

Tyranny 6.5

It was incredibly off-putting, seeing that smile and hearing that tone together coming from someone — or *something* — that looked so much like my friend and yet so different. In that moment, I felt like a giant cliché, like I was in some kind of grim, tragic soap opera, the girl staring into the face of her friend's evil twin sister.

Was *that* what this was? Was I looking at some twisted doppelganger, a projection created by Noelle's power or some kind of meat puppet? Or...

I swallowed around the lump in my throat and blinked away the prickling at the corners of my eyes.

Or was this the real Amy, twisted and Mastered by Noelle? Was my friend still in there, watching her body try to hurt and kill the people she cared about, or had her mind been perverted and warped the same way all of Heartbreaker's victims were?

Was there even anything left for me to save?

And in that case...when I'd heard Lisa's voice, earlier...was she, too...

All of a sudden, all that confidence I'd felt before, when I'd finally decided who I'd be using to fight Noelle, drained out of me like someone had pulled the rug out from under my feet.

"You're going to try, Amelia," said Brandish strongly, stepping forward. Somewhere along the line, a pair of swords made of blazing, glowing light had formed in her hands. "But we beat your father, before, and we can beat you, now."

But Not-Amy only grinned. "So, you did know. That smug bitch was right, then. Well, not like it makes much of a difference. Dear old daddy has *nothing* on me."

"Mom, what are you doing?" hissed Glory Girl. "That's *Amy!*"

"No, it's not," Brandish only replied. "The Amy we knew is gone. *This* is *Marquis's* daughter."

No. No, I had to believe. I had to think I could save her. The alternative was simply too terrible to even consider.

"Weren't you listening, *Mom?*" asked Not-Amy with a devilish smile. "I just told you. I'm nothing like *Marquis*. I'm *much* worse."

Three shafts made of sharpened bone leapt out from between the knuckles on her hands like claws, and she took off towards Brandish with cheetah-like speed — but I was already moving, and to me, with my *Vantage*, she might as well have been moving in slow motion.

A single step took me back in front of her, placing me between her and the rest of New Wave, and my arm lashed out, took hold of her wrist, and I spun around, carrying her with me, and threw her to the ground. Before she had enough time to do more than let out an "oof," I dropped my body

weight down on her and pinned her with my knee, the arm in my hand twisted into that same submission hold I'd used in the bank what felt now like a lifetime ago.

It wouldn't hold her for long. With how her power had been changed and warped, with what she could do with it now, she could get out of it just as fast as I'd put her into it. I just needed her stunned and off guard for a few seconds.

"What did you do to the real Amy, Noelle?" I demanded.

I didn't know if she could actually hear me through Not-Amy, but at the very least, Noelle would have Lisa's power in some way, shape, or form, right now. There was no way she didn't know what I was saying.

The girl beneath me laughed. "I *am* the real Amy!"

I pulled harder on the arm, but it didn't seem to bother her at all. If she had such absolute control over her body, maybe she'd even turned off her pain receptors.

"No, you're not," I asserted. I wished I was as confident as I sounded. "Amy would never have tried to hurt any of us."

"You're so fucking sure of that, are you?" spat the girl underneath me, suddenly furious. "Maybe I just got fucking tired of watching Vicky fawn over Dean and you bend over backwards for a girl who didn't deserve the time of day from you!"

The flesh underneath me started to bubble and bulge.

"Maybe I just decided," she went on, "that if *I* can't have you, no one else gets to, either!"

Instinct commanded me to move, but before I could push myself off and away from her, someone snagged me from behind by the collar of my vest and yanked me back. As I watched, Not-Amy's body erupted into spikes of sharpened bone, jutting out like some kind of human porcupine, perfectly and unnaturally still.

If she'd hit me with that... I wasn't sure I would've survived it.

My savior dropped me unceremoniously on the ground, and I stumbled a little, but managed to keep myself on my feet.

"Thanks," I said quietly.

"I don't like you, but I'm not gonna let you *die*," Glory Girl muttered acidly.

"Marquis made use of a similar tactic, back when he was in power," Brandish told me, as though Glory Girl hadn't spoken. Then, she raised her voice. "You won't win this by using tactics like that, *Amelia!* Your father learned that the hard way!"

"Carol," murmured Lady Photon, "I'm not sure this is a good idea..."

“We beat Marquis,” Brandish affirmed. “We can beat her, too.”

“Yeah, but this time, we don’t have...”

“Me, hiding in the closet.”

The spikes quivered, then retracted and melted back into Not-Amy’s flesh. Slowly, sinuously, she slid to her feet and turned back around to face us. As though nothing had happened at all, there was not a wrinkle in her clothing, and not a hair was out of place.

“Haven’t you been listening, *Mom?*” She was smiling again. “I’m *not* Daddy Dearest. You *can’t* beat me the same way you beat him. I’m better, smarter, I have a *way* better power —”

A sickening *squelch* cut her off, and I whipped around towards the sound, to find Brandish, mouth agape, gasping, weapons flickering and vanishing, with a blood-splattered *arm* sticking out of her chest.

What?

“You talk too much, Amelia,” a new voice rasped.

“Mom!”

Glory Girl was the first to move, the gravel beneath her spraying out as she took off towards the assailant. But the newcomer spun and yanked her arm back, and Glory Girl crashed headlong into a gurgling, choking Brandish, taking them both to the ground in a tangled heap.

“Caroll!”

“No!”

Blasts of light streaked across the open air, but the newcomer danced back and out of the way with an almost feline grace, putting distance between us and her, watching us with an unblinking, predatory gaze. For a moment, it flickered towards me.

She almost caught me off guard, that was how fast and vicious she was. It was the glint of something metallic in her hand that kicked my brain into gear, and I ducked under the swing of her arm with a *Folding*, then retaliated with a punch of my own towards her gut — not another Thunder Feat, but definitely enough to *hurt*.

She took it like it was nothing. A slight, weak “oomph” passed through her lips, but there was no indication — no scream, no shout, none of the usual sounds of pain — that she’d been any more bothered than if I had thrown a pillow at her.

She *did* back away, again, and I took that moment to glance over at New Wave, who had all huddled around Brandish. Lady Photon was doing something with her forcefields, making some kind of pressure bandage or something to keep Brandish from bleeding out, but that couldn’t last too long.

Damn it. Fuck. And if I tried to bring out Medea to heal her —

I turned back towards the newcomer.

— *she* would definitely try and stop me, wouldn't she?

The newcomer was completely naked, giving me a better look at her than I really wanted. She was shorter, thinner, more compact than Not-Amy. Maybe four and a half feet tall, with a narrow body comprised almost entirely of lean, wiry muscle, to the point of looking unhealthy. Her skin was bronze and leathery, tough and weathered-looking, and it made the creases at her mouth, around her eyes, ringing her neck, seem all the deeper.

She barely looked human. The general shape was right, but the details were simply off, and off drastically.

But even through the leathery skin, even through the gaunt, hollowed cheeks, even through the sunken eyes and the pitch black freckles that seemed to suck in the light, her face was unmistakably Amy's.

“What?”

A second Amy...? Did that mean...?

It was like the thought that had been niggling at me all night had clicked into place in the back of my head, and it suddenly seemed so *obvious*. Clones. Of course. Noelle's power — she absorbed people into her body, using them as templates to form doppelgangers, and then those doppelgangers were *twisted* until both their powers and their personalities didn't even resemble the original, anymore.

That was why Not-Amy's power was so different from what I'd seen her do before, and that was why she was so different, so strange, so *not Amy*.

That thing is —

“Clones!” I shouted to New Wave. “Neither of those things is the real Amy, they're all just clones!”

“Ugh,” said the first Not-Amy. “I knew you'd figure it out the moment you saw Claire. That smug bitch was so sure it'd take you awhile, but her opinion of your intelligence is —”

“Amelia,” said the second Not-Amy — Claire, apparently, “shut up and kill them already.”

“Fine, fine,” the first Not-Amy — Amelia — groused. “Ruin all of my fun, why don't you.”

I tensed, getting ready to fight.

But I needn't have bothered, because a blast of red light shot out and caught the second, Claire, in the chest, throwing her back several feet, and at the same time, Glory Girl, screaming a furious war cry, blasted off and *slammed* into Amelia like a freight train.

“You! Fucking! Bitch!” she bellowed in time with each punch. Amelia just took it as she was carried off, and I could see her flesh deform like putty with each hit, only to reshape itself like a rubber band snapping back.

As Claire pulled herself to her feet and Glory Girl continued to whale on Amelia, Laserdream and Manpower stepped up to face one while Flashbang moved to join his daughter. An instant later, a bright blue forcefield in the shape of a dome sprang up around Shielder, Brandish, and Lady Photon.

For a moment, I didn't move, and I glanced back and forth between the two clones and the people arrayed to fight them. I wasn't sure who I should be standing with. Which one needed my —

“Apocrypha!” shouted Lady Photon. “Go! Find Noelle! Get the *real* Amy back! Now!”

Startled, I turned towards her. “What?”

“Go get the real Amy!” she repeated forcefully.

I hesitated. That would mean leaving them alone to fight these clones by themselves. Could they do that? I didn't know their limits or their powers intimately enough to say so.

And as selfishly as I wanted to save Lisa and Amy, I didn't want to leave Amy's family to die.

“But —”

“The sooner you get Amy, the sooner she can save my sister!” she snapped back. “Go! Now!”

“I can heal —”

“I *know*,” she said impatiently, “but the more time you spend here, the more clones Noelle can make, which means the more of them we'll have to *fight*. Go, before she makes a whole army!”

I hesitated for a second longer, then turned and left as swiftly as my feet would carry me. She was right, even if I hated to acknowledge it. This would only get more unmanageable if Noelle kept making more clones, so someone needed to stop her, first.

“Flashbang,” I heard Lady Photon say behind me, “contact the Protectorate, bring them up to speed, tell them to bring their best healer —”

I ran deeper into the Trainyard, until the sounds of the fighting faded almost to nothing. Aside the marks in the gravel from where she'd been when she flipped that train car at us, however, there were no other obvious signs of Noelle or where she'd gone off to hide. The gravel simply wasn't deep enough for her to have left a more obvious trail, and it was too dark for me to really keep track of the one that might have been there.

Damn it. I wanted to wait until I knew where she was, so I could reduce the amount of time I spent in an Install and conserve my energy, but —

“She said you'd come.”

I skidded to a halt and whirled around towards the voice, fists rising of their own accord, and came face to face with —

I blanched.

What the...

“She said you’d be alone, too,” said the... It must have been another Amy clone.

But it looked almost nothing like the other two. The other two, at least, had looked *mostly* human. Grotesque, in Claire’s case. But the face had been shaped like a human face, the body like a human body, and even if Claire had been unnaturally thin and short and muscular, her proportions had been all symmetrical, like the human body.

What was in front of me had almost none of that. Four limbs, one head, hair, skin, a mouth, yes. But one eye was small and beady, and the other was large and bulging beneath a protruding brow. Her right arm was swollen and heavy, with a four-fingered hand, and her feet were almost comically large and cumbersome. Her lower jaw was thrust forward in a horrendous underbite, with large, misshapen teeth that protruded over her upper lip.

And like Claire, her skin was bronze and leathery. If it wasn’t for the stark freckles and the mousy brown hair, I wouldn’t have recognized her.

“You’re...another clone of Amy.”

The clone nodded.

“I don’t have a name,” she said. “Not like the others do. But they called me the Fingerpainter.”

She hefted her misshapen arm, wiggling her fingers a little. “My power’s like Mom’s power,” she went on, “only not so much on the small details. Big picture. Large scale changes.”

“Are you going to try and fight me?” I asked cautiously.

She shook her lumbering head. “She told me to tell you where to go.”

I wasn’t sure how much I should trust her, if I could at all. But it wasn’t like I had any better ideas for how to find Noelle, right then, without spending energy on another Install.

“Where?”

The clone pointed off into the dark.

I hesitated for a second, then awkwardly said, “Thank you.”

“Wait!” she called as I turned to leave. I stopped. “Can... can you do me a favor?”

My lips thinned into a line. “Maybe.”

Although if this one asked me to die, the way Amelia did —

“Please kill me.”

My brain crashed to a halt.

What?

“Please. Kill me,” she repeated.

“Why...” I said shakily. “Why would you even ask something like that?”

“I’m a monster,” she told me, eyes watering. “I was made only to suffer and cause suffering. I have no future and nothing worth living for. No family, no friends. No life at all. The only mercy I can ask for is to die quickly and painlessly.”

In spite of everything, in spite of how she was made, whose image she’d been made in, who had made her, I found myself pitying her. Almost against my will, my heart ached.

She was a clone. If she was anything like the others, she was a perversion of the real Amy, and it wasn’t at all unlikely that she could try to lie and manipulate me.

Even so, that didn’t change how I felt.

“You...”

“So please. Kill me. Let me die.”

I shook my head. “I-I’m sorry,” I told her. “But I can’t. I... Even if I believed all of that, I just...I...”

That’s not a path I can walk down.

She gave me a wet smile. “She said you’d say that.”

She stepped back, curling in herself and sagging as though some great weight rested upon her shoulders. Her bulging eye looked up at me, met mine, and she gestured vaguely in the direction she’d pointed to earlier.

“You’d better get going, then,” she said quietly.

I hesitated.

“I’m sorry.”

It seemed wholly inadequate and not at all like what I should have said, but I didn’t have the time or the words that she might have needed, just then, nor the expertise necessary for them to be anything more than empty air. That simple, paltry apology was all I could give her.

I turned around and took off, and this time, there was no waiting. If the Fingerpainter was right, if she hadn’t been lying, then I was headed directly towards Noelle and the fight, and if, as I now suspected, the “she” she’d been talking about was Lisa — a clone of Lisa — then I was also walking directly into a trap.

I reached into and through myself and grasped my chosen hero.

“Set,” I said between breaths as I ran. “Install.”

Between one step and the next, I transformed, shrinking a good five inches. My hair lengthened, straightening, and out of the corner of my eyes, I saw the strands turn green and gold. My ears shifted up to the top of my head, twisting and morphing into furry, feline triangles, as a tail sprouted and swayed behind me. My costume flowed into a green and black dress with a pleated skirt, embroidered with golden designs, and a pair of gauntlets and armored, thigh-high boots.

Chaste Huntress Atalanta, an archer of incredible skill. She had the keenest of eyesight, capable of seeing and striking the tiniest of targets over great distances.

She was also the furthest altered of the heroes I’d yet used, with the cat ears and tail, compared to Medea’s tame elf ears. In another situation, I might have been more nervous about dealing with something like that, but there was no time to worry about something that seemed so insignificant, now.

The world opened up around me, and it was suddenly like I’d been blind and deaf my entire life. Atalanta’s ears picked up every sound, even New Wave’s battle in the distance, and her eyes saw with such incredible detail that I could make out the tiniest of imperfections on the railcars around me. Even in the dark of the new moon, everything was as clear as daylight. Washed out, in shades of grey and blue and black, but so crisp and clear that it was almost breathtaking.

Almost. No time to get distracted by that, either.

The railcars started to shift and the paths between them began to narrow as I went, and it didn’t take me long to realize that it was intentional, that it had likely been arranged that way specifically to herd me in the direction Noelle wanted me to go. To control when and where our fight started. It was so painfully obviously an ambush.

How she’d managed to arrange that so quickly, I had no idea. It wasn’t like New Wave and I had taken more than an hour to follow her here.

It was fine, either way. I’d let Noelle have the initiative, spring her trap, and then I’d adjust my course of action based upon that.

The path that had been laid out for me led to a dead end, but it was no obstacle at all for Atalanta. In fact, through her, it felt like one of the many footraces she’d been through, dancing along and outside the beaten path, taking to the trees and the branches with casual grace, jumping along without the slightest change in stride, and I leapt up, a carefree smile starting to break over my face, just high enough to set down a single foot on the roof of the railcar —

And then I almost took a shipping pallet to the face.