

Tyranny 6.4

Much like the rest of the Docks, the Trainyard was, for the most part, abandoned. A train came through every now and again, a shipment from the outside world, and left with whatever meagre exports the remaining businesses in Brockton Bay had to offer, and a few brave — or maybe just desperate — squatters had taken over one or two of the shipping containers or one of old boxcars that had been left to rot. If the stories were to be believed, anyway.

But by and large, it was a figurative ghost town. Creepy. Empty. Nearly silent, without even the bustle of the city in the distance to give it life. Any sounds came from the howl of the whistling wind as it wove through the decaying train cars or the occasional *gong*-like echo of some homeless guy stubbing his toe against one of the metal containers.

It was worse at night, under the dim light of the nearly-gone moon that hung in the sky as the faintest of slivers. The long, deep shadows cast over the tracks and gravel stretched and blurred together, such that they seemed to cover the entire trainyard, and the wind blowing through the old boxcars and around the containers was eerie, like the low, keening wail of some vengeful spirit that still haunted the tracks.

Even the light cast by New Wave's powers, used like lanterns to let us see in the gloom, only made it worse. Everything within ten or fifteen feet was brightly illuminated, plainly visible, but outside that little circle of light, the darkness seemed even starker, even deeper, and there was no telling what lurked inside of it.

We walked carefully, gravel crunching beneath our shoes. The air was chilly and thick with tension, such that it seemed to cling about our faces and prickle along our skin, and the entire group had clustered together in a way that spoke of experience and preparation, with the more vulnerable members wedged between what I assumed were their family's heaviest hitters. Somehow, I'd been made the leader, at least insofar as who stood in front went.

If I admired anything about them, the people Amy had told me so little of, it was how easily they seemed to be keeping themselves together. Their heads on straight. Like they knew what they were doing and how to handle themselves, even in a situation like this.

I was still off balance. My mind was still a mess of chaotic thoughts and emotions, still swirling and reeling from everything that had happened in the span these last few hours. I felt like I was completely out of my depth, like I'd been tossed into the deep end of a pool and told to sink or swim.

What would I do, when the inevitable confrontation happened? When we found Noelle, when it came time to fight her or fix her, what would I do?

Medea... Medea could probably fix her. Nimue, maybe. No, almost certainly. Of the caster types I knew and had used, was comfortable with, their experience with healing was the greatest. If either of those two couldn't solve the problem, was there any hero who could?

But would Noelle believe me, if I told her I could fix her? After Amy had tried and failed, after she'd shouted her blame at me and tried to attack me for it, would she even listen to a word I said?

I didn't know.

And what if I *did* heal her? What if it worked exactly as she wanted and she got her human body back? What would happen to all of that extra mass? Would it just disappear, vanish into the air like so much vapor, or would it collapse in on itself and crush my two friends beneath the entirety of that bulk?

Had it already, for that matter? Had they been drawn in, only to be suffocated and broken beneath all of that flesh? Were they even alive for me to rescue, or would I find their shattered corpses, bones snapped and contorted, limbs bent in impossible directions, when everything was said and done? Would those two girls, my only friends, come out of there as anything more than two battered lumps of meat?

My fingers curled into fists and I took in a shaky breath, trying to steady myself, clamp down on my whirling emotions.

I didn't know. I just didn't know.

And what if I did? What if the only thing left at the end of this was me, holding the remains of the only two girls who had given me so much as the time of day in nearly two years? The only two girls who had decided to reach down into the well of my loneliness and pull me up, regardless of their own baggage or ulterior motives? What would I do? What would I...

I took another breath, let it out slow.

No. I knew exactly what I'd become, didn't I? What it was I'd been running from, why it was there was one hero I absolutely refused to touch. Along that pathway, there was only one end, only one answer, and it was one I wanted no part in. In that case, the one thing I must do was hope that they were alive and that they could be saved.

If I couldn't cling to that, then I was already beyond saving myself.

"You're certain that this is the right place?" asked Brandish, pulling me from my thoughts.

I was. I'd scouted ahead using Lunette, my familiar, just to be certain. I hadn't wanted to use Medea to scry, not when I had no idea how much I might need an Install if and when things degenerated into a fight. The last thing I wanted to do was exhaust myself, especially when I'd spent the last several days using my powers more in one go than I had since I'd gotten them.

"The trail stops here," I told her quietly.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her turn her head back to look behind us. She probably couldn't see it in the gloom, but when we'd passed it, the trail of destruction, of crumpling buildings, shattered windows, broken storefronts (well, *more* broken than they'd been before), of street signs ripped out of the sidewalks and now train cars that had been bowled over, it was unmistakable. Noelle couldn't have given a more direct path for us to follow if she'd painted bright red arrows.

Then, it had abruptly stopped. Like she'd just suddenly vanished between one step and the next.

I didn't know what that meant, but none of the possibilities I could imagine were very good.

"She could have doubled back," Laserdream offered from behind us.

My lips pursed.

"No," I said. "This is the best place for her to hide. Lots of large containers, lots of open space to move around in, no one around to keep track of her."

It was why I'd figured she'd come here in the first place. There were certainly warehouses she could have hidden inside in the Docks, but those were all in the middle of one gang's territory or another, where she was likely to be noticed. The only ones who might be hanging out in the Trainyard were Merchants, and like as not, they'd be too stoned to try and pick a fight with a monstrous mass of meat and limbs like Noelle.

I had to hope I was right about this, too, because a fight somewhere else would mean a fight with more people around, more people I might have to *rescue*.

"The Travelers are nomadic," Brandish pointed out. "She may not even know that."

"But she came in this direction anyway," replied...Flashbang, I thought his name was. "And we have no idea how long they've been in the city, so we don't know if she does or not."

She made a sound of agreement, then changed the subject. "And you're *sure* don't know anything else about her powers?"

I bit my lower lip. We'd already gone over this, but...

"No," I admitted. "I...I got the feeling that she wasn't really in control of her...her lower half, but if she can do anything else aside from absorb people, I don't know."

It still felt like I was missing something, like there *had* to be more to her powers than just her monstrous lower body and the ability to absorb people who touched it, and it niggled almost incessantly in the back of my head.

But I just didn't *know*.

"You think she's one of *them*?" murmured one of the men.

"Maybe," said Brandish. "It's entirely possible."

"Them?" I asked.

"The PRT calls them Case 53s," Lady Photon told me. "Amnesiac parahumans who appear out of nowhere with no memory, no identification, and with powers that have somehow permanently altered their bodies."

"They're called 'monster capes' on PHO," Laserdream added helpfully.

"Crystal!" her mother scolded quietly.

‘Monster capes,’ huh... I could see it, yeah. Maybe Noelle *was* one of those.

“Does it really matter *what* she is?” asked Shielder, who was about my age. “What I want to know is what our plan of attack is. How are we getting Amy back?”

“Don’t get in close, don’t let her touch you,” Brandish replied shortly.

“Was kinda hoping for something a little more concrete,” he muttered.

“Be on the lookout for suspicious signs and symptoms,” rumbled the taller of the two men. Manpower, I think his name was. “If you see unusual clouds or slimes, or if you start to feel sick or strange, retreat and let everyone know immediately. It’s possible that absorbing a cape lets her use that cape’s powers, either in full or in some diminished capacity.”

Comment [1]: Maybe mention the 'altered' possibility.

My thoughts ground to a halt. *What?*

“That’s why we’ll be fighting at range, until we understand what we’re dealing with, *Victoria*,” said Brandish, looking pointedly in Glory Girl’s direction. “Bad enough we might be dealing with *Panacea*’s powers, we don’t need to give her access to *Brute* and *Mover* powers, as well.”

Glory Girl said nothing. In fact, she’d been uncharacteristically silent this entire time.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek nervously.

If Noelle could use the powers of capes she absorbed...

That made me the biggest risk in this entire team, didn’t it? Even if most of my close-range heavy hitters didn’t run far too high a risk of hitting Lisa and Amy for me to be comfortable, if she captured me and started using their powers, their Noble Phantasms — or worse, if she could use Installs herself and access some of the truly frightening heroes in my repertoire...

Could the likes of Gawain or Herakles or Cuchulainn be captured and held the same way two teenage girls had been? Even if I didn’t think so — and I wasn’t sure enough of that to bet on it — was it a chance worth taking when the alternative put way too much power in the hands of someone who might not even be able to completely control her *own* powers?

No. If — *when*, because I had few illusions about whether or not Noelle would listen — it came to a fight, I’d have to fight at range. An archer, rather than a swordsman.

Which, now that I thought of it, seemed like the obvious choice. I wasn’t sure why it hadn’t occurred to me before, but Lisa and Amy were both wearing those amulets, which made an archer the only type of hero I could safely use without having to worry I might accidentally kill my only friends.

Perhaps somewhat strangely, the realization made me feel better, more confident in myself. I’d been agonizing over which hero I could use without risking my friends’ lives, and I’d been floundering because my mind kept winding back to *her*, but having a...a direction, for lack of a better term, let me focus on other options.

“Are we sure she’s here?” Shielder asked into the chilly silence.

Lady Photon sighed. “Shielder, we just went over this.”

“No, I mean...” He paused. “You said she’s about the size of an elephant, right? With a human torso on top? Even in here, shouldn’t we have seen her already?”

“Here, in the middle of the night, under a new moon?” Laserdream asked incredulously. “Our powers are the only reason we can see our hands in front of our faces!”

“I guess...”

“We wouldn’t be here at all if it wasn’t for *her*...” Glory Girl muttered.

“Victoria!” Brandish said sharply. “This isn’t the time or the place!”

A wave of sudden fear washed over me, and it took me a second to realize it was Glory Girl’s aura, again.

“You know what?” she said. “No! I’m not gonna just keep pretending that we don’t all know who it is under that mask! Or that she’s the reason Amy got kidnapped in the first place!”

“Victoria!”

“She spends the weekend with her *friend*,” Glory Girl went on, aura spiking with each word, “and then Sunday night, we get an alert from her phone, which leads us to the *ass end* of the Docks, only to find out that she’s been *kidnapped* and *Apocrypha* is the one holding her phone —”

“There is a time and a place for this, Victoria, and it will be addressed,” Brandish cut across her, “but *this is not it!* Now, mind your —”

An unholy, metallic *screach* cut her off, and one of the abandoned train cars in front of us was lifted off the tracks and *thrown* in our direction.

I took a step back, cocking my fist, and prepared a *Thunder Feat* — but I needn’t have bothered, because a towering wall of blue light formed in front of me, and the wooden train car that slammed into it splintered, cracked, and broke like so much tinder.

Behind me, I heard someone — Shielder — gasp.

“Fuck!”

With the train car blocked, the wall of light flickered and vanished. For a split second, through the gloom, I thought I saw a massive, misshapen figure move and disappear again into the sea of train cars.

Noelle.

“Flare!” shouted Brandish.

The word had barely left her mouth before a blast of solid light shot up into the sky with a sound like a firework, where it exploded into a brief, twinkling orb, illuminating the trainyard for a scant few seconds. But there was no sign of anyone else, aside what might have been divots in the gravel off in the distance where Noelle had probably been.

The orb in the sky guttered and died.

“Where is she?”

“Right here.”

The words were whispered into my ear, and I spun towards the voice — *Lisa's* — hands rising on their own, only there was no one there.

What...?

“Guh!”

Something *slammed* into me from behind, and the force of it pushed me forward and towards the ground. Aife's training kicked in and I rolled with it, snapping back up to my feet. I reached for my back, at my spine, just behind my diaphragm, but there was no pain and my fingers didn't come away slick with blood. My barrier had absorbed the damage.

Across from me, arm outstretched, was...

“Amy?!” Glory Girl gasped.

No, it wasn't. I could see the resemblance, why someone would make that mistake, but the differences were obvious. Firstly and most glaringly, the *entire* lower half of her right arm had been transformed into a long, vicious horn made entirely of bone, held outstretched from where she'd just *stabbed* me.

“Damn,” she said, sounding disappointed. “It didn't work.”

Secondly, although it was Amy's face, it didn't look like Amy at all. The freckles were gone, the cheeks narrower and leaner, the hips broader, the chest larger, her hair smoother and straighter, every part in perfect, flawless, *eerie* symmetry. She was even *taller*. It was like someone had taken Amy and removed or altered every part she could possibly dislike about herself, every feature she might have been self-conscious of, leaving behind something that might have been one of Michelangelo's sculptures, for how “perfect” it was.

“Amy, what are you doing?” Glory Girl demanded. “She said you were kidnapped!”

“Oh, hello, Victoria.” Not-Amy smiled, a charming, beatific thing that just looked *wrong*. “Could you do me a favor?”

“Uh...” Glory Girl hesitated. “Sure...?”

“Could you please die for me?”

I was moving before I even realized what I was doing, and suddenly I was standing in front of Glory Girl, shifting the bone spear up and over my shoulder, where it would pass harmlessly over Glory Girl's head instead of taking it off. Reflex more than intent pulled my other arm back, and it was only my brain catching up with me that let me blunt the *Thunder Feat* that I unloaded into Not-Amy's gut.

It wasn't enough.

Horrified realization shot through me as Not-Amy's torso *exploded* from the blow, showering the ground behind her in droplets of vivid, *glistening* red. My stomach roiled in protest.

I'd just *killed* her.

"Amy!" shouted Glory Girl. "Apocrypha, you bitch!"

But Not-Amy just looked at me, the blood pouring down her chin sinking back into her flesh like water into the desert sand, and gave me a frustrated scowl.

"Every time I think I've got a handle on it," she said, despite her shredded lungs, "you go and remind me just how bullshit you are."

And before my eyes, the upper half of her body bulged and stretched out like playdough, reaching down to connect with her lower half. Then, it snapped back up, pulling her legs back up into a standing position, and more fabric oozed out of her flesh to merge seamlessly with what she was already wearing. It was like she'd never been hurt, because even the blood on her clothes disappeared, too.

"Oh my god," someone whispered. It might have been me.

The horn of bone in my hand suddenly sank back into Not-Amy's elbow, leaving me holding air, and it was only reflex honed by Aife's training that pushed me back and out of the way as her other arm transformed similarly into a bone blade and swiped at me.

I landed almost ten feet away, body tense.

"What... What even..."

"Amy?"

"That's not Amy," said Brandish.

"No," Not-Amy agreed. "I'm everything Amy Dallon *should* be."

She smiled that beatific smile again.

"And I'm going to kill each and every one of you."