**Reconstruction 15.7**

A fewhours after I’d dropped off what we’d salvaged from Dauntless’ apartment at a waiting pickup truck he’d called to meet us, I was sitting with Herb, making sure we were generally on the same page, or, as he called it, ‘scheming’. It was during these sessions that we’d hammered out how we’d clear an area, with Mouse and I poking around in detail, then Lady Bug and Break coming in to tag the bodies. Normally Taylor would be with us, but she’d begged off, so it was just us two.

“I’m not so sure about givin’ the heroes the talk,” Herb, replied, after I explained what happened. “Though helpin’ Dauntless get his shit was nice of ya. I know ya like to teach, but maybe not here. If ya want to, I’ll back ya, man.”

I frowned, having expected he might not want me to, but lacking in that response of his had been any explanation as to *why.* “Because it would be giving out too much information?” I asked. “Because it would be showing that I knew more than they thought? Because it would be helping out or possible foes? Or just that I’d be in range in case they tried something, because I don’t think they will. Not when we have Cauldron’s backing.”

“Nah man,” he disagreed, frowning in turn. “It’s, you know, I don’t think they can handle that shit in the Zones all professional-like. Like, you think they’d follow our instructions?”

Considering how hard it was to get *him* to follow my instructions, I thought that was more than a little hypocritical, but I could kind of see where he was, if not coming from, then trying to go. “You’re worried they’ll get overconfident? That they’ll get themselves killed?”

“Yeah,” he smiled, glad I understood. “They’re not bad guys, well, not bad good guys, ‘cept for Armsmaster, but he’s in the pen, tryin’ not to drop the techno-soap. We bring them along, they might get Minded, or think they got some shit, just ‘cause they’re used ta sparring with the C-stringers or the normies, and then, *POW!*” he yelled as he clapped his hands together, making me jump a little, *“*Their spleen’s a begonia.”

I shook my head, “No, I’m not running clearing missions with them. This’ll be a basic ‘I’m not kidding be fucking careful’ talk, maybe take them to a nearby anomoly or two in the green zone.” I paused, sending off a request to my brother to Future-send his teams poking around the south-western end of the city to go find an Anomaly I could show off that wasn’t near either of our bases. “Definitely one of the ‘will kill you if you fuck up’ types that’s based on proximity, as that’ll be easy to display why they need to be careful. I’m *not* going to be putting myself on the line for them, but a few hours of instruction would likely help them,” honestly on the fence about it before, but finding myself seeing the merits. I’d ask Taylor her opinion, but unless she disagreed I’d call Piggot tomorrow morning and set it up.

Herb gave me a mindful look.“But not anything invisible,” he stressed.”

“Nothing invisible,” I agreed, trying to move us on to a new subject. “Have you seen your *other* employers? Since you talked to them about our project?”

“Ya mean Spookytown?” he asked, grinning. “Yeah, they had me do a wetwork job in some desert. Place looked weird, though, sand was whiter than you. Big sucker too, and was eatin’ people, so I figure you’d be okay with it.”

I shrugged, “That means it was either a rogue minion or a cannibal, either way, you’re right.”

The other man nodded, “Yeah. Took a bit of convincin’ to get ‘em to pay me like ya asked, but I made sure not to use any powers, so it didn’t look slim.”

“Slim?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he replied, “Shady.”

I groaned, “Herb, you’re my friend, but you’re hard enough to understand when you’re *not* using your own particular version of cockney rhyming slang. So you got it?”

He looked around, as if checking for watchers *in my office with a single closed door*, before leaning back cockily. “Yeah. I got the stuff. Ya got my money?”

I gave him a flat look.

He laughed, pulling out a steel cylinder. “Just fuckin’ with ya, here ya go. Oh, and they got this too,” he added pulling out a crumpled up sheet of paper, but I waved it away.

“I’ll check it afterwards, but I need to test a theory,” I said, unstopping the top.

“Uh, dude?” Herb asked, suddenly worried. “You’re not gonna drink it, are ya? They said they didn’t know what it’d do.”

Taking off the sunglasses that covered my eyes, I shook my head. “No, but I need to get a good look at it.”

The pinkish, metallic goop wasn’t anything that impressive, but that all changed when I stopped seeing it and started to See it. Unlike the other Vials I’d looked at, the ones we’d gotten from whatever dropped us here, this one was different, wild, free in some ways, but broken in others, like a shattered mirror where each piece showed something slightly different. One reflection showed yourself only a shade more tanned, another where your hair was slightly different, or your eye color was changed, but others, further and further away, became more and more extreme, like your skin was covered in iridescent scales, your hair was made of writhing white quills, or you no longer had eyes, but a pair of tiny, screaming, fang-lined mouths.

Blinking, something gave, and the shattered mirror fell away, revealing a thousand twisting pathways, shimmering with possibilities, each step defining the next, in flowing fractal fissures. Stepping down those streets, the matrices of possibility shifted, defining and limiting while also specifying. Retracing those steps, the pathways reversed in turn, showing the potential paradigms of power possible.

Something nudged me, yet I did not move, Seeing nothing that could have done so. Suddenly the world shattered, and I found myself looking at the top of a light-brown hand. Blinking, I could hear the man in front of me saying something, but the words were sharp, yet flat, and hard to understand. However, they gained meaning as I focused.

“-re thing again and I was gettin’ kinda worried and you aren’t even hearin’ me are you?” Herb asked, eyes a little wide and tone more than a little worried.

“Just the last bit, sorry,” I apologized. “About me not hearing you.” Glancing at the clock, I saw it had only been a few minutes. “Why did you stop me? I was just getting started?”

My friend gave me an incredulous look as he pulled his hand back. “Yer eyes caught fire, and you weren’t talkin’ back. Ya *always* talk. I got scared.”

Checking, I closed my eyes and pressed a finger against one, and it was still there, so I wouldn’t need to go talk to Panacea, and I didn’t have a nosebleed, or really feel that bad at all. A bit of a headache, but, considering what I’d been looking at, that made sense. “Would it help if I explained?” I suggested, and at his shrug, I took that as a yes. “It’s. . . complicated.”

“No, *really?”* he snarked back.

Wincing, I nodded, “Okay, fair enough it’s. . . unbound? Free? Unaligned? Our vials are set. You get what you get, they’re *very* set. This,” I stated, indicating the Vial. “Is. . . *not.* I mean, it kind of is. It’s power is Reflection. But that’s all.”

“So, like, mirror clones and shit?” Herb asked skeptically. “Cause we’ve already got that shit with Noelle, and we don’t need more.”

I thought about it. “Yes, but also no, but also maybe.”

“Oh, okay,” he replied mildly in the way that I knew meant he was saying he didn’t understand.

“Okay, so, it *can* be, or it could be something completely different, or it could be, but not in the way you’re thinking,” I explained. “The power *isn’t set* yet. For instance, and this shouldn’t take more than a minute, so wait a mo’,” I said, looking back down into the Vial, and *through* the Vial, not bothering to pause at the mirror before I punched through it, finding myself here-yet-not.

It was an infinite pathway of switching, twisting, shifting hallways, but, instinctually, I knew the way, though I didn’t know *why*. Regardless, I started to move, to dance, to *shift.* Third right, second left, back up, twist, three steps rimward and one towards Law, the pattern continued until I found the doorway, the portal a twisting mirror that would shatter the others. Not looking at it, but at the reflection shown within and without, I took a moment to *understand*, and retreated, leaving the matrix of ability completely.

The world felt small, yet infinitely large for a moment, before I got my bearings. “Okay, so, possible, but *no.*”

“Wait,”he asked, *“you can tell?*” I lifted an eyebrow, not understanding the question. He just stared at me, then closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and asked “You can tell what powers I’d get if I drank that?”

“You wouldn’t *get* any powers, you’re already a host,” I replied, now frowning at the stupid question. “And of course I can tell,” I waved the Vial, “how can you *not?”*

He accepted it, his eyes glowing with Power Sight, and Saw the contents of the Vial. “It says ‘Reflection’. That’s it. Nothin’ ‘bout clones-”

“No,” I shuddered a bit at the thought. “No clones.”

My friend looked at me, hesitating, finally asking as he handed it back, “Do I want to know?”

I considered the issues as I stoppered the Vial, and figured out how to phrase what I’d seen in that final reflection. “Major Mutation, psychological contamination, and a good chance the Host wouldn’t survive. You’d *become* a reflection, of sorts, terribly unstable, and not. . . not you. You’d be the first victim of your power, in order to stabilize it, but it would through a mirror, darkly. And, with time, you’d. . . warp. It’s possible, but. . . the powers are a maze.”

“Like, a hall of mirrors?” Herb asked, adding as I shook my head no, “Then what.”

I considered how to explain it. “So, it’s like a hall of mirrors, but you can step into a mirror to enter another maze. Hmm. . . Have you ever seen a five-dimensional object?”

“There are five? I only heard about four. Height, length, girth, and the other kind of length, like a movie,” he listed off.

Decoding that, I nodded, “Okay, first of all, never use the word ‘girth’ again. Second, yeah, height, length, *width*, and time are the first four, at least in reality. The fifth is weird, and kind of where light and gravity exist, since they don’t exactly do, in the conventional sense. No, I’m not talking about reality, but conceptually. Have you ever seen a hypercube?”

“I’ve seen a sugar cube,” he offered, and I smiled at the joke.

“Close, it’s a way of modeling space with multiple dimensions, in a way we can’t in reality. Actually. . .” I trailed off, manifesting a bit of starstuff into being. “Okay this is a one-dimensional object.”

“A ball?” he asked. “Cause I think that’s three-dee, but it’s not like I went to college for this stuff.”

I sighed, “It’s impossible to make a non-three-dimensional object in three-dimensional space. At least not without powers I don’t have. Just go with the analogy.” He nodded. “Okay, since you know this already, then this is a two-dimensional object,” I lengthened the *ball* of plasma into a rod, “and this is a three-dimensional object.” Extending it outwards, I made the wire-frame box. “And this is a four-dimensional hypercube, a tesseract.” I extended a rod out from every corner of the box, using the ends of *those* rods to form a secondary box, with rods connecting them as well.

He blinked, looking at it, then nodded. “Oh, um, but it’s still, ya know, three dimensional.”

“Let’s rotate it,” I suggested, spinning it to clockwise, then clockwise from above, then clockwise from the side. “And now on its fourth axis.”

The shape warped the interior box seeming to make a break for it out of one of the sides of the larger box, the side it was attempting to leave through growing then passing over the smaller box, who’s leading edge grew even as the side of the larger box that it was trying to get away from shrunk and tried to follow. The enlarged edge of the larger box reached the halfway point and started to shrink, returning to the size it had originally been, only on the other side. The leading edge of the smaller box had now grown to the same size as the side of the larger box it’d passed through, the back of the smaller box the same size, while the side of the larger box the smaller box had tried to get away from had shrunk and was now the back end of the smaller box, the entire shape now identical to how it started.

“. . . Do it again,” Herb ordered eyes intent.

To help him I shifted the color of the current outer box’s bars from red to purple, and then sent the entire thing to spinning on its fourth dimension. I waited until he finally looked up and asked, “Five?”

Stopping the Tesseract back at its base position, from the tip of the larger cube I grew another set of rods extending outwards, making a third, even larger cube, coloring its framework purple, like the inside. Then I sent that spinning in its fifth dimension. This one extended upwards, instead of to the side, which was easy enough, until I started to move it in its fourth dimension, then its third, then it’s second, and then sent the thing twisting like a top.

“They keep going?” Herb questioned.

“They keep going,” I agreed, “but I have a hard time understanding them past this point.” with the pattern started, it was easy enough to set to repeat, turning back to the task at hand. “So I explained that,” I waved to the rotating penteract, “to explain this,” I waved the Cauldron Vial.

“Imagine there’s a maze, that shifts as you walk, where different paths will lead to entirely different exits, and at each of those exits is a power,” I explained.

“Each step is a request, a requirement, a suggestion for use of the power, as it were. The more specific you get, the closer to your final power you become. The difference here is I’m. . .” I searched for an analogy that wasn’t so obvious but it was really the best one. “I’m walking the path with my eyes open, instead of blundering through it at the speed of thought. That’s why Cauldron has mental exercises its Recipients can do to get better results, as certain wants, or desires, would lead you down certain roads. One of them is. . . not ‘do you like yourself’, but. . . ‘is this you, you’, or something like that. Now, something in this almost half-answers the question for you, but you can say no, and there’s more to it, but I’m not sure. It’s, like, step *four,* so it’s pretty clear, but I had to say no to get to clone creation. It’s. . . odd.”

I considered the Vial. “I don’t know how I knew how to do it, I just did. Maybe it’s a part of the Abaddon aspect of the power, how it grows in power over time? Either way, I think the mixes. . *help* direct it, but. . . I think. . . . I think I’ve been thinking of Shards wrong,” I admitted.

“How were ya thinking of them?” he prompted, as I fell silent.

I rolled the idea around a bit more, responding as he moved to talk again. “Entities are hive minds, but they themselves have a dominant intelligence. I assumed that Shards are like us, they’re individuals, just slaved to a purpose, but my data set has been *flawed.* I’ve only been looking at Shards that already have a *Host.*”

“Ya keep sayin’ that. Host,” he explained. “Like powers are parasites. I don’t remember readin’ anythin’ about ‘hosts’ from the story.”

“You didn’t read very much of the story,” I shot back. “But, no, more like host servers, required to run the program.” At his blank look, I tried again. “Okay, you know when you have guests over, how you’re ‘the host’?” This time he nodded. “It’s just like that. I mean, there is a bit of a symbiotic aspect to it, but it’s more like having a long-term guest who, while he’s here, will help you build that garage you’ve always been meaning to, and maybe remodel your kitchen, but he might also paint the house, which you didn’t want, but you can’t exactly say *no*. Only, if the guest doesn’t really understand people, then he might make dinner using arsenic instead of salt, because the Shard doesn’t understand the difference. Now, you don’t know that *it* doesn’t know that, and another Shard *might,* but you *did* ask it to make ramen from scratch, so that’s what you get.”

“So, Shards can’t cook?” Herb asked, but I shook my head no. “Oh, then, the one that cooks might burn your house down if ya ask him to make a garage?” I nodded yes. “But ya don’t know. Only you do. Then, what else can it do?”

“What do you want it to do?” I replied. “It *needs* to have some aspect of ‘Reflection’ to it, it’s naturally keyed that way, but how it does it is where things get interesting.” I made a second Penteract, entirely red. Twisting it randomly, I motioned toward the new shape, “This is clone making.” Resetting the shape, I stated, “You want it to be survivable, okay, that’s a limiting factor.” I moved the top inward, right point of the outermost cube up slightly, then mentally fixed it in place, turning it purple, the point nowhere near where the ‘clone’ configuration had been.

“You want it to effect light? Another limiting factor.” I moved one of the innermost cube’s bars down, tilting it, before fixing it in place and turning that one purple as well. “Like a mirror?” I lengthened one end of the purple bar. “And be invisible?” I caused one of the points on the purple bar to flare, shaking my head, “Nope, sorry, if it’s going to be invisible it can’t reflect light like a mirror. Understand?”

“No,” Herb said, “But, like, a little.”

Shrugging, I agreed, “Same. Only the actually power is like this.” Resetting the shape, I made more and more cubes until they were fourteen deep. “And this is survivable.” I didn’t move one point, but a constellation, letting my own Shard handle the heavy lifting when it came to modelling. “And this is reflecting light.” Another swirl of motion. “And this is like a mirror.” More motion, some of the fixed purple bars also shifting.

“Wait,” Herb said, “I thought purple meant it doesn’t move.”

“It doesn’t,” I agreed, “Unless it does, or only in certain directions, or only if another bar moves in a very specific way, or only to a new position, and every change shifts every bar. Closing and opening paths with each step.” I reset the second hypercube. “It’s navigating a maze, that’s a hundred stories tall and a thousand feet wide where with every step everything changes, you can walk through the walls, though that changes the positioning, some steps teleport you, while others have to be done while saying the right thing, or positioned the correct way, or thinking the right thing, all to get you to your destination. It’s a giant diagnostic test to help the shard lock itself down to human-understandable ways, which is why I was wrong about Shards,” I reiterated bringing myself back to topic.

Looking at my friend, I proposed, “I’ve been looking at already locked down Shards, who have been navigated, and shaped in turn. This little bastard,” I shook the Vial, “is Shards how they *actually are*. Simultaneously more servile than you could possibly imagine, and as uncaring of you as the universe itself. It has orders, and desires, but not in any easily recognizable way, and it will assist you, but it *doesn’t understand what that means.*”

“. . . Shit,” Herb swore, and I nodded.

“Exactly. Ours are already locked down, already navigated, and I’ve *Seen* what that *means,* which means I can *do it again,”* I revealed, hesitating. “*Kinda.*” At his look I added, “Okay, I can walk them, and if I’m going for an end result I can navigate the path, but I don’t know *why* that’s the path. At the end, however, I can review the end result, and either lock it down, like our Vials are, or go back and try again. But, while I can move with a result in mind, I can’t handle *all* of the variables, or what they mean. Only knowing when, probably, something is impossible.”

I sighed, “So, cloning powers are possible, cloning powers without physical changes are not, at least not with this Vial.”

“What about a little changes, like, hair and nails and shit?” Herb suggested. I Saw the contents, and tried that, only for my path to evaporate like a river in the desert.

“No can do, not enough of a change. The mutations aren’t just for show, either, they matter, on a level that I’m not sure about,” I explained.

“What about eyes?” he suggested. “Yours are weird, but you get by with a little help.”

Considering that, I tried again. It *was* possible, though the numbers of possible powers were few. Hesitating, I amended my statement from ‘modified eyes’ to ‘modified eyes but the eyes still work optically in a manner functionally at least equal to normal eyes, if not more.’ The powers narrowed even further, less then a percent of the original pathways still intact.

Pulling back out of the matrix, Herb was grinning. “So ya can?” At my confused look, he pointed towards the second Hypercube which had shifted, displaying a pattern that hurt a little to look at. I wasn’t even sure if that was still a Hypercube anymore, as parts seemed to curve in a way a polyhedron *shouldn’t.*

“I, um, *yeah*. Seriously limits the uses though. Only a couple thousand possible powers, but it’s doable,” I informed him. “What kind of power should I go for? Cloning? They’ll likely be weak and/or short lived now. Or bouncing back attacks. Or maybe some kind of refraction thing?”

“You’re askin’ me?” he asked in return. “Uh, what kind of powers ya got?” I looked at him, confused, as I’d *just listed* the kinds of powers. “Like, Tinker, Changer, Striker, Shaker, that kind of thing.”

I thought about it, trying to mode it, taking a peek to make sure. “Not Tinker, this power could never be a Tinker power, it doesn’t have the recall/micro-transmutation patterns needed. Think of that like a triangle, which this doesn’t have, though it *could* empower items, not sure how unless I run it down. It’s *way* easier to start with a power I want and try to find that. The other way is. . . well, complicated.” I waved to the static stellar creation, that I was trying not to look at too hard, before I just dismissed it entirely.

“Powers don’t fit into the PRT paradigm, which is all about the medium of how their effects are delivered, kind of, while the powers themselves work by refining a conceptual effect, kind of, to a usable power. It’s. . . *complicated,”* I reiterated.

“But you can lock it down? Make it safe? Maybe even write up a little note? Better than this?” Herb asked, handing me the crumpled power, which was labelled with 15% Balance, 20% Jaunt, 40% Division, and 25% Bounce. And that was it. Oh, there were notes under each, but all they amounted to was explaining how the sources *usually* did the thing they were obviously named after, but that was all.

I snorted, tossing the paper into the rotating Penteract. “Easily.”

“Good,” he smiled, expression snapping to deadly serious, “Never tell no-one you can.”

I blinked. *Right, double negative for emphasis.* “I wasn’t. Other than Taylor.” Herb obviously bit back his words. “No, I’m going to, but I’m going to also explain *why* it needs to be a secret. But I need at least one person I can trust to talk to about these things.” The *because I can’t trust you completely* wasn’t said out loud, but it was still said.

He nodded, “Fine. Not Mouse or Panacea?”

Considering it, I shook my head. “No, maybe I’ll have some questions for them, but no, I can trust Taylor to keep a secret this big, but not them. Power Copying is one thing. Vial Determination. . . They’d have me Mastered and enslaved in an instant if they could. Cauldron’s done worse for less, after all.”

Herb shook his head, “Keepin’ secrets from your harem? That’s a forecaster of disaster.”

Capping the Vial I put it away in my desk and dismissed the other star, insisting, once again, *“I don’t have a harem.”*

“Ya can look into powers, but you can’t look into your heart,” my friend opined. “Lee, women are like Voltron: the more you can hook up the better it gets.”

“Have you informed *Kayden,* of this particular truism?” I shot back.

He scoffed, “Do I look stupid to you?” I said nothing. “No, please don’t,” he quietly added, though he couldn’t hide his smile. “Seriously dude, what are you going to do about these girls?”

“Nothing. I’m going to do nothing,” I stated. “Taylor and Amelia aren’t underage-”

“Amelia ain’t,” Herb interrupted. “She’s 16. That’s legal in New Hampshire.”

I sighed, “One, *did you actually look that up?* Two, she’s not *eighteen,* that’s underage *to me.* *Three,* ***no****.* moving on, they’re underage, and Mouse is just teasing me, she doesn’t want a relationship.”

He winced, “Uh, Lee? Ya don’t need to be in a relationship ta bump uglies.”

“I *do,”* I enunciated. “So, no. No harem. No nothing. Not now, and not anytime soon.”

“What ‘bout Squealer? Pretty sure she wouldn’t mind ya makin’ her. . . *squeal*,” he offered.

I looked at him in confusion. “How did you. . . *Mouse,”* I growled. “She mentioned it didn’t she?” Herb grinned and nodded. “Okay, what happened was that Sherrel offered me sexual favors ‘cause she’s used to assholes demanding them, so she just tried to preempt it. Mouse helped explain things, so there’s nothing then. Besides, I barely know her.” Herb opened his mouth, “Which matters *to me.”*

Quinn’s voice, thankfully, piped up from my computer. “Vejovis, I have someone who insists he needs to see you. He *says* it’s urgent.”

“Send him in,” I replied, thankful for an out. However, a moment later, I got the sense something was wrong, and realized it was *Taylor.* The feelings of *worry-fear-guilt* shining like a neurotic beacon. I tried to send positive feelings back, but it just made it worse.

Either way, she was heading towards me, the nearest scribe-swarm waking up to lethargically form the word ‘Sorry’.

On that ominous note, the door opened, and Quinn stepped in, out of costume. “Vejovis,” he said, stepping aside to let in a thin, tall, balding man. He wore glasses, behind which angry eyes glared at me. What got my attention most of all was his chin, or lack thereof. I knew it was likely genetic, and thus shouldn’t be taken as a predictor of personality, but I’d never met a single chin-less person that I liked. Some called it a ‘weak’ chin, and some used that phrase when it didn’t really fit, but his was just a bumpy slope from mouth to neck. From Taylor’s presence, out of costume, coming in behind him, I had a feeling that trend wasn’t going to change.

“Who do you think you are?” the man demanded, full of spit and vinegar. From one perspective, being out of contact with his daughter for weeks, I could almost understand. From every other perspective, the neglect of his daughter that bordered on the criminal, the leaving her to deal with the loss of her mother on her own, the blind eye he turned to anything that he didn’t like, I had no sympathy, or empathy, for this man.

Interesting thing about angry people, their actions held weight for two reasons: Danger and Expected Value. Angry people were dangerous; they could attack you, or cause others to do so, so we payed attention to them. Given I’d disarmed Eidolon, literally, and threw down with an Endbringer (Even if I got badly hurt every time), I had nothing to fear.

Angry people also were expected to have a reasonable cause to be angry, and thus were normally listened to, if only to find out what that cause was. Even strangers were expected to have a certain level of rationale thought and a certain degree of moral character, which is why they gained attention. From what I knew of Daniel Herbert, he had neither, at least not in any way that I cared. If I needed his professional opinion on something, I may listen, but, when it came to morality, I’d pay more attention to Alexandria then I would this man.

That combined to make me feel absolutely nothing at the angry pitiful excuse for a father in front of me. “I believe I’m Vejovis,” I stated, sounding a little confused and looking to my lawyer. “I am Vejovis, right?”

“Legally, at the very least,” he agreed.

“I’m sorry, you think this is a joke?” The tantrum-throwing adult accused.

Taylor winced, as I grabbed the scribe swarm and spelled ‘not your fault’. “I don’t know what ‘it’ is, random citizen, unless you mean my identity, as that’s the only thing you’ve talked about.”

“You know what I’m talking about!” he argued. Lacking an actual topic, I just stared. “Well?”

Looking over to Herb, who had a bit of a deer-in-the-headlights look, I blandly asked. “Did you hear a topic in that vague accusation? Because I didn’t.

He just shook his head, obviously taking Taylor’s piss-poor pater more seriously than I was, muttering, “Nah.”

*“Kidnapping!”* Danny nearly exploded with rage. It was. . . I wanted to say cute, but from how badly Taylor was taking this, from behind him, her feelings turning to *fear-guilt-self-hate,* there was nothing cute about this.

“Arson! Murder! Jaywalking! Either get to the fucking point or *get the fuck out,*” I stated. “Actually, let me start,” I continued, as he started to respond, speaking over his *‘What-’*. “Since you seem devoid of even the *barest* of common courtesy, *Mr. Hebert,* I will get to the point, since you seem *incapable* of it. Hello, I’m the Hero known as Vejovis. I found your daughter when she was in trouble and helped her out. Then, later, when she’d *run away from home*, I gave her a safe place to be, and even a job, which she’s been excellent as, so she wouldn’t be penniless, alone, and *vulnerable*.”

“You had no right!” he argued, ignoring most of what I’d just said. “You should’ve called me!”

I just looked at him, “Okay, since your blind anger has also rendered you *deaf,* I’ll try that again. I’m a registered *Hero*, which does, *in fact,* give me the right to do so. Also, do you know *anything* about dealing with runaway kids? Contacting *the very person they ran away from* is almost *always* a bad idea. Did you even bother reporting her missing?”

Predictably, the man went on the attack. Again. It was a strategy that might’ve worked if I’d *not* been able to bench press a cement truck, or given a shit, but his angry step forward and his scowl were pathetic. “I did three weeks ago! When you were living with my daughter!”

Taylor’s *“Dad!”* went ignored, and I just stared at the man. Pity Flashbang wasn’t divorced, or else I had someone that’d compliment Danny perfectly.

“So, what, a week after she’d ran away? Two? Three? Yes, father of the year, that’s you,” I commented sarcastically, when it became clear he was ignoring his daughter. *Again.* “Did you even know she was safe until we, *at her request*, got you out of Brockton Bay before it was attacked. Unless of course *that’s* the kidnapping you were referring to, and *not* your daughter which, just, *wow.”*

“Of course I’m worried about her!” he shot back, incensed. More incensed? Incenseder? I made a note to look up if that was a word when I was done. “And now that I find out she’s living in some villain’s underground lair, where the government’s said no one’s allowed to be. Oh, I know where we are, I’m not *stupid,”* he spat. “What do you think the PRT would do if I told them where you were?”

I stared at him, shocked, and he grinned viciously, “If you don’t want me to-”

I tapped a few keys on my keyboard, then shut him up with Acoustokinesis. Then I laughed, hard, and long. He took a few steps forward as I howled with laughter, unable to believe what I just heard. He didn’t hit me, but he was shouting, and getting a little red in the face. Herb and Taylor were both staring, wide-eyed, and Quinn? Quinn just looked exasperated.

When I finally stopped, I tapped a few more keys, not doing anything, and let him talk. “Just because-”

He started to yell, and I silenced him. “Tinkertech is so useful,” I sighed. “It’s *obvious* that Taylor gets her intelligence and demeanor from her mother.” That shut him up, so I tapped a few more keys, un-muting him. “Now, in order, one, the PRT is not going to do *anything* you sad, stupid little man. I met with the Triumvirate *last week,* and, two, I *own the land the base is built on.* Yes, even *after* the city was dissolved.”

“No you don’t!” he disagreed. “No one does!”

I motioned to my lawyer who stated, “He, in fact, does.”

“Three,” I continued. “If I *were* a Villain, doing all sorts of horrible things to your daughter then I, A, wouldn’t give a shit if you went to the PRT, B, wouldn’t have brought you *to my ‘lair’*, C, would have you killed for threatening me, D,” I kept going, counting off on fingers, as he suddenly paled, ”Would’ve killed you rather than save you from Leviathan, saying I sent someone to do it but you refused to leave, and E, would’ve had you killed *weeks* ago when I first took her in to make sure that she had no one to go back to and would’ve then *depended* on me for everything, giving me even *more* power than I already had. As you are still alive, if, sadly, a moron who makes accusations rather than *talk like an adult*, I’m not a villain, this isn’t a lair, and I sent someone to approach you with a Job offer, one that I’m now seriously rethinking. You aren’t the only game in town, state, or even country, and I only reached out to you as a favor to your daughter, the same one I apparently ‘Kidnapped.’”

“Um,” Herb put forward into the silent, sounding nervous, for some reason, “Ixnay on the death-threat-ay.”

I frowned at him, “I’m describing how, if I *wasn’t* a Hero, he’d be dead. He’s here, yelling at me, so, ergo, I’m obviously *not* a Villain like he claims. That’s like, an anti-death-threat. I’m saying why I *didn’t* kill him.”

“Besides,” I scoffed, “I’m not going to do anything to him, because Taylor’s *not* in that situation anymore and because she wouldn’t want me to, even though the man ignored his daughter completely after the death of his wife, not noticing she was being bullied to the point that she was near-suicidal, then when she was *locked into a locker full of fermenting feminine waste products,* he had a little blow up, like this, then felt all useless so went back to ignoring her, until she almost got herself killed trying to save some kinds from a gang when she heard about it, which is where I stepped in, helped her, and now, practically a *month* later, he finally shows up like *I’m* the bad guy, yelling to distract himself, again, from the fact that he’d a neglectful parent.”

“I’m not neglectful!” Danny seethed, only for Quinn to respond before I could.

“Actually, if what Vejovis states is true, something I’ll note you did not object to, you would be a case study for malignant neglect, and how it can be committed without *physically* harming your *daughter,”* the lawyer stated, somewhat more coolly than he had spoken before. I’d assumed that, being a father himself, he would be inclined to be on Danny’s side. Then again, *not* being a *neglectful* father, that might’ve had the exact opposite effect.

“I’d never hurt my daughter!” Danny turned on the other man, who didn’t flinch. “As a father, I would never!”

“You don’t know who I am, do you?” Quinn asked, shaking his head. “A number of teens develop powers, and soon run afoul of the law. I can tell you that being a father has nothing to do with what you ‘would never’ do.”

Looking between us, Daniel’s expression was ugly. “I see how it is. C’mon Taylor, were leaving.”

He was halfway to the door when she spoke up, her voice small in a way I hadn’t heard in weeks. “No.”

The man turned, his cooling temper re-igniting, except, thankfully, his target wasn’t Taylor, it was me. “You can’t keep her here! I’m her father, and that means what I say goes!”

I looked to my lawyer in a ‘what can you do’ gesture, and he just sighed. “You are aware that your daughter has, you know, agency*.* Maybe she doesn’t *want* to leave. Also, pretty sure, with the seemingly *iron clad* malignant neglect charge, you won’t be if you push for this. The one main hurdle to emancipation is being financially independent, and I’m almost certain that she makes more than *you* do right now.”

Herb spoke up, before I could hear the newest version of ‘I don’t want to face what I’ve done!’ Danny would spew next. “We offered you and your boys a job. Take it. You’ll be here, with your daughter. My friend’s bein’ a dick, but he ain’t wrong. Make it right with her, ‘cause she’s the one sayin’ no.”

The chinless chump turned away from us, focusing on his daughter. “Taylor, honey, come with me. I, I haven’t been the best, but I’ll be better, I’ll be there for you.”

I was. . . less than impressed, but I’d dealt with this brand of bullshit before. Danny meant it, he really did, which meant his body language, his tone, everything, would show honesty. God knows I’d been suckered that way. The problem came from the *follow-through.* Promise you they’d change, promise you that they’ll learn from this, but next time, *next time,* they’d do better. Then, when they failed you, *again,* they’d repeat themselves as if this wasn’t the first, second, or thirty-fifth time they only could be arsed to pay attention when the consequences of what they’d done started to inconvenience their lives.

Taylor, however, surprised me. “Like you did after the locker?” she asked, her statement sad, and quiet, but seemed to strike him like a physical blow. “No.”

Turning back at us, his temper, *predictably* flared. “You can’t buy me,” he declared, a barely veiled accusation that I didn’t even dignify with a response. When it became obvious we wouldn’t give him more ammo to use to turn his daughter against us, he turned back to her. “Taylor, you need to listen to me. I’m your father.”

“You haven’t been acting like it,” she stated, looking down. Her father started to say something else, but bit whatever it was back as she looked up at him. “Dad, I’m happy. For the first time in a long time. I love you, but I’m not going to leave. I’m almost an adult, and I want you to be around, but. . . but if you don’t want to, I’ll understand.”

While Danny’s little rage-tantrum didn’t do more than annoy me slightly, I felt my heart break a little for Taylor, and looked to her father, wondering what he’d do next. He didn’t say anything, just glared at me, then turned around and stormed out.

She broke down into tears, and Herb was by her side in an instant, giving her a hug as she turned and held onto him, crying freely.

Quinn turned to me, and asked, “Should I look into criminal charges?”

“*No*,” Taylor begged, even as I considered it, pulling away from Herb to look at me. “Please don’t. He, I know what he did was bad, but he’s my *dad*.”

“You heard her,” I said. “Have someone look into an emancipation case, but don’t go forward with it. It’s the. . . not the nuclear option, but definitely some kind of bombing. I think things have gone badly enough there, we don’t need to make it worse unless he does.”

Quinn nodded, “Should I find someone else to fill the position for laborer’s?”

“No,” Herb suggested. “Give him some time to cool his jets. He blows up, but then he gets over it.” My lawyer looked to me, and I nodded.

“From what I know he’s as good at his job as he’s a shit father,” I informed him. “And I don’t care if the man uselessly yelled at me. I care about results.”

“That skilled?” Quinn remarked. “Very well. Now, if you excuse me, I’m going to go home and hug my daughters. For *some* reason, I feel the need to do so.”

With that, the man dissolved into static, and I couldn’t help but shake my head. I’d known the Danny situation was going to come back and bite us, but I hadn’t expected it to be *that* bad.