**Revision 13.12**

Victoria Dallon was the picture of teenage grace as she stared at me, face beautiful even as it paled, and part of me wanted to see how much paler she got when I ripped it off of her perfect neck. “You’re. . . You. . . You can copy powers?” she asked reasonably, and I hated her for it.

“Glory Girl, Aura!” I barked out, resisting the sudden urge to kill her, my well of anger given focus. Unlike the last she’d graced me with her mind control, my own powers started to act without me wanting to. The Swarms hidden in the vents started to buzz, air blades slowly forming around me, metal spear-tips starting to emerge from the stone in a circle around her, ready to impale her at a moment’s notice. I’d need to stagger them, the first draining the shield while the second pierced her perfect flesh, with the air blades catching her as she went up, as most fliers, including her seemed predisposed to do when they needed to escape.

“You copied my powers! That’s how you knew!” she accused, her voice perfect. Behind her I redirected the space around the doorways and balconies, making them non-euclidean so there’d be *no* escape. My hands glimmered with Light, ready to fire and blow this stunning woman to bloody chunks.

“Copied and helped you improve your own,” I argued, dozens of suns appearing around me, spinning themselves into long darts as they arrayed themselves around my head, ready to shoot forward and burn through everything they touched. “Turn off you Master power, *please*.” I hated to beg, but for someone of her stature it just made sense.

The heroine before me wasn’t listening to me, rightly focusing on the more important fact of “You can’t heal either, can you. That’s just Ames’ power!” I wanted to rip out her perfect tongue. if it would get her to *fucking listen*.

I wrenched my thoughts away from her oncoming execution, trying to get a hold of my own powers, and failing. I could hold them in place, but that was all, and I could feel them start to work around my control, metallic tendrils writhing just beneath my skin, wrapping around my bones to control me directly. “Turn off your fucking mind control before you *make me kill you!*” I pleaded, unable to raise my voice to someone such as her.

“I trusted you, and you-” was as far as she got before Dean lit her up with a dark blue stream of energy. It blew her off her flawless feet, so perfect they never needed to touch ground, though they would soon, and I had to force an Air Blade to move before it sliced off her hand. When I killed her, I’d make it *hurt*. She deserved no less.

Like a blown candle, the barrage against my emotions stopped. “Fucking Masters,” I spat, able to control myself once again, the metal tendrils receding. The unnatural anger was gone, replaced with genuine animosity. I glared at Amelia, whose eyes had glassed over. “Do you *see* why I don’t want this getting out?”

“I, what, Vics!” the healer cried, coming to. She stumbled to her feet, rushing over to her sister. Like usual.

I dismissed the warped space and flew backwards, until I was well away from Glory Girl’s Aura range. Calling Amelia’s phone, she had a hand on her sister’s forehead and glanced over at me, over fifty feet away, and took the call. “Lee, why-”

“Put me on speaker,” I commanded her. She did so. “Victoria Dallon, why did you attempt to mind control me into killing you. I was not aware you were suicidal.”

The girl blearily sat up looking over at me. “What, you, what happened?”

“Your boyfriend saved your life. I have instructed you previously that I have an adverse reaction to any mind-controlling power, in that I feel a desire to harm the user that runs from the occasional unkind thought to complete homicidal fury in direct relation to the extent that I am being *controlled*,” I informed her, my tone clipped and chilled. “You, upon discovering that, *yes*, I have the ability to copy powers, not steal, not borrow, but *copy* powers, decided that this would be a *great* time to try to mind control me. I was, *at best*, thirty seconds away from killing you, only delaying it by giving *my* powers the outlet of making more ways to *kill you*.”

From where she was standing, I grew a wire-framed version of her body, attracting the attention of all three. “Observe.” The eighteen metal spear points extended in a staggered spiral, and I could hear the tearing metal from the other side of the cafeteria. Air blades shot forward, invisibly slicing pieces of the frame apart, followed by the darts of sun that melted the wire-frame’s head and torso, as well as the spears impaling it, to slag. Extending my still-glowing right hand, I let out a small shot of Light that accelerated off the Speed Zones on my fingers, Speed Zones I hadn’t even realized I’d made, and blew metal fragments backwards, embedding themselves on the Air-Wall I’d laid across the back wall before dropping to the ground.

“I do not want to *kill* you, Victoria,” I stated coldly, “so please don’t *make* me. Amelia, is she *still* brainwashing everyone around her, or has she pulled it back in?”

“She’s not,” Amelia told me, and I hung up, flying back to the group. If she did it again. . .

“Have a seat. We’ll talk while I clean up,” I informed them.

“I-” Victoria started to say, only for Dean to cut her off with a tense, “Yes sir.” He was probably reading how scared I’d been and how absolutely fucking livid I was with his girlfriend. He helped Victoria to her feet and brought her to the table I pointed at as I started going around, collecting slag and shrapnel, picking up the still-red metal with my bare hands before cooling it off with Stellar Negation.

I created a sun large enough to toss the metal into, extruding the remains of the wireframe Glory Girl and the metal spears to filament thick points before breaking them off and tossing them in as well. “So, short story, my *main* power is permanent Power Copying. There’s an ass-load of rules and restrictions, but the short version is that most power I can see the direct effects of, I can copy. This does not lessen the Shard’s strength that is accessible by the original power’s holders, and through things that I will *not* tell you about, I can work to speed the development of the powers of those whose power I have copied, and who have Triggered naturally, far beyond what they originally were designed to do, without negative repercussions.

“When you helped me,” Dean said, letting me either deny or affirm his supposition.

“It’s that teaching ability taken to such an extreme, and helping you resulted in a pretty bad backlash on me, and you may know why I think that may be, but due to the nature of the process shouldn’t hurt the people who I use it on,” I agreed formally, “only myself. Also, I have no memory of actually doing whatever I did, and when I try to I taste colors, so I only know what I’d planned and what you all told me about that event.”

“Synthesia?” Amelia asked, concerned, able to pay me mind now that she knew her sister was alright.

“I believe so, yes,” I commented mildly. “Not only is my main ability frighteningly powerful, it’s still evolving and, if I’m going to help humanity survive what’s coming, something that *must* remain a secret. If I didn’t find such an act in the same ballpark as *murder*, I’d consider using Canary’s power to enforce the need for keeping this from getting out. If you tell others, there’s a good chance that *you* will die, though not by *my* hand. There’s also a good chance that it will result in the deaths of tens of *thousands*, possibly *millions*, and, in the worst-case scenario, *everyone on every earth.*”

I turned to look at them. “Amelia, I believe you were telling me how people finding out wouldn’t be so bad?” I glanced over at Vicky, who looked scared, but was oddly calm despite her previous state. Power Sight flared, and I could see Dean was feeding his girlfriend a small stream of Calm. It was so weak as to be nearly invisible, and just the kind of use I’d normally find abhorrent, but if it stopped her from trying to make me kill her again, I’d overlook it this time.

“She was just surprised,” the healer argued, trying to defend her sister.

“And would you have excused my actions when I was forced to kill her, no longer in control of myself, because of what she did when she was ‘surprised’”? I asked neutrally. The teenager didn’t respond.

I looked at Dean and Vicky instead. “My power models itself off of other, and is, as far as I know, a completely passive process. However, my power also grows in power faster than powers normally do, and, if am trying to help the person I’m modelling grow their power, my power interfaces with theirs and lets them model the improvement I have already developed back to them, which they are eager to integrate.”

Revealing the golden metal arm underneath the sleeve and glove I wore, I unwove it into a mass of tentacles, reforming it into Hookwolf’s lupine configuration. “It did not hurt Hookwolf’s ability to use his power when I copied it, but, if he were still alive, his power would not grow in power by being around me because I *wouldn’t* want to help that Nazi filth.” Putting it back, I nodded to Glory Girl. “Tell me, or more specifically your *sister*, why you reacted *so* badly to finding out that I’d copied your power, Victoria. And be honest. While I have *not* forgiven you for what you *just* *did to me*, this will help, however slightly.”

“I,” she started, stopping immediately. My intent stare did not relent, and she tried again. “I, I don’t know. It’s just. It’s mine. And you took it.”

I raised an eyebrow, “I was not aware that you had lost your power, Glory Girl. Given the fact that you still fly everywhere, considering I copied it a month ago, how much weaker *have* you gotten?”

 “That’s, I don’t mean it like that!” she rebuked. Her Aura fluctuated and she went white as I allowed a single Sun Dart to manifest behind me. As it went away, I dismissed my own as well.

“You don’t have to do that!” Amy rebuked, and I turned my gaze to her.

“But I’m just surprised that she’d use her mind control ability on me again,” I said mockingly. “By your *own logic* you *can’t* get mad at me for that, or is that a *special* protection only your sister receives?”

My comment obviously stung her, but she still argued, “She can’t control it!”

“And you think that I can, when I’m being *mind controlled?*” I asked, unable to keep the anger from my tone.

Losing the argument, Panacea changed tracks. It did not endear me to her. “I wasn’t mad when I found out you copied my power! It won’t be everyone!”

She wanted to play games? Fine. Distaste for a thing did not equal *lack of ability.* “That’s because *you* consider your power as a responsibility verging on a curse. Dean, Victoria, Amelia’s power isn’t healing-”

“Don’t!” the ‘healer said, but I ignored her.

“It’s actually Biokinesis,” I told them, Amelia paling as I did so. She wanted my secret out, then it was time to show her *why* throwing rocks in glass houses was a bad thing. Revealing it this way, I was fairly sure it would turn out well for her in the long run, but her despair and worry would make my point. If she wanted to argue emotion instead of logic, who was I to disagree? “She has completely unfettered control over living biological tissues. She could just as easily create a zombie plague as fix a cold, re-write your brain to make you love her as effectively as Heartbreaker could as fix your arm, and create monsters that would put Nilbog to shame as effortlessly as she healed you, Dean.”

At my statement, the healer gave a sob and covered her face, but I wasn’t done. “She does not do any of the former in small part because she’s scared of her power, but mostly because she’s a good person who controls her powers, both of the latter I respect her for. She has more control than you do, Dean, and if she had the same amount of control that you do, *Victoria*, then you would have all been her mind-controlled minions, accidentally, of course, and I would’ve put her down like I put down *Heartbreaker.*”

“What?” Vicky asked, stunned. Either she had gotten control over her Aura again, or it only flashed up when she felt *she’d* been wronged. I hoped it was the first, but the second would no longer surprise me. “*Oh my god*,” she said to herself, audibly scared, causing her sister to give another sob. Victoria pulled slightly away from her boyfriend and wrapped her robe-clad sister in a hug, “Ames, *please* tell me that no one else knows!”

“What?” Amy asked in turn, still crying, not understanding.

“You *totes* can’t tell anyone what you can do!” Victoria insisted. “Did you tell anyone else?”

“She didn’t even tell *me*, and the only people who know are members of the Penumbral Defenders,” I informed her. “Though, by the logic that she was *attempting* to argue when you came in, there’s no reason not to tell all and sundry, assuming, *of course*, that this wasn’t *another* ‘rule for thee but not for me’ situation of hers.”

Victoria shot me a dirty look, though it was unaccompanied by Aura, so I didn’t take offense. Dean was the one who spoke up, “I think she gets it, but you should’ve told Vicky.”

“Does she?” I wondered aloud. Part of me wanted to ask if Dean had informed his girlfriend about his secret, but, as angry as I was, letting *that* cat out of the bag wouldn’t help. One at a time, it could be corralled and dealt with, too many and everyone just ended up clawed. Technically my last statement didn’t help either, but I *hated* bad faith arguments, and that’s all Amelia seemed to have been doing today. “And as for telling Victoria, considering she needed *you* to stop her from mind controlling *me* into killing *her*, a reaction I’d *previously* warned her about, I’d argue that ***no***, telling her was *not* a good idea.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Glory Girl objected, her defense weak, and she obviously knew it.

I looked at her and shook my head in disappointment. “And if I accidentally killed Dean because I lost control of a new power, would that be okay? I wouldn’t *mean to*, after all. I’m well aware of the fact that, before you came to me, whenever you used that morally offensive power of yours, you suffered no blowback or consequence, so you learned to use it freely. However, it *is* dangerous to you, you just didn’t *realize* it, and you could ignore the horrific moral implications beforehand. You *have* been better about it, which I’ve been thankful for,” I admitted, “but if the next time this happens I hurt you, or worse, you *make* me so angry that I lose control of myself and are mind controlled into *killing* you, be firm in that fact that it will be *your* fault.”

I made a steel spear with a blunted tip burst from the ground towards her, striking her before she could dodge, hitting her stomach hard enough to drop a shield. She froze, and the blunted spear nudged her slightly, just to prove that I could, “If Kaiser’s power was subconsciously controlled, and, to some extent, *it is*, and that spear had an *actual* tip, then I would be *just* as responsible for impaling you as you would be for *mind controlling* me.” I made it grow a millimeter longer, shrinking the base so it broke freely, picking it up with air and carrying it back to me. Throwing it in a sun, I looked back at the three teens before me. “*Do*. *You.* *All.* *Understand?*”

Vicky nodded, as did Dean. Amelia, when I stared at her, did as well. “Okay then, Vicky, *actually* tell your sister you don’t hate her for keeping her power a secret or are scared at her because of what she can do.”

“What?” the teen asked, looking back to the girl she was still holding on to. “I *wouldn’t*! Ames, did you think that?”

“You, you mean you don’t?” her sister asked back, voice thick. “But I could, and all it would take is, and you’re being careful not to touch me so-”

“That’s ‘cause you’re wearing your robe,” Vicky sighed, exasperated. “Wait, is *that* why you wear it, so you don’t accidentally touch people?” Amelia nodded, and I hid my own surprise. That made a great deal of sense, in retrospect. Then again, it wasn’t the Brute’s intelligence I found fault with, it was her self-control. Victoria let go of her hug and grabbed Amy’s hand. “I don’t hate you, you’re my *sister*, and that means we need to stick together! *Okay?*”

“*Okay*,” Amelia nodded, bursting into tears once more.

I let out a long sigh. “Okay, I’m gonna go do. . . something else. *Dean*, two things:” I said, turning to him.

“Yes?” he asked hesitantly.

“One: Everything I said about mind control for her works for *you* as well. You hit me with a strong enough blast, I might kill you, and I’ll have *no* say in the matter until you’re *dead*.” He paled, likely using his power to know that I wasn’t angry, just informing him of a fact of reality, and nodded. “Two: You good to help these two?”

He looked at the two of them, Panacea crying, and Glory Girl quietly telling her it was going to be okay, then back at me. “I can.”

“*Good*. Philosophical discussions, battle plans, and power development I’m good at. This emotional crap, notsomuch,” I stated, getting a *completely unnecessary* nod of agreement from Dean and walking out.

Tracking down Quinn, he looked up as I entered his office, "Ah, Vejovis, I was just about to come talk to you."

I paused, one-step. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he assured me, "just routine paperwork." He pushed forward one of the dozen tablet computers arrayed before him. I looked at them inquisitively, and he explained, "If I try to do too many things from a single access point, everything slows down. Luckily you have several hundred of these in stock."

Taking the computer, a document opened up. Then another. Then a third. More and more documents opened up, so quickly I lost count, before they suddenly stopped. Quinn *hmm’d* and one last one opened up, this one detailing a contract for office supplies. "And I need to. . .?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Optimally you'd read all of them," my cruel, *evil* lawyer smiled. "Minimally you'd sign them. I'd suggest skimming them, and reading my summary at the bottom. The sooner you do so, the sooner I can get started. Thinking about it. . ." he trailed off, the documents on my screen rapidly closing and re-opening. "There we go. Start with what's on top, and save and close them when you're done."

I looked at the *new* task I needed to complete with ill-hidden distaste. "And if this was all printed out, how many pages would it be?"

"One thousand, three hundred. and eighty four."

I sighed. “And when do they need to be done by?”

He smiled at me, “The sooner the better, as they will allow me to start the lengthy process of opening Eclipse and buying the city. Speaking of which, you have a meeting tomorrow at ten with Toybox.” Another document opened up. “Please have samples of these metals ready. We’ll be meeting them in Albany at ten A.M.”

I nodded. “Okay, just to keep you up to date, Mouse Protector has joined the Penumbral Defenders.”

“Officially or unofficially?” he inquired. “That is also quite quick. She has a reputation for avoiding teams wherever possible.”

“Officially,” I stated. “I saved her from the S9, put her back in one piece, and I *can* make a convincing recruitment pitch. *You* joined, didn’t you?” I asked.

Quinn looked at me a little sourly, before giving a single nod. “Touché. Well, if that’s all-”

“Actually, there’s one thing I wanted to ask,” I interrupted, thinking about what just happened.

“Yes?” he inquired in turn, tone a little weary. “What now? Are you planning on putting a colony on the moon as well?”

“No, that’d have to wait until we kill the Simurgh, at the very least.” I disagreed. “No, why can’t people actually *talk* about what they’re worried about? If I don’t *know* what I did wrong, how can I defend myself, or try to explain my actions, when I’m not aware of which actions I’m being accused of doing? It’s downright Kafka-esque!”

He stared at me for a long moment, before closing his eyes and chuckling. He looked up at my annoyed expression and waved a dismissive hand. “I’m sorry, it’s just. I’ve seen your face, but I forgot how *young* you are.”

“I’m in my twenties!” I argued. “I’m an adult!”

“A *young* adult,” he agreed while simultaneously countering my argument. *Stupid Lawyer.* “And, while I am not prying, I assume you did not have a. . . *normal* childhood? Not a great deal of friends?”

I shrugged, not seeing what this had to do with my question *at all.* “Yeah, I guess? Had a lot of people I knew, but not a lot of actual friends. *Any*, really. Hell, if I wasn’t so depressed, I would’ve noticed I was practically popular, *somehow*. What’s your point?”

“My point, is that if you talk about what you’re worried about, you might be proven wrong, or worse, right,” he pointed out. “And if *they* know what you did wrong, obviously you, who did it, must know as well. After all, knowing what *they* believe to be true, how could you *not* know what *you* did?” he asked rhetorically.

I stared at him, trying to parse what he’d just said. It took me a moment, but when I did, “It’s fucking *projection!”* I cried out. “Are you *kidding me?*”

“Nothing quite that simple,” Quinn disagreed. “Projection is when someone sees what they’ve done in others. It makes what they’ve done not as wrong, if *everyone* is doing it. No, this is no more, and no less, than assuming that everyone else knows what you know.”

“But, but that’s *dumb!”* I argued. “How could everyone know what I know, and how could I know everything that *they* know? Why would I need to ask anyone if I knew what they knew! Panacea’s not that thoughtless, emotional sometimes, but not *dumb!*”

“Panacea is *also* a teenager,” Quinn observed politely. “And this is not something that people do on purpose. It *is* emotional, and most people, especially people being asked to make moral judgements, tend to rely more on emotion than facts. They need the facts to back up their emotions, but I wouldn’t be half as good a defense attorney as I am if I didn’t think about such things,” he smiled, the expressional broadening slightly.

“After all, that’s why I had to retire from the courtroom when I was scarred. It was a small thing, and *intellectually* shouldn’t matter, but unfortunately that didn’t matter to people. Once again, thank you for that,” he told me. “Even if I hadn’t taken you up on your offer, I would still be forever grateful that you’d let me go back to doing what I loved.”

I shrugged, “No prob. I mostly did it to show off my power, convince you it was useful, and help you out. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Just like Mouse Protector didn’t deserve what was going to happen to her?” he asked softly. When I nodded, he gave a single nod in return. “Keep hold of that Lee. And don’t hold it against Ms. Dallon. She’s a teenager and there’s a reason, short of what are supposed to be special circumstances, we don’t try them as adults. Anything else?”

“Should I apologize?” I asked. I didn’t really want to, but if I hadn’t been fair, then maybe-

“No,” he disagreed. “At least, not if she wasn’t telling you why she was angry, like you were suggesting. She *is* a teenager, so needs to learn when she hurts people. It’s something I’ve had to teach my own daughters, though thankfully they aren’t *that* old yet. My advice: If she apologizes, accept it. If she doesn’t, don’t take it personally. If it happens again, address it directly, though with any luck it won’t. Now, I need to go home and see my family. I’ll be back here at nine-thirty, to get you for the meeting is that acceptable?”

I let out a long sigh. “Yeah, yeah it is. Thanks Quinn, you’ve been invaluable.”

He smirked slightly, “On the contrary, you’ll find that I have a value, and you will be charged for it once we diversify your revenue streams. I will accept the compliment though. Have a nice night,” he wished me, vanishing into static, the faint, sharp, mineral smell of new electronics all he left behind.

It was a few hours later when I called everyone together for dinner, having gone with just a simple steak & veggies, not really having the feeling to make anything more. The only two people who *did* show up were Karen, with her mouse-themed domino mask, and Taylor. “Bit much for the three of us, but I’m not gonna complain. I could eat a cat!” the former announced.

“Help yourself,” I told them as I almost called Victoria, thinking better of it and texting her instead:

V: Dinner’s ready in the main Cafeteria.

GG: Gallant here V&A asleep

V: It’s only eight.

GG: Emotions ired

V: You can speak in complete sentences. I know you have the capability.

GG: Youve tired them out emotionally

V: Okay. Leftovers will be in the fridge. They doing okay?

GG: Better than when you left

V: Fair enough. I’m not REALLY mad at either of them, they just need to learn not to jump to conclusions.

GG: I know youre not mad

V: You would. ☹

I didn’t get another response from him, so I put my phone away. “Okay,” I sighed. “They’re not going to be joining us.”

“Things that bad in paradise?” Karen prodded with a knowing grin.

I nodded, “That remind me, MP. Thanks for shaking that particular powder keg,” I told her, completely honest. “Things got bad enough it nearly came to blows.”

Her smile froze. “Um, no problemo?” she asked, suddenly nervous. Taylor stopped eating, staring at me as well.

“Relax,” I told both of them. “I *am* actually grateful, though some warning would’ve been nice. It let me head off a problem in the making, and while it *did* set off about three more, you couldn’t’ve known about them.

“Liiike?” the heroine asked, sounding like she didn’t *want* to know the answer, but had to ask anyways.

“I have a bad reaction to people mind controlling me, in that I feel a desire to hurt the one controlling me in direct relation to the degree with which I’m controlled,” I revealed, seeing no reason not to. “Glory Girl has a secondary power which is a Mind Control Aura that makes you feel either Awe or Guilt, depending on if you’ve done something wrong. She’s gotten a better hold of it after she nearly made me kill her. Twice. But apparently her control wasn’t as good as I thought, but Gallant was able to help before thing went *very* bad. Now that I know about it, I can have her address it, so things don’t get *worse*, like her loosing control of it in the middle of a fight.”

She blinked at me. “Oh. Yay? You’re welcome?” she replied, obviously unsure how to take that.

I nodded, smiling warmly. “I *am* thankful, Karen. More importantly, I didn’t realize that Panacea *liked* me, romantically.”

It was Taylor’s time to be disbelieving, “You *didn’t?* But, *how?*”

“Remember what it took for me to realize *you* were interested in me?” I prodded, and she blushed deeply. “Not something I normally consider. I told her the same thing I told you, that I have a hard floor of eighteen, and the conversation devolved from there, instead of settling nicely like it did with you.”

She blushed harder, likely still embarrassed. When Mouse Protector started to speak, I wondered if it was going to be going after the poor girl, but surprisingly it was directed towards me instead.

“There a ceiling on that?” she asked teasingly. “Say someone in her early to mid-thirties?”

I rolled my eyes. “Not at all. Do you know of anyone of such august experience?” I inquired.

“Nope!” she said. “I’m firmly. . . however old you are. Twenty-six? Yeah, I’m twenty-six!”

“Wait, if you were a teen in the ninet-mmf” Taylor tried to object, only for Mouse Protector to disappear and re-appear behind my partner, putting a hand over her mouth.

“Don’t tell men your age, dearie,” MP chided. “When you’re my age, you’ll learn that!” she disappeared and reappeared back at her plate.

“Your age?” Taylor asked dryly.

“Yep, twenty-seven,” the woman agreed, shooting me a grin at Taylor’s look of annoyed confusion.

“So,” I said, moving the conversation along. “Since I don’t really sleep, I’m like Miss Militia,” I added for MP, “I’m pretty free. I’m meeting with Toybox tomorrow morning to set up a possible partnership with the local Tinkers and plausibly work out a business deal or three. Other than that, my schedule’s absolutely clear. Any suggestions?”

“We could-“ Taylor started to say, cut off by a yawn. “Sorry. Um. We could look into possible, um, ***routes of improvement***,” she said, adding *way* too much emphasis on the phrase. “But I’m not sure if that’s something you want Mouse Protector to worry about yet.”

The heroine in question perked up at that, “Sound ominous. I’m in!”

My partner winced, fighting back another yawn, and I *looked* at Taylor. I hadn’t noticed it before, but she looked *tired.* “Okay, that works, but not in that way,” I agreed. “Lady Bug, you go get some sleep.” She looked like she wanted to object, but I shook my head. “You need it, and I want you well-rested tomorrow at nine when you come with me to talk to Toybox.”

“Don’t worry, you can get all hot and sweaty with him later, LB” Mouse Protector promised. “But I want a spin first. Sharing is caring!”

“That’s not a bad idea,” I agreed, Taylor turning to look at me with wide eyes. “Sparring would give me a good baseline of your abilities,” I told MP.

“You. . . you’re doing this on purpose,” the bug controller accused, looking between the two of you.

“‘Cept he keeps explaining the joke,” Karen huffed.

“One of us needs to be the straight man, and it’s not going to be you,” I countered.

“I’m neither of those,” she agreed. *“Bi*, the way how’d you feel about a little Ménage à trois once she’s had her beauty rest?”

“Um, what’s that one supposed to mean?” Taylor asked, guessing, “Brainstorming?”

“Pfft, nerd,” MP mocked. “Though I wouldn’t be adverse to using your head, or givin-“

“Group combat training is probably a good idea,” I interrupted, Taylor blushing and Karen grinning in victory of a point scored. “Don’t take anything she says too seriously, Taylor. She’s like Herb, she speaks in subtext. She just doesn’t have the easily readable sub-titles.”

Mouse protector moved her mouth quickly, as if speaking a foreign language, saying in a bad Asian accent, “But my dubbing is without flaw!”

“Your dubbing?” I asked, wondering what the joke was.

“Exactly!” she said with mock seriousness, grabbing a butter knife and moving it to one of my shoulder, then the next. “I dub you Sir Vejy-mite of the kitchen table!” Taylor laughed, despite herself, and Mouse shot her a grin.

“Let’s finish this before it gets cold,” I suggested turning back to the meal I’d cooked.

“So, what’s with the padded room? I can’t’ve driven ya batty *this* fast?” Mouse Protector asked as we walked into the space I’d claimed for sparring.

“Force of habit,” I shrugged. “With our respective physical enhancements, we could do this pretty much anywhere and not need to worry about hurting ourselves, but this is the room I’ve used for sparring with the others.

“You train little bee?” she asked, wandering around the room, doing a random cartwheel as she stealthily stretched out under the cover of mercurially inspecting the space.

“Mostly, yeah. How could you tell?” I wondered, stretching out myself.

She glanced back at me, before shrugging herself, taking a few running steps up a padded wall and lightly landing. “Ya don’t move until ya need to, then you move fast. Also kinda. . . Jerky? Like you’re not really movin’ yourself, but controllin’ something,” she observed. “Her more than you.”

“A power we share,” I nodded. “The one that let’s us see insects also gives us a three dimensional positioning on them, in addition to letting us tap their senses.” I grabbed a fly, from the vents and brought it down, circling MP’s head and dodging her attempt to smack it. “So I see myself, like you see yourself, but I also see me from the perspective of that fly’s eyes.

“Wouldn’t that get kinda confusin’ seeing hundreds of yourself from each bug?” she asked, covering her eyes with her fists. “Cause the weird eyes?”

“Th power takes care of that,” I told her. She shrugged, taking comically large, slow steps that were somewhat similar to, ironically, the warrior pose from yoga.

“Ya share a power?” she asked instead. “That’s pretty rare. How’d ya get it, and how’d it involve her? If ya don’t mind me asking,” she backtracked quickly. It was the first thing she’d openly self-corrected, but given we were talking about Trigger events, it was an understandable, if surprising, amount of tact.

“So, first on the docket of ‘seriously don’t tell anyone this, people will probably die if you do so’ secrets,” I said, getting over this first hurdle as effectively as I could, with an unshakeable feeling that *this* time it’d work out, “I can copy powers.”

Mouse Protector, to her credit, didn’t break stride, but suddenly found a set of ropes *very* interesting that let her turn her back to me. I let her take her time, and she finally asked, “So you copied mine, and want me to show ya how it works?” She kept her back to me.

“Haven’t copied it yet,” I told her. She pirouetted around on the tip of one foot, and shot me an inquisitive glance.

Disappearing, she reappeared next to me, where she’d *very* lightly brushed her hand against the ‘fabric’ of my sleeve and had left her Mark. *“Really?”*

I nodded. “You’re not a villain, so you aren’t actively misusing your talents; your power, while useful, isn’t high-priority enough for me to bend that rule, no matter what I’ve done for you; and you joined the team. I’m formally asking you if I *can* copy it.”

She regarded me carefully, expression serious for the first time in hours. “How much am I gonna lose?”

“I said *copy*, not *steal,*” I replied. “The *opposite* is going to happen, actually.”

She looked at me incredulously. “How? My power’s kinda plateaued. It’s the only part of me that’s flat.”

I ignored her joke, which was likely just habit on her part, or maybe a defense mechanism. I wasn’t sure, and it didn’t matter right now. “Secondary aspect of my power is. . . let’s call it a resonance. I copy your power, and in doing so it re-invigorates your own. Tried to copy Eidolons, and *that* was a mistake. Oh, don’t mention that to people either,” I added, off-handedly.

“Like anyone’d believe me,” she muttered to herself. She got me staring at her and gave a broad, sunny, fake smile. “Not a squeak from me! Quiet as my churchy brethren and Sisteren!”

“So, *not* a lot of experimental data here, as I’ve mostly worked with newer triggers, but I could kickstart your power’s development, probably like you’d just gotten it,” I told her, mostly working on supposition. “What I *do* know is that, once I *have* a copy of your power, any new development, manifestation, quirk, trait, or anything like that I can turn around and teach *you* how to do. My power starts off with a real ‘monkey see, monkey do, monkey has no idea *how or why’* approach, but by working it out I can figure out how to do what *else* the original user did, and more.

“That why Millie got a tank?” Karen asked.

I shook my head, “No, I don’t have a copy of her power. That was me looking at the pre-defined limits of her powers and suggesting that, with everything that she was on record making, there was no reason she couldn’t make a motorcycle. A tank?”

“From when the city got hit by the wettest of blankest,” she explained. “Those things aren’t normally taped.”

“A *lot* about that was non-standard,” I agreed. “So, do have your permission to copy your power?”

“No side effects?” she double checked.

“No *negative* ones,” I agreed. “You getting stronger could be considered a side effect.”

“Okay. I owe ya,” she sighed. “I don’t care what you say,” she told me before I could correct her, “*I* think I owe you, that’s what matters. Xerox my Marvelous Mousiness!”

I nodded, closing my eyes, checking my open slots. The Major slot in progress was still hanging around a third completed, but I’d picked up another Minor slot, the next one most of the way there as well. *It’s been two and a half days since I last checked, and that was like fifteen percent,* I thought. I *really* needed to set an alarm to start checking in at regular intervals to get some actionable data.

Searching my inner constellation, I found the Mustard Yellow & Red of Marked Teleportation and coaxing it down to an open slot. I let out a breath as it connected without issue, tendrils of its flame snaking down into the greater blazing sea, small enough that it added texture, but did not change the base character of the larger inferno.

I felt a sense of falling as the power started to hum, trying to connect to Area Teleportation, but something about it wouldn’t match up. I winced as pain shot through my head, the incompatibilities creating a mental feedback loop that blared through non-existent ears before a second, deeper buzzing over-rode it, both sensations vanishing in an instant.

I opened my eyes, feeling a little woozy, and stumbled backwards as Mouse Protector’s face was an inch away from mine, the shorter woman up on her tip-toes. A sensation buzzed across my skin, my shoe’s sole opening up to let me touch the ground, and I felt my power flare.

Loosing my balance completely, my sense of the fabric of the world tilting crazily, I started to fall only for the world to twist and shift, and I found myself standing where I was a moment ago. One of my own powers buzzed angrily, and I felt more things shift. Area Teleportation flared, and I found myself in a forest at night, only for Marked Teleportation to flare right back, depositing me back in the sparring area.

“Where’d ya go?” Mouse Protector asked, concerned, catching my arm as I flailed, only for both of us to end up on a snow-bound mountaintop, the sun starting to rise. Keeping hold of her I tried to shift back to the Mark I’d left behind, only to get a sense of resistance from her own power, and for her to look at me sharply.

“Go with me,” I asked hoarsely, my powers uncomfortably settling in amongst themselves. When I reached out for my Mark once more, she came with, depositing us back in the sparring area, both of us with snow-crusted shoes, and this time she went with me when I fell down, her presence keeping me from shifting again as she rolled with me, almost like a judo roll, but ending with us both lying down on our backs, looking up at the ceiling.

“What was. . .” she asked, as I laid there, still with sensations of rippling and falling, even after I double checked that the floor wasn’t going anywhere. With the lack of balance, I felt not only drunk, but absolutely *smashed*, though without the cognitive impairment.

“You powers and Striders don’t get along very well,” I told her, closing my eyes. The Burning Sea was still there, but the two powers were fighting, each trying to take up the same spots. Mentally reaching down into the depths of my power, my hands felt warmer and warmer, as if they’d catch fire if I didn’t move fast enough, and I grabbed both powers, forcing them to curl in on themselves where they met. They both existed, they both could be called on, but there was no intermingling, no mixing, and as I let go, the feeling of dissonance faded.

Opening my eyes, Mouse Protector had straddled me, and was poking my cheek. I caught her hand, and looked up at her. “How long was I out?”

“Only a few minutes,” she said, grinning, and looking down at where she was perched on my abs. “Not gonna comment?”

“That you’re riding me to new and exotic locales?” I asked, pulling on Strider’s ability and spinning us in what I *assumed,* was a southernly direction. We popped into a swamp somewhere, my own flight ability kicking in and keeping us away from the muck. Distant, seemingly unnatural lights shone deeper in the Bog.

“What’s that?” MP asked, moving to get off me. I felt a sense of unnatural announce and grabbed hold of her.

“Sorry, rides not over yet,” I told her. She started to object, but I could use Strider’s power again, and the odd sense of someone in need of help where the lights shone vanished, along with my annoyance at them, as we popped into scrubland, the sun setting in the distance.

Karen blinked. “What was. . . Master?”

I shrugged, Mouse Protector, easily keeping her balance on me through the movement. “No fucking clue. It had a Mind Control element, but other than seeming like Will-O’-Wisps, don’t know, don’t want to know. Back to base?”

She shivered, possibly from the cold, and nodded. Taking a moment to mentally switch gears, I kept hold of her and shifted us back to the base, and back to the safe familiarity of the sparring area.

Getting up, she held onto me so she was hanging off me as I easily stood. Giving her a look, she sprang off me, flipping to land on her feet easily. “That happen every time ya get a power?”

I shrugged. “Usually not. Combining Hookwolf’s and Kaiser’s had a similar effect, but they meshed instead of fighting.”

She shrugged right back, a seemingly real smile on her face. “That was fun, what’s next?”

“How small can you make the mark, and can the surface be curved?” I asked in turn.

“Half an inch, and yeah.” She replied instantly, obviously having experimented with her powers. “Why?”

Reaching into a pocket I extruded a steel metal ball, about half an inch in diameter. It wouldn’t work with my right hand, the metal tendrils that made up my arm not counting as *me*, but with my left I was able press a Mark onto the ball’s surface. It was an entity, spiraling around a tiny circle that *might* be earth. A bit of mental effort shifted it to the symbol of Arachne Assemblages.

Tossing the steel sphere halfway across the room, when it was about to hit the floor, I teleported to it, trying to catch it. I missed, *badly*, and managed to fall flat on my ass again. Getting up, though, I was grinning. As a proof of concept, that had gone Perfectly.

Picking it up and tossing it towards where Mouse Protector watched, head tilted, I tried to catch it again, missed, but caught my balance right before Karen caught me. Seeing that I was fine, she pushed me over instead.

Flying to my feet, I ignored her muttered ‘Cheater’, and grinned at her instead, making two dozen steel balls, there being no reason to make them filled in sphered. “These are for you.” I told her, handing her a dozen.

“While I won’t turn down playing with your balls, though I kinda expected ‘em to be brass, why?” she asked.

Holding up one of the balls in my right hand, I pressed an uncovered finger from my left to its surface, the flawless steel instant darkening into my Mark. Tossing halfway across the room, she looked to it, then to me, then to the balls in my hand. “Okay, ya suck at pitching. Your never gonna be a bear. So what?”

“I thought it was obvious,” I smiled, branding and tossing all but one of the metal balls in my hands. I rippled my costume, and I could See her connection the the marks she’d left on it breaking. She glanced sharply down to the non-responsive marks, and I reached out to her with my free hand.

Booping her on the nose, I teasingly told her, “Tag, you’re it,” before flashing to one of the marked balls. I missed the one I’d been going for, heading to another one entirely, though thankfully it was in the same general direction.

Mouse Protecter blinked, shocked, before a feral grin spread across her features. With only a few waves of her hand, she sent the balls flying across the room, just like I had done. “I hope you know,” she announced with the most solemn of mock-seriousness. “That this means war.”