**Reconstruction 15.12**

Starting to work on the Boat Graveyard had been a good test case, but it utilized less than a fifth of the Dockworkers Union’s manpower, so, with Herb, Kayden, and Victoria left working on that, I turned my attention to the larger project we had for them, the retaking of Brockton Bay.

Taylor and Mouse had gone through clearing and poking the minor anomalies nearby. I’d worried that there might’ve been a bit of a personality clash, but they’d actually gotten along surprisingly well. Almost *suspiciously* well. In all honesty, without me around to pretend to flirt with, Mouse had apparently gotten serious, or at least *more* serious, and taken Taylor under her wing. “Millie’s been mindin’ the little buggers, how hard can it be to help your busy little bee?” she’d asked, which hadn’t been *that* comforting, but she’d taken to mentoring well.

Talking with Taylor, Mouse had been a font of information, of how to spot problems, how to move, and how to survive when you *weren’t* an upper level brute and ‘couldn’t cheat’. That fact that Taylor, as she was now, was almost as strong and as fast as Karen had been *before* I’d accidentally given her a tune-up trying to heal her from the damage that the Slaughterhouse Nine had inflicted had also helped. The Arthropod Controller was able to pull off the mildly inhuman acrobatics that were the older heroine’s stock-and-trade, though Taylor had been quick to point out that, while she could *physically* pull it off, she didn’t yet have the *skill* to do so. Mouse, in private, had said Taylor’d have the basics down in a *month*, and the rest down two or three after that.

Now, I had a section that had been *completely* cleared, or as close as we could get it, at the very western edge of the northern residential area, in the area known as the ‘Farside’. It was there that the work would start, and slowly spread, until the entire city had been explored, pacified, or, at worst, sealed off.

The Dockworkers were arrayed in teams, and each one would handle a single house. They had boxes to fill with anything that seemed valuable, but not monetarily. Oh, we were grabbing the things that seemed to be expensive as well, but that wasn’t our goal. No, it was the *sentimental* items we were after.

A quick test solidifying the air in the buildings and pressing it down had shown them to be structurally sound, at least for our purposes, and I’d already taken every corpse Taylor could find. We had the workers outfitted with face-masks, though I’d make sure everyone got a tune-up every few months, just in case. The roads had been cleared to allow the box trucks we’d gotten to pull right up to the houses, load the full crates, offload the empties, and drive back to the warehouses we were using to store everything.

Every truck had water for those who wanted it, and would bring a good lunch to help everyone keep working. More than that, the drivers, as well as several members of each team, were armed. Everyone had specific orders to back off and call us the second something unnatural happened, but it was better to be safe, and a shot would ward off a number of things, even if only because there was suddenly something between you and it for the anomaly to focus on. It hadn’t been that surprising that over half of the dockworkers had licenses to carry, nor was it surprising to learn that Daniel Hebert *hadn’t* been one of them.

Speaking of whom, I flew over to the man himself, who was, *once again*, standing next to Taylor. He’d been doing that, trying to strike up conversation, and Taylor couldn’t bring herself to tell him to let her *do her job*. Annoying her into accepting him *might’ve* worked a month ago, in that awkward ‘I’m doing this because I care’ way, but now his inability to see that she was hard at work, even dismissing her job, had the opposite effect, pushing her further and further away. That said, *I* wasn’t going to tell the man that, so I was happy to fly the metal skiff I was piloting over, setting it down on the street next to them, making sure to leave enough space for trucks to pass.

Walking down the boarding ramp, The Lady Bug followed me, striding in graceful yet clipped steps. We both moved over to Taylor, who nodded to us. “Vejovis, Bug,” she greeted, even as she took control of the insects in the hollow shell of wood I was using to fill out and manipulate her suit.

Moving them to indicate how I should manipulate the mannequin, the hollow hero turned to stare at Taylor, arms crossing as the insects inside her buzzed *“Hebert,”* seemingly annoyed with my assistant. The choice to do this had been another step to further separate ‘Taylor’ from ‘Lady Bug’, and one we could only pull off because her costume covered everything but her hair. With Panacea’s assistance we’d managed to grow out my partner’s hair, cut it, and make a wig that was indistinguishable from the real thing, because it *was* the real thing.

“Be nice,” I chided, and the empty-ish costume looked away with a humph of annoyance. This was the first trial run of the distancing strategy, but it seemed to be working, from the somewhat hostile look Danny gave Lady Bug, not noticing it having any of his daughter’s mannerisms. That said, with how the man was, he might not *know* his daughter’s mannerisms.

“How are things going?” I asked my assistant, even as I turned the Lady Bug costume to glance at her semi-interestedly. It was a bit to juggle, but I’d been working with Dryad enough that it wasn’t that bad, though if I had to fight I’d make her run, before I accidentally, automatically used her to pull off a Dryad-specific move, like I’d trained to.

“This’ll take a lot longer than the boats, even just this neighborhood” she said, showing ‘us’ her tablet, and the map of the area with only a few houses cleared. “And I’ve been looking over it, but storage is gonna be an issue.”

“How long until we need to clear out and secure another space?” I asked, thinking about how to manage it. We hadn’t had to have more than basic security, the Merchants, what little presence they still had, relegated to the southernmost slums, least affected by the Anomalies.

She frowned, “I thought a week, but at this rate two, maybe three. Get a crane to help stacking and it’ll be closer to four or five.”

Daniel piped up, “You’re having us search through wreckage. That’s more dangerous and it’s more complicated than moving freight. Of course it’d be slower.”

“Get the crane,” I ordered, wondering what the other man was talking about, and noting the royal ‘we’ despite the fact the man had been doing Jack Squat. She nodded, tapping away at her screen. “By then we should be able to start offloading it. Now that we’ve got the addresses, I can have Overwatch start tracking down the original owners.”

Mr. Hebert’s eyes narrowed behind his thick glasses. “So that’s what you’re doing? Selling people’s possessions back to them?” The ‘*you villain!’* was heavily implied.

Before I could answer, to suggest that being able to buy back your sentimental items was far better than having *lost them forever*, I felt the bugs in the Lady Bug suit move. Complying, they directed me to make the Lady Bug suit glare at the man, even as Taylor herself sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “No, dad. We’re going to give them their stuff back.”

The Union rep glanced at his daughter, confused, then at me, suspiciously. “For free?”

“That is what the term ‘give’ normally means,” I observed.

“How?” he looked at me, then around at all of the men working.

I steepled my fingers, and, in a carrying whisper, leaned forward and intoned, “A secret organization. An ancient evil that makes the most depraved of monsters look like cartoon villains by comparison. *The United States Postal Service.*”

Daniel Hebert glared at me, while Taylor gave out a repressed *snerk* of laughter, and directed the Lady Bug suit to smack me in the arm. “I mean how are you paying for this?” he demanded, ignoring the joke completely*.* “This should cost thousands of dollars a day. Do you really expect me to believe you’re doing this out of the goodness of your heart?”

“Of course not,” I laughed scornfully. My first instinct was to just grow a bit of gold in my pocket and toss it at him, to show him how *little* money this actually was to me, at the level I was now working. But this was a man who’d threatened me, and while I didn’t care, I also didn’t *forget*. Giving him *any* intel on me, or rewarding him in *any* way, was not something I was going to do.

“Then why?” he asked, confused, likely that I’d ‘admit it’ or some such nonsense.

I was *very* aware of the eyes on me, the workers nearby all blatantly eavesdropping, only half of them even pretending to work. “Because it’s the right thing to do, it’ll help clear the land without fuss for when we start reconstruction, it’s *amazing* PR, because Taylor asked for me to help the Dockworkers Union, *and* out of the goodness of my heart,” I grinned toothily at his disbelieving glare, which had only deepened when I mentioned his daughter. “Who does things for just *one* reason, when you can do it for *multiple?*”

“Then you’re doing it for your own *selfish* reasons,” he spat, and I stilled, not angry at him, but for the rank *stupidity* of the statement.

*Concern-worry-care* came from Taylor, and I grabbed some bugs in a building the DU hadn’t gotten to yet, spelling out the words ‘Nice/Honest ?’ I felt her hesitate, then dismiss the word honest, leaving only ‘Nice’.

Path set I sighed. “If that’s your standard for good behavior, Mr. Hebert, you must truly live in a cold, dark, and terrible world,” I stated a bit more frostily than I meant to.

Tayor added a question mark, making the swarm spell ‘Nice?’, which I took, added insects to, and made into ‘**Nice.**’ I hadn’t mentioned how his life’s work, the clearing of the Boat Graveyard, which *I* was now accomplishing, was a wish born, at least in part, from that fact that it was *his group* that’d caused the catastrophe in the first place.

“I live in reality,” the fool in front of me stated, with the sureness of someone who absolutely did *not.*

Not bothering to reply, as arguing with *this* idiot was like playing chess with a pigeon, I turned to his daughter, who had inherited, as far as I could tell, her mother’s *everything.* “So, if you have any requisitions, pass them along to Quinn or Overwatch. I trust *you*.”

With her smiling, and him scowling, I turned and boarded the skiff, walking ‘Lady Bug’ onboard with me, and took off, leaving the others to get back to work.

<AB>

That evening, after helping corral a few anomalies with Herb (an area with enhanced plant growth that was caused by, and tied to a corpse that was currently in holding, a floating sword that attacked anything that got near, currently tied down, and an area that *didn’t seem out of the ordinary*, caused by a piece of Tinkertech that my bugs found and Quinn walked me through disabling), I was once again left with time to kill, and turned to something that I’d been ignoring, *power testing.*

I had two more minor slots open, but the Major one was still locked. It had made progress, somewhere between sixty to eighty percent of the way there, as opposed to the forty percent-ish it’d been. More than that, the rate of expansion had been slowing. The first set of slots were put up quickly, but while it wasn’t a linear decrease in progress rate, it was tapering off.

However, I had a feeling, one I couldn’t really explain, that the first bit of explosive growth had been the power bringing me back to where I was, and I was either going to hit, or already had hit, the baseline rate for my progress. Whether that was my Shard telling me what was going on, or just wishful thinking, I couldn’t tell.

Somewhat disappointingly I hadn’t gained a new host of powers from the Zerchidna Incident. I had *Seen* the powers of the monsters I’d killed, should have by all rights copied them, but they weren’t in the Flaming constellation of options I saw when I closed my eyes. Thinking about it, a distant star pulsed, purple and red, but with a sense of. . . *fleshiness* to it. Bringing it to the forefront, it grew, and grew, and grew, until it stood before me, a Major power.

***Adaptational Replication***

I frowned, not recognizing the power, but feeling a deep, melancholic sadness in my chest as I watched it, pulsing, seeming to curl in on itself before my sight. Thinking of the Yuki-Onna I’d slew, it twisted, the shifting currents of Flame showing me a reflection of those monstrous women, but hazy, not enough to tell me *how* it worked, only that the secret laid within.

Feeling myself slipping, like I was falling despite sitting on the ground, I pulled back, letting the Major power retreat, further than all the others, until it blended in with all of the Minor powers at my disposal.

Letting it, I moved onto what I was really here to do, to activate another power.

I’d asked Taylor, having let Panacea pick the last one, which I was *still* getting a handle on, and she’d thought about it long and hard. “Density Manipulation,” she’d finally decided, face serious.

“I don’t think that’ll make me any less dense,” I’d teased.

She’d just rolled her eyes. “I don’t think you could be any *more* dense either,” she’d joked right back, smiling, her humor strumming through Arthropod Control. “But, you need more Brute powers,” she said, getting serious once more.

I’d raised an eyebrow. “I have Vicky’s, and Hookwolf’s, and an impenetrable costume? Don’t I have enough?”

“Can you fight Alexandria?” she’d asked intently. “Or an Endbringer?”

“Probably to the first, I’ve got a power that trumps hers, but requires skin-contact, and I *did* fight an Endbringer, Taylor,” I’d reminded her.

She’d looked at me, gaze piercing, “And you almost died. Twice. I. . .” she’d hesitated, closing her eyes, “I don’t want the third time to be when it *sticks*.”

The feeling of *hurt-fear-sorrow* coming off of her had made it not even a choice for me, as I’d hugged her, promising that I’d pick it up. That it might not even *be* a Brute power, but if it was I’d make it work.

And that’d led me to here, now, ready for a world of hurt, nothing at all, or something in-between as the power would either play nice with the others I had, or it wouldn’t.

Gritting my teeth, I slotted it in, feeling it connect and integrate itself into the sea of Flame that was my own power set.

And nothing happened.

No, that wasn’t *exactly* true, I felt. . . *something.* It was in the back of my head, as if it were a muscle I hadn’t realized I’d had. A mental lever, set to rest, straight up, which could go one way or the other.

Floating in the air, I pushed it one way, and. . . nothing happened. I let go, and it slowly returned to zero. I pushed it the other way. . .

Nope. Still nothing. Holding it, I set down, only for the padded floor I was standing on to indent, compacting until it was like I was standing on steel.

Letting the power go, I slowly rose, the padded floor going back to *being* padded, indented from the weight of my metal-threaded body, but normal. Putting it the other way, I rose, until, once again, it felt like I was standing on steel once more, only I stood on the padding without so much as indenting the surface.

Taking a step, I accidentally launched myself off the ground, practically rushing towards the ceiling, catching myself with flight, and putting myself back to where I was. Letting my flight go, I felt myself drop lightly onto the ground. Moving careful, a slight step sent me practically gliding across the ground.

Sighing, coming to a stop, I went to run a hand through my hair, pausing as I noticed the colors of my costume were. . . *off.* In my Vejovis guise, I had blood red gauntlets, but now they were a faded pastel, almost pink, but not quite. Definitely not pink. It was like, um, a lightish red.

The rest of my costume was white, but even that looked oddly. . . *faded.* Shifting my armored top to a blue jacket, it wasn’t the azure I’d pictured, but more of a. . . cerulean? I really didn’t know colors, but I’d worked with the suit I wore long enough to know it made itself *exactly* what I imagined, requiring me to imagine everything in exacting detail, or else it’d come out blobby or plain. I still didn’t know how I’d managed the red-lion hoodie on my first day, though it’s distinctness *had* gotten me into trouble, so that might’ve been the answer right there. Trying to add a blood-red vine pattern to the sleeves, they too weren’t the crimson I was picturing but pi- *lightish red.*

However, as I stared, the colors slowly became darker, no, more *vivid*, shifting until they became what I’d envisioned. It wasn’t until I unconsciously took a step towards the computer desk, where the camera sat, that I realized the internal lever in my head had set itself back to zero, my step *not* sending me hurtling across the room.

Stopping, I pushed it back to where it was before, feeling myself rise on the padded floor, the colors of my shirt becoming washed out once more. Frowning, I moved it back, finding the lever only moved so fast, and trying to push it faster felt deeply uncomfortable. It only took three seconds to shift to normal, but that was *quite* a bit of time in combat.

Pushing it the other direction, the colors started to become richer, *more* vivid, as if they were more *real.* I tried to remember the couple of times I’d gotten Herb talking about color theory. Was it the saturation or lightness that was the little white/black slider? The hue remained the same, as did the light/darkness of it, but as I shifted my mental level it shifted from normal, to washed out, to more vivid than should be physically possible, my weight changing as I did so, bouncing me up and down on the padding.

On one hand, density *wasn’t* weight, but if I was increasing my density *without* increasing my mass, no, my *volume*, then it *would* increase my mass, and thus, likely, my weight. The fact that increasing my density wasn’t increasing my size meant it was *more* than just ‘density manipulation’, but, without tracking down the original user, I’d have to do this the hard way. That being, the way that *every other parahuman in existence* had to do things, so I was kind of whining.

Watching my hands de- and re-saturate, I chuckled. “Villains beware, for I am *Detergent Man!*”

Hearing the door chime, I let the power return to zero, shifting my costume to my normal Vejovis guise as I used a fly in the hall to check, seeing Kayden, still in costume, outside. Hitting the door switch with a bit of hardened air, the door opened, and she stepped inside. “Hello Vejovis,” she smiled, using a bit of Light to cross the room, landing smoothly next to me. “How are you?”

“I’ve been better, I’ve been worse,” I shrugged. “You?”

“Can’t complain,” she shrugged, with a wide smile. It took me a little aback, as I hadn't realized how good she looked when she *actually* smiled. While a literally bright beacon of light most of the time, unless she was in the ‘Mom’ role, she tended to fade into the background when her power wasn’t active. I’d seen her smile before, but they were small, demure things, not the, well, *bright* grin she was giving me, more like something I’d get from Mouse Protector, or Taylor when she wasn’t feeling self-conscious, which was slowly becoming rarer.

Her grin turned wry, “Anything I can help you with,” she asked, looking around the room intently.

Considering it, I shrugged, “Sure.” Mentally flicking the switch, the colors of my costume deepened slightly. I didn’t shift it all the way, just a third, and it fluctuated a bit before I mentally pinned it in place, creating a metaphorical notch to hold the lever in.

“New Tinkertech?” she assed, raising an eyebrow.

Internally freezing, I answered almost on autopilot, having forgotten that I’d forgotten I hadn’t told her I was a power-copier. “Yep!” Thinking hard, I mentally created a generic looking piece of tech in one pocket from my costume material, flipping the pocket open and taking the ‘device’ out for a moment, before dropping it back inside. “Interface is a bitch to get used to,” I tapped my mask, “but maybe some sparring will help me get used to it.”

Flying backwards, I set my hands in a fighting stance. My motions felt heavy, but weighty, like I was bigger than I was. Mentally turning the lever back, setting it to one-third ‘washed out’, I made another mental notch to hold it steady in, though it still wanted to zero itself out. Moving my hands again, I was fast, faster than I was before, though my perception of time was unaffected. Nodding to myself I looked across the room at Kayden, who was watching with an amused look. “Ready?” she asked, again with a teasing quality that was unexpected, but not exactly unwelcome

“Give me your best shot. Best, *indoor* *training* shot,” I quickly amended, hardening the air around the computer consoles as her hand started to glow.

With an almost lazy wave, a helix of light shot off towards me, but I was already dodging. My push off the ground was more horizontal than vertical, but I still wasn’t prepared for how *quickly* I moved, overshooting my mark by a good deal, going for one of the padded walls.

Thankfully, with my flight I was able to twist mid-air, landing on my feet, if sideways in relation to the floor, and my speed had also taken aback Kayden, who’s second shot towards where I was *trying* to stop, missing me by a mile. Still, the fact that she’d been able to predict where I was going was impressive, given how I’d been *trying* to get her to lead fire for *weeks*, instead of just blasting at wherever I stopped.

With a grin of my own, I jumped off the wall, my own weight so low I could squeeze out the kind of speed that would normally put me dangerously close to discharging a shield.

Panicked, Kayden let out a Light Wave as she flew up, and I redirected myself. It would’ve been enough to stop me without damaging the floor, but I wasn’t moving for her, but for *above* her.

Landing, using my flight to stop myself, I launched myself downwards, directly for her. Surprisingly, she was slow on the dodge, letting me get close and slug her in the chest, not with super strength, and not even as hard as I could, but still hard enough that it should’ve knocked her back and left a bruise. However, I barely pushed her back a little, my hand dragging down across her breasts as I fell past her.

She looked shocked for a moment, then smiled in a way that was *very* Mouse Protector, blasting me away with a small blast that still spent me spinning as she murmured, “Oh *that’s* how it is.”

I righted myself, letting my density normalize as I tried to figure out what just happened, dodging another blast. *That should’ve hit harder than it did. Why did. . . I’m an idiot.* Force equaled mass times acceleration, and my effective mass was *different.* Actually, it would be closer towards momentum equaled mass times velocity squared but the issue was still there.

To try not to hurt her, so I’d slowed my velocity to what would be a normal hit on an unenhanced person, but my mass was something like a *tenth* of what it should’ve been, making the blow only a fraction as effective. To hit her normally I’d need to increase my speed by. . . okay, that was math I *didn’t* want to do right now, *especially* dodging another Light Blast, even if Kayden kept on closing instead of maintaining a healthy distance, *for some reason*.

That said, with the change in mass through density, I should’ve still hit her harder than I did. Was that another aspect of the power? I tanked a blow at normal density, getting blasted back. Shifting to be lighter, I took another hit, feeling how far back I was shot, getting a feel for it. Once again, it didn’t line up with how light I was, knocking me back further, yes, but not far *enough.*

“Glutton for punishment?” she laughed, noticing how I’d not bothered to dodge the second shot.

Shifting to be full *vivid*, my density increasing, I pushed off, accidentally popping a shield and feeling the floor dent slightly under my foot as I lifted off. *Fuck* I thought, even as her eyes went wide as I flew towards her, my Personal Shields not caring the slightest how heavy was as they carried me, at speed, towards her. Even discharging a minor shield for the launch hadn’t sent me moving as fast as they could just by carrying me.

Kayden tossed another blast at me, only for it to hit and splash uselessly across my chest, not even slowing me down. Her eyes widened as she let out a pulse of Light, only slightly moving backwards. She’d fallen back on her old manner of flight, the wasteful full-body glow, but for our limited space that made sense, the jet-method likely sending her bouncing off a wall which, even enhanced as she was by the Light, would still smart.

Putting a hand over my face, though to move my limb even at a moderate pace I had to *force* my body to move with the metal around my bones, the blast splashed harmlessly against me, barely slowing me down. Moving my arm back down, extending both of them out, I could see actual panic in her eyes as she prepped a full powered blast.

She let it go, the white helix shooting forward like a rocket, and I reached a hand out, already having started moving my limb before she shot her power, her aim predictable even if my muscles felt like concrete.

The blast hit my outstretched hand, palm angled as the exotic matter hit and started to detonate. A hint of my own Light, along with targeted Acoustokinesis, sent the blast down and to the side, the air rippling in a muted explosion as I seemed to slap it aside, eve as the Crystalline Shield on my hand discharged from the force of it.

Before she could do more than stare in disbelief, I was on her, grappling her as I hit her like a freight train, careful to slow myself down *just* before I impacted her so as not to cause injury. Clamping down tightly around her, I sped back up, shooting us across the space, and slowing right before I hit the wall, pinning her there.

“So,” I grinned, “I think I’m getting the hand of t-mmmf!” I tried to quip, only to find Kayden kissing me. That or she’d decided to defeat me by choking me with her tongue.

I froze in shock, part of me tempted to continue, but I *sat* on my libido, something I had an odd amount of experience with lately, and let her go, disentangling as I let my *vividness* fade, flying backwards. I looked in confusion at her, wondering where the *hell* this came from, as she started to fly towards me with an anticipatory grin.

“Kayden, *what the fuck!?”* I swore, and she paused, suddenly unsure. “What about Herb?”

She grimaced, and I stared, but something seemed *off* with her Flames of power, not burning in the patterns they normally did. I tried to think what that could mean. Normally, the Flames of power were related to the person’s mental state, low when depressed, high when passionate or angry, and I couldn’t recall seeing them burn and twist the way they were now. That said, I hadn’t made a study of them. Yet. “What *about* him?” she asked with a scowl.

“Aren’t you two. . . *you know?*” I asked. I knew she didn’t like to talk about it, given her racism, but I thought they had something going on, if only because I hadn’t heard Herb bitching about it lately and they *seemed* to actually be getting along when we’d been tearing apart the boats.

She sniffed, “We aren’t anything. And he doesn’t have time for me.”

“And *I* would?” I asked incredulously. “Even only needing to sleep a few hours a night, I’m *swamped* with shit Kayden! You might not be part of it, caring for Dinah, which I *do* appreciate, but do you *know* what goes into running this place? Because I’m *still* finding new shit every day or two!” I felt a little unbalanced, having not expected *whatever* this was, but trying to figure it out anyways.

“You made time for me now,” she argued.

I sighed, “Because I was *also* testing out something else, and I could do *both.* Kayden, we haven’t spent that long together, why do you think I’d sleep with you?”

“Are you saying you don’t want to?” she asked, twisting in her aura in a seductive way that I had *never* expected from the prim and proper Kayden. “It only has to be the once, if you’re not *satisfied*.”

*Dude*, I could practically hear my libido say with an urgency that was so strong it looped back to complete calm, *she’s not just teasing, she’s not doing it as payment for helping her, oh, and she’s not fucking* ***jailbat.*** *Go for it!*

I, however, didn’t *do* that kind of thing to my friend, even if he *hadn’t* acted like my friend since we’d got here, only starting to get better in the past week. Kayden, taking my silence for approval, flew closer, with a grin, reaching out for my chest. She jerked to a halt as, no longer restrained by my increased density, my hand darted forward, catching her wrist before she touched me.

“Kayden, if you have a problem go *talk* *to him.*” She started to open her mouth but I reached out, putting my finger on her lips, internally cursing as I was almost moving on autopilot, still trying to figure out what I was supposed to do in this situation. At her quirked eyebrow and smirk, I could tell that had been the *wrong* thing to do.

Letting go of her, I held up my hands. “Sorry, mixed messages, I know. I have the social awareness of your average armadillo, but Herb, he gets too wrapped up in himself. I mean, I do too, but it’s a different kind. He probably thinks he’s being too clingy, and needs to give you space, or something, trying to pre-empt you, thinking what *he* thinks is obvious is *you* giving him a non-verbal *command*. God knows he’s tried that shit with *me* enough time.”

Kayden closed, wrapping her arms around me, and pressing herself close. “Are you *absolutely* sure about that?” she asked.

Holding myself stiff, ignoring how soft and warm she felt, I nodded. “Yes, yes I am. Thank you for the spar, it *really* did help me, and if you’re up for it again, and I’m free, I’ll be glad to help you work on some of *your* abilities. However, that is *all* I want to do with you.”

Pushing herself up against me one more time, she let go, smiling, though without the predatory edge she’d had before. “You are too good to him,” she commented sadly, glancing down. “At least you’re not gay. Bye Vejovis.”

“Bye Kayden, have a good rest of your day,” I replied politely.

Flying to the door, she shrugged. “Could’ve been better,” was all she said, hitting the switch and leaving.

*I hate you,* my Libido groused.

*Not as much as I would’ve hated myself if I agreed,* I shot right back, shakily lowering myself to the floor. “*What. The.* *Fuck*,” I swore, to no one, and everyone, at the same time.

 I was sure of two things however. One, Perfect Body meant I wouldn’t feel the pain of being. . . *backed up.* And two? I was *never telling anyone about this.*

<AB>

I sighed, sparing a glance for the crowds gathered around us. It was June Sixth, and an hour before sunset. It hadn’t even been two months since I’d arrived, that being the day after next, but it felt more like two *years*, maybe even two and a half. I shook my head, wondering if I’d recognize myself if I could see me now, or if I would a year today.

I’d made mistakes, *so* many mistakes, but, all in all, I’d made more correct decisions then wrong ones. Amelia was no longer on the short road to a mental breakdown, and neither was her sister. Taylor wasn’t stuck in a suicidal spin of escalation, where she’d either fix the world, or die trying. Even people like Paige, Dinah, and Mouse Protector had been saved from their canon fates, even if the last two had still gotten a small taste of them.

That said, I wasn’t ignorant of the blood on my hands, the people that I’d killed. Most deserved it, but I’m sure there were some that might not’ve. Some poor souls press-ganged into working for the ABB, only to die at my hands. Those that’d died in the bombings that would’ve otherwise lived. The scores of heroes that’d perished in the fight against Leviathan. And I knew there’d be more.

With the city *literally* inhospitable, filled with powers, and monsters, and dangers beyond most human’s understanding, it was empty of the expected problems, but as we fixed things, as we brought order and safety to the knife-edged chaos, we’d attract them once again. I was well aware that Charlie, Herb, and myself were all Slaughterhouse Nine targets.

Hell, if we were following canon they should’ve *been* here by now. But where would they hide?

The Slaughterhouse 9, unfortunately, weren’t *idiots*. They needed the cover an of an active population to hide in, disappearing into the crowds between strikes, sowing fear and chaos wherever they went, and hiding within the panicked public. Here? They’d be a beacon, easily seen, and metaphorically nuked if only because I didn’t have a power that could *literally* nuke them. Yet.

No, when we started to get established, when there *were* masses that didn’t know each other present once again, they’d utilize the anonymity of cities and slip in, and then it’d be *on*.

That said, they were going to be in for one hell of a shock when they realized how little glass there was in the city.

Looking at the gathered Penumbral Defenders, I turned and regarded where we’d start the process. Sherrel and I had built a second vehicle, this one more like a millipede, her ‘vehicle’ requirement being more flexible than she’d first thought. This one worked in conjunction with her Deconstructor, excavating all of the things that went under the surface, ripping them out and replacing it with bedrock, returning the area to what it originally was. Now we had a gaping hole in the ground, which was *exactly* what I needed.

Accord had come through, oh *boy* did he come through. I’d known the more complicated I’d made the plan, the easier it’d be for him, so I hadn’t held back. I hadn’t commissioned a plan for the city, no, I’d commissioned an entire city-building *system.*

Decision trees, permutations of possible architectural design formats, possible pathways of city services based on over a hundred different factors, every kind of anomaly containment or utilization I could think of, I’d asked for the moon, and he’d *delivered.*

I knew the nature of the anomalies meant that any plan would likely need to be changed, if not scrapped outright. With how intricate Accord’s plans were, that meant I’d need to either go to him again and again, annoying him more each time, or wait until we’d pacified the *entire city* before we asked for a plan. Either way, what we were doing would be so obvious it’d give him weeks, if not *months* to position himself to try to undercut me, like his ‘little’ request for a quarter of the city had been, and I was under no delusions that, whatever quarter I’d give him would just happen to be the *most* important quarter in his plans. No, I’d asked him for plans to make plans, the sheer scope of the project mind-boggling.

He’d had it done in five days, and apparently most of that was spent writing the damn thing down.

Now I stood, in front of what would be the first of *many* structures. Part of me wanted this to be the new city hall, to show that *this* was where we started, but there were a limited number of things the plan accounted for being here, and I knew the one I was going to go with. Besides, it didn’t matter what the first building here was, it mattered what the city *became*.

“Ready?” I asked, and the Dryad body next to me, the most ornate of which I’d ever built, nodded. Black and red wood twisted together for her base form, gold and white marbled embossed panels of Orichalcum providing contrast, carved statuary marble forming the hard surfaces of her body. She was the closest thing to art that I’d ever made, but that was fitting for this, as I was about to start a much, *much* grander piece.

Standing tall, my eyes were open, but I wasn’t seeing through them. From a hundred different vantage points, insectile eyes stared at the pit, taking in every detail. This was going to be a *bitch* to pull off, and I couldn’t throw *this* one into a sun, like I’d done to all of the faulty models. Glad I’d built ‘close enough’ tolerances into the request, to avoid having to build the stupid thing to the *micron*, I let out a long breath. Dryad, still silent, lifted her arms, putting on a show to all to be pulling deeply on ‘her powers’. With the theatrics taken care of, sinking *deeply* into my powers, I began.

The stone bottom of the pit was flat, and the wood chips were tossed inside, by the puppet, rolling into position, even as the surface rippled in a way that would be recognizable to many in the Bay. If they said anything, though, I didn’t hear them, so focused on what I was doing that their words were so much noise, the words of the potential Hosts not worth caring for.

The wood was held in place through **Tree Growth & Control**’s power, while metal, a titanium alloy *specifically* chosen for this started to emerge from the ground. It wasn’t Tinker metal, but it was close, but I’d gotten it down to the point that I could make it on command. Utterly useless as a weapon-base, it was apparently *perfect* for construction, the only issue was its *cost*.

Nowhere near the cost of the rare earth metals I was making for Toybox, it would still be *ruinously* expensive, easily over a hundred times the cost of the cast iron used for building normally. That, however, wasn’t an issue for me, but there was also the fact that a metal only building was a *horrible* idea, for more reasons than a *very* annoyed architect could explain to me in the hour I’d asked for him to answer the questions I had.

That was where the wood came in.

The Crimson Oak grew, twisting in ways that wood never would normally, flattening and shaping itself into long pieces, occasionally breaking themselves up as they continued, as making a building out of a continuous piece of wood was, again, not nearly as good of an idea as I thought it’d be, according to the architect.

Regardless, the interweaving patterns of the lowest sub-basement formed, reaching up like hands raised towards the heavens, and they continued to grow, lifting ever higher.

Moving in orchestrated patterns, constantly checking against the plans and the working models I’d constructed that were squirreled away nearby, I continued without pause. There were certain points where I could stop and rest, and in the future I would, but this time it needed to be *done right.* Higher and higher the tendrils of wood and metal grew, the superstructure quickly filled out with walls, panels, doors, and then we hit ground level, and the plans *changed.*

Twisting and flattening, the ground floor started to grow, and I got to the *windows.* While Star Wars Transparisteel was not a thing, someone had developed a transparent aluminum that did the job. I’d been worried, as it was *technically* a metallic ceramic, but my power had gone ‘still counts’ when **Planning** had asked, and we were in business.

Now clear sheets of the material grew before our eyes, even as the titanium alloy and crimson oak structure grew its first level, then it’s second, then the third. Most of it was repeating patterns, but there was enough variation and difference that I still paid close attention. It kept going up, and up, and up, finally stopping at twelve stories, which was the predetermined height for this particular building, finishing it off with the roof-cap, and all of the little ‘finnicky bits’ which I’d found I had to add after the structure was done, doing them at the same time as the base structure being impossible, at least with my current skill level.

With it done, unable to give a sigh of a relief of my own, I had a bit of catharsis as I made Dryad drop her hands and stagger with the emotions that I felt. **Arthropod Control**, no, *Taylor* caught her, and I made the puppet nod in thanks as she pulled herself together, wearily walking back to me, letting my control over my powers, so tight my hands metaphorically ached, go.

“Good job,” I said carryingly, ignoring the fact I was congratulating myself, the murmured whispers around me slowly making sense again. The empty Lady Bug costume on my other side nodded, Taylor making it comment, “Not bad, Woody.”

With the oddest feeling that I was playing with dolls, I made the Dryad body flick off the empty Lady Bug costume, Herb, Karen, and Taylor all laughing as the Lady Bug costume shrugged at the raised, wooden middle finger, but with the puppetted costume somehow having an amused air about it. I shook my head, Taylor having gotten quite adroit at manipulating the hollow heroine through me.

Looking at the structure with my own eyes, I had to say I was a bit impressed with myself, even to the point that I easily ignored the arrogance seeming to drip from that thought. I’d seen the plans, and dozens of models, but looking at it in its proper scale it had a certain grandeur that I’d overlooked.

It was an apartment building, twelve stories tall, with several basements, made of crimson wood and shining metal, and the titanium was probably the weaker of the two. The wood, naturally formed, or unnaturally depending on who you asked, gave the entire thing a slightly otherworldly air, as did the embossed art that covered it.

It was all following pre-set patterns, the aesthetic needs of the city part of the grand proposal that’d been presented, with different buildings having different designs in the manual. To ease maintenance, a thin layer of transparent metal covered the art, making a flat, easily cleanable surface so dust, dirt, and god knew what else wouldn’t collect in the cracks.

Some of the designs were geometric, some were artistic, some were just. . . odd, but apparently their inclusion was part of the design, so I’d make them if needed. This building was one that straddled the line between the second and third category.

Across every surface was borderline religious iconography, but most prominent were designs detailing phoenixes in flight, rising from ashes that, if you squinted, seemed a bit. . . *building* shaped. The name ‘Phoenix Point’ was a bit, well, *on the nose,* but I wasn’t going to argue, especially looking around at the dockworkers and office staff who’d all gathered to watch it built.

It was currently a shell, all of the furniture, wiring, and so on needing to be brought in and assembled. I could handle most of the broad strokes, and the entire thing was built in such a way that someone *without* powers could do the rest, and maintain it. That said, it was a *very* pretty shell.

I clapped, getting the attention of those around me. “Well, there’s the first one. Or at least the first stage of the first one. It’s a bit empty, if you look in the windows, but that’s fairly easy to fix. Not bad for,” I checked my watch, “half an hour’s worth of work, eh?”

That seemed to cause a wave of disbelief and shock, the others checking phones and watches. Glancing at the building again, I knew they weren’t going to all be this easy. This one hadn’t been hooked into any sort of city services, not even having water, power, or sewage, and I’d need to do the first construction for *all* of it, along with all of the other city systems. It was doable, but it was going to take a *great* deal of time.

Time I might not have.

I sighed, even as I felt Taylor’s bugs push the inside of the Lady Bug costume, directing it to pat me on the back, likely sensing my feelings. “Thanks,” I told the costume, but directed towards Taylor, who made the costume nod, her father not that far away and watching us all.

Glancing over towards the next plot, which was halfway cleared, I joked, “So, same time tomorrow?” Overwatch, standing to the side, nodded, before dissolving into static, off on his next job.

“It really is somethin’,” Herb commented, staring at the building, the light of the setting sun seeming to set the building ablaze with orange light, as it likely would every evening. The city was designed to maximize sunlight for psychological health and to avoid vitamin D deficiencies.

“It is,” I agreed, feeling a twinge of guilt. “Also, you should probably talk to Kayden, if she hasn’t approached you already about it.”

My friend, who was smiling softly at the structure, froze, glancing over to me. “She, ah, told ya about that?”

“Not in as many words, no,” I reassured him. “But, well, I could tell she was upset.”

“Even you. . .?” he trailed off, and I shot him a ‘and what do you mean by *that?*’ look, which just caused him to laugh. “I will tonight, promise.”

“Good. And if either of you feel you need a third party. I hate doing that, but I’m decent at it,” I offered.

That caused him to snort, “Like an emotional jackhammer, bustin’ through the bull. Things aren’t that bad.” I gave him a look. “But if they are, I’ll ask,” he reassured me with an unconvincing wave of his hand.

“Good,” I told him, looking back at the building, staring at what I’d built. After all the destruction, it felt good to have *created* something. “Not bad.”

“The first of many,” my friend intoned, with unusual seriousness.

“The first of many,” I agreed, feeling a smile rise. “*We’re just getting started.*”