to start that career by *taking* from an innocent bystander.

I'd thought about using some of *Mom's* old jewelry, but not only was there the risk that Dad would notice it missing, there was also the chance I might screw something up and ruin one of the only things left we had to remember her by.

And we had few enough of those as it was. Dad might have thought I hadn't noticed, but I knew he'd had to pawn some of it off during a few of our rougher patches.

So, yes, I had to *make* a necklace from scratch. And for that, I needed... Well, something to transmute. Raw materials. If I was ever pressed for time or didn't have any other options...I

supposed I could use something from around the house, like paperclips or spare change, but I wanted some leeway so I could start over if I had to or make one for Dad, too.

Fortunately, I had the perfect place to find those materials. It wasn't as neat or as easy as just going to a junkyard and carrying out some scrap metal, but if I scrounged around, I was sure I could find piping or rebar or something that would serve me just as well as part of a fender or the hood of a car.

That...was where I ran into *another* problem.

Dad.

If I went out during the day and tried to bring that sort of thing home... Well, first of all, I imagined that would garner me a bunch of strange looks from people, and maybe even the wrong kind of attention — after all, there were rumors on PHO that both the Protectorate and the gangs were on the lookout for Tinkers buying and ferrying raw materials like that to work with, and that would be a really stupid way to get outed that would also happen to *put my Dad at risk*. Second of all, if Dad caught me trying to bring all of that into the house, I would have some very awkward questions to answer.

I didn't think I was ready to tell him about my powers, yet. I didn't know if I ever would be.

“Hey, Dad, I have superpowers. Ha. Like *that* will go over well.”

That led to problem number three: if I was going to go out to get materials, it would have to be at night, and I would have to do it without waking Dad up at all.

Fortunately, I was pretty sure I also had the solution to that problem: my powers.

I'd first started experimenting with my casters yesterday afternoon, and I'd decided to begin small, with a pencil, so I could get a solid grasp on how making magic devices worked. Today, however, had lit a something of a fire under my ass, so I'd moved on to messing around with various other things around the house (including our toaster, which...yeah, that whole SNAFU was better left unsaid), and I could admit I'd gotten a bit...reckless, in some cases.

By the time Dad came home, though, I felt confident enough to try something more ambitious, so around midnight, when I was sure Dad had gone to bed and fallen asleep, I got ready to make my first “supply run.”

I felt a little silly, standing in my pajamas in my room, about head out. What kind of hero went out to do *anything* in her pajamas?

But my powers came with a built-in costume, so...

“Okay,” I told myself. “I need a hero who can sneak around without being noticed, someone who will let me get there and back without anyone seeing me.”

I reached out with my powers — and then immediately recoiled, flinching, as my options welled up inside my head.

Because my first *nineteen* results were *assassins*. And not the political kind, the kind that killed only one famous person, either, but the *professional* kind, the kind that made *killing other people* their entire *life's work* and honed their mind and body *specifically* for that goal.

Just... Okay. How did those even *count as heroes*?

I mean, fuck, seriously? Siegfried and Gawain and them, they killed people on the battlefield, but fuck, these guys were outright *murderers*. They didn't face their enemies in direct combat, they came up to your bed while you were sleeping and *slit your goddamn throat*.

Bile rose up in the back of my throat, and I had to close my eyes to fight down the nausea suddenly rolling about in my belly.

It wasn't like Medea, either, who had killed her brother and chopped him up into — okay, no, *bad* time to be thinking about that one — because some bitch of a goddess had screwed up her fucking mind worse than *Heartbreaker*, these guys did it without *flinching*. They spent every day coming up with new and inventive ways to *kill you* before you could even *see it coming*.

Fuck... Just... Okay...

I took deep breaths and tried not to think about it too much. Somehow, I managed to keep myself from throwing up, and it was probably because I hadn't gotten more than a glimpse at their histories.

But seriously. *Assassins*. How the *fuck* did they count as *heroes*?

Just...

Deep breaths.

Once I'd managed to calm down a few minutes later, I reached out and through myself again, grasping at my power, and looked at all of my stealth options *besides* those nineteen guys taking the title of "Hassan."

My stomach churned again, but I forced myself to stay calm.

Because the other guys weren't much better. Or at least, there seemed to be some kind of correlation between "assassin" and "stealthy." The further and further away you got from "assassin," the lower and lower the value of the hero's "stealth" became. Sure, there were outliers — both King Arthur and Siegfried had a kind of invisibility cloak — but those outliers tended to be good at only one aspect of stealth and terrible at the others. Both King Arthur and Siegfried, for example, could turn invisible, yes, but neither one was particularly practiced at walking around without making noise or masking their scent and stuff like that.

That...didn't work for me. I needed someone who was good at *all* aspects of sneaking — and, unfortunately, those nineteen Hassan guys seemed like the best bet. If I could only choose between assassins, I'd *certainly* prefer a professional over a deranged madman like *Jack the Ripper*.

Just... Okay. If I didn't really have any other options...

Damn it.

“Alright,” I said, swallowing nervously. “I need... I need the version of Hassan with the weakest ego.”

Immediately, my other options dropped and I was left with one, single person: Hassan of the Hundred Faces.

For an instant, I hesitated, because, hello, *assassin*. Then, steeling my nerves, I grasped at him and examined his powers and history. And in seconds, I understood why my power had singled him out as having the “weakest ego”: he’d split his mind into about eighty different pieces, each with its own personality.

Good grief, what were these people *doing* to themselves? Splitting their minds into nearly a hundred pieces, turning their bodies into poison, transforming their arms into some freaky, elongated... *thing* that killed people by crushing symbolic hearts — the hell where they *on*?

I frowned and worried on my bottom lip.

But that was good, wasn’t it? If I was understanding this right, the Hundred-Faced Hassan’s personalities were unified enough that they could all work together towards a common goal, but separate enough and split evenly enough that no single one of them had stronger influence over the whole than the others.

I had no idea what it would mean or how it would affect them when *I* was the one defining the goal, but...but, well, there was no way to find out just by standing there and twiddling my thumbs, right?

I glanced towards the clock. I’d already wasted almost half an hour.

Right. Right. This was just me waffling and being nervous, and maybe that was only natural, because, hell, my first Install since the Locker was only a couple *days* ago, but it wouldn’t get me anywhere. Just like I had with Installing in the first place, I was letting my fears and my worries limit what I could do, and I couldn’t afford to do that, anymore.

I steeled myself.

“Right. Alright. I’m going to give it a try.”

I reached out and through myself, grasped the Hundred-Faced Hassan.

“Set. Install.”

The change was instantaneous, lengthening my limbs, drawing my muscles tight, sweeping my hair up into a tail. I felt a mask settle on my face, forming from nothing, and when it was all over, I was an even taller, lean-limbed specter, with smoky black skin and clothes that seemed woven from shadow. When I inspected my physique, I found muscle definition that could give *bodybuilders* envy, and a wiry, sinuous grace that reminded more of a cat than a human being.

Best of all, the presence in the back of my head was muted and quiescent. It had no strong feelings whatsoever, only a calm focus that help *me* focus, to the point that I wondered, for a second, what I'd even been worried about.

“Alright. Yeah. I can do this.”

I crossed my room almost silently, grabbing the spare backpack I'd been saving for the day the Trio ruined *another* one on the way, and slid the window open just enough, then slipped out with a move that probably would have made *Olympic gymnasts* green and landed on the lawn below with only the slightest of sounds.

I waited for a moment, holding my breath, but nothing happened. The lights did not suddenly flip on in Dad's room, his voice did not suddenly call out for me. I was in the clear.

I let my breath go, then started for the warehouse. I was a ghost as I moved, barely more than a whisper on the wind, there and gone by the time you looked to see what had brushed against the grass or flickered past your window. If you glimpsed me, you might think me a trick of the light or a figment of the imagination.

I supposed that was the point. None of the Hassan would have been any good at what they did if they were easily spotted or noticed.

All told, it took me about fifteen or twenty minutes to make my way to the warehouse, a journey that would have taken more than an hour in my own body and maybe even longer on a bus that had to stop regularly for traffic and passengers.

When I came upon it, it was no different than it was during the day. It certainly *looked* darker and more foreboding, but there were no new signs or boards or anything, and when I slipped inside the door like a snake slithering through the cracks, there were no squatters huddling around cheap lanterns or gang thugs lighting up in the corners. The only *real* difference was the lighting: during the day, when the sun was out, it was more than bright enough to see what I was doing, but at night, with only the moon and the stars to guide me, the entire place was blanketed in shadow and shade.

Fortunately, Hassan of the Hundred Faces had excellent night vision. He had to, if I was guessing, or else he couldn't have been anywhere near as effective as he had been. Or was supposed to have been? I was still kind of dubious about even the *possibility* that these heroes — for a certain value of the word, given Hassan and his kind — had once been real people.

In any case, Hassan's night vision spared me a lot of trouble I might have had otherwise trying to find resources in the dark. And, just to make it easier on myself —

Delusional Illusion

“Zabaniya.”

— I used his Noble Phantasm to split myself into a group of ten. My duplicates — and it was a bit surreal even to see them — set off without a word and began the task of rooting through the trash and the debris for useful materials for transmutation. A moment later, I picked a direction that wasn't being covered and started looking, too.

A few minutes later, I had two rusty rods of steel rebar and a circular...thing that looked like it had come off of a pipe of some kind.

“That was fast,” I remarked to myself and...myself. That...would probably never stop being *odd*. “I thought it would take much longer.”

The rebar had come from one of the concrete pillars holding the roof up. It was missing a large chunk from the one corner, probably where, if I knew anything about science and chemistry, water had seeped into a crack, then frozen, expanded, and just worked its way through. This place *had* been abandoned for something like twenty years, after all.

“Still...”

It had come off a little *too* easily. I’d expected to have to fight with it, or failing that, switch to Medea or something and use some precision spellcasting to cut it out of the pillar. A few quick slices with Hassan’s dagger — what was that thing *made* of, it hadn’t even *chipped* — and a good, hard yank or two, however, and it had come right out.

It seemed that *all* my heroes had some level of super strength. Because why not?

“Gift horses, mouths — I’m not inspecting this one,” I muttered. I wasn’t about to question it when things went my way, I was just going to smile and take it as good luck.

I stuffed the rebar and the circle thing into the backpack I’d brought, then took another quick look around, but I had enough for what I was planning, and if tonight was any indication, it wouldn’t be *too* hard to come back for more, should I need to, so I didn’t bother grabbing anything else. A brief thought, a minor exertion of will, and my duplicates all vanished back into shadow, gone, unless and until I need them again.

I hefted the backpack over my shoulders and left the way I came.

It was another fifteen or twenty minutes to make it back home, and when I got there, I scaled the wall with ease and slithered back in through my window. There were no new lights on and everything was the same as it was when I left. Dad hadn’t woken up at all.

I slid the window closed behind me and it whispered shut, then I carefully set the backpack on my bed and stepped out into the middle of my room.

“Release.”

I said it softly, and in an instant, I was back to being Taylor Hebert, standing there in my pajamas.

My feet didn’t even have time to get cold before I was reaching out for a new hero: Nicolas Flamel.

“Set. Install.”

Paradoxically, I shrank an inch or two, different from how it normally was with my male heroes. I also experienced the extremely strange sensation of aging almost thirty years in a single instant — I felt the wrinkles form around my mouth and my eyes, saw the strands of grey that streaked through

my hair, almost *hear* the creak of my bones as the passage of time weakened them. My pajamas vanished and were replaced with long, red silk robes, lined with black and decorated with designs done in rich gold.

I knew why, too. Nicolas was not like my other heroes, who had all formed through me in the bloom of youth, the peak of their strength and power. Their legends all occurred and were remembered from their prime, when they were at their best and brightest, when they could fight to the utmost.

Nicolas was an older man, and he was remembered as an older man. Wise, knowledgeable, because it was not until later in life when he was said to have created the legendary philosopher's stone. And so the form he took was that of a man entering his twilight years, but not quite there yet — a respected, tenured lecturer and teacher, rather than an old sage.

I let out a breath. It was a little...odd, to be well into middle age before I was even twenty. Odd, but strangely satisfying. It made me feel more mature.

“Alright.” I grabbed the backpack again, fished out my supplies, and set them down on the spare sheet I'd laid out earlier that night. It would be the first time I worked in my room, rather than the basement or the warehouse. “Let's see what we can do.”

Alchemical formulae and processes filled my head as I let Nicolas' knowledge flow into me, and I got to work. This was going to be *so awesome*.

It was a little after five in the morning when I clumsily stuffed the half-finished pendant in my desk drawer, before climbing into bed. It was about an hour and a half later, just as it seemed I had finally fallen asleep, when my alarm blared and told me to get up.

I rolled over and groaned, utterly exhausted. I felt like I hadn't slept at all, and I didn't want to even *think* about pulling myself out of bed, so I just lied there and politely asked the sun to go back down and give me a few more hours.

When Dad came in to check on me, I muttered something about not feeling well and asked to stay home from school for the day, because there was no way in *hell* I was going to try and deal with the Trio's shit on less than an hour's worth of sleep.

After giving me a few comforting pats on the head, Dad went back downstairs with the promise that he would call in sick for me, and whatever guilt I might have felt for lying was washed out by the relief at having a day where I *didn't* have to face my bullies. *Especially* when I was so tired.

As I rolled back over and closed my eyes again, I decided drowsily that if I was going to be spending long nights experimenting with my powers, I needed something that would let me get up the next day fresh and wide awake.

The pendant would have to be put on hold, for now. The next thing I was going to enchant was my bed.