

Tyranny 6.1

“Are you *sure*?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Yes, Lisa,” I hissed back at her. “For the thousandth time, I’m *sure*.”

“Okay, okay,” she whispered back. “Just checking.”

“What’s got you so wound up?” Amy murmured.

“We *really* can’t fuck this up,” said Lisa. “*Really* can’t. If we don’t get the right Coil in the right timeline, then he might just decide to blow his base sky high with us in it. I’d *really* like it if that didn’t happen. And if I could wear some of my own clothes, again, because no offense, Taylor? But after this, I’m taking you *clothes shopping*.”

“I don’t see what’s wrong with my clothes,” I muttered.

I *liked* my clothes. Sure, they weren’t as nice as Emma’s designer skirts or name brand tees, and maybe Lisa, as a supervillain, was more used to stuff like that, but they were comfortable, functional, and didn’t run me a week’s supply of food and drink to get.

“*Exactly*,” Lisa answered. “Anyway. I *really* wish we could’ve visited the loft first so we could do this in costume, but he’s *definitely* got someone watching it. That’s if he hasn’t spun some yarn to Br — to Grue and the others about how I’ve betrayed the team and sold them out to the heroes or whatever.”

“It’s not like *I’m* in costume, either,” Amy mumbled.

“No, but you’re part of New Wave, and your secret identity is already public knowledge. Your costume is just a formality. Me, I gotta make do with *this* garbage.”

She fingered the strip of black cloth that had molded itself to her face — a basic piece of magic that had required the effort of seconds — in a crude approximation of a cliché domino mask. Eyeholes had been expertly woven into it with a skill and precision that was utterly inhuman, although it was still something simple and uncomplicated. It was little more than a bandana, even if it was an exceedingly elegant one.

When you had Arachne, the seamstress who had outdone the Goddess of Weaving, that was only natural. Her Noble Phantasm, Argaleiós Arákhnēs, was what had allowed me to make not only that strip of cloth to hide Lisa’s identifying freckles, but also the cloak of invisibility that the three of us were huddled under.

And all it had taken was an old, unused bed sheet.

After that, Medea had taken care of the rest.

“If you don’t like it, you don’t *have* to wear it,” I told her lowly.

“Well, it’s better than *nothing*,” she admitted. “But I *really* wish we’d had the time and material for you to make me a whole costume. Not many people can claim their wardrobe was made by a mythological seamstress, after all.”

“Your priorities are really strange,” said Amy.

“I’m trying *really* hard not to focus on how badly we’re fucked if this whole thing goes wrong,” Lisa confessed. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her nervously run a hand through her hair — left loose, compared to the braid or ponytail she usually wore when in her civilian identity. “Really, *really* hard. It’s not like there’s enough interesting stuff around to play a game of I Spy. Plus, that’d be *too* distracting, and the last thing we want is to accidentally run into one of his patrols, because if he even *thinks* we might be coming, then he’s definitely got someone patrolling the site in secret, and —”

“Lisa,” I interrupted, “calm down.”

“You’re starting to ramble,” Amy added.

And it wasn’t helping, because all it did was make *me* start to think about how this could go wrong. About what would happen if he figured out we were after him. About what he would do when he *did* figure it out and escaped. About how he might respond, how he might try and strike back at us, now that his first, direct attempt failed.

Of *course* he’d go after Dad. Somehow, miraculously, I’d managed to convince him to stay home all weekend, constantly assuring him that he wasn’t too “uncool” for three teenage girls, but all it would take to get him outside the protections of my home was for Coil to call and claim he had me hostage, and Dad would go rushing out to come to my rescue — and right into Coil’s hands. If he and his men figured out that Dad was protected from bullets just like Lisa and me, or hell, even if he decided not to waste the ammo once he had Dad in his clutches, then all it would take was one guy with a combat knife.

Dad wasn’t a trained mercenary, after all.

And what *if* he decided to blow his base up with the three of us inside? Now that Lisa had mentioned it, it made *way too much sense* that he *would* have a self-destruct set up in his bases. If I had enough warning, I could get the right hero and survive, but Lisa and Amy would be *fucked*. I’d lose them, just like that, and there was no way I could simply take that in stride. I wanted to be a better person than that, than *her*, but if he took away both of my friends like *that*, then I... I...

I would most certainly kill him.

My hands curled into fists and I swallowed thickly.

Viciously, horrifically, in all the ways I knew he feared. I would ruthlessly grind him beneath my heel, and then I would kill him without remorse and spread his name as a lesson for why you didn’t hurt the people I cared for.

Because I, better than most, knew the lengths to which I could be driven. I, better than most, knew exactly how far I could go and exactly what I could convince myself to sacrifice, if the situation drove me to it.

And that was why I absolutely didn't want to become that person.

Thank you, Lisa, for making me think about it.

"Are you *sure* we're going the right way?"

"Lisa," Amy muttered, exasperated.

"Hey, the *last* thing we want to do is get lost! It's taking us long enough to get there, what with how we all have to huddle under this thing, so I'd prefer if we didn't take a wrong turn at Albuquerque, you know?"

I let out a breath through my nose, grateful for the distraction, and reached with that extra sense down the connection to my familiar, Lunette, the sparrow made of crystal who I had quite forgotten about until yesterday. I tugged on that bond, waited for it to "pull taut," and the moment it did, I looked almost reflexively over in her direction. I couldn't actually *see* her, we were still too far away for that, with plenty of buildings still standing between us, but I had a rough sense of the exposed steel girder she was perched upon and where it was located.

"Not too far," I murmured quietly. "Another couple of blocks, yet, but we're getting close."

I looked down at my watch. Twelve-fifteen in the morning. Dad had already been in bed and asleep when we'd left almost two hours ago. We had to be back before he got up around six-thirty.

Lisa blew out a breath between her lips. "Alright. And you're absolutely sure that we're going to the right place?"

I rolled my eyes. "For the last time, Lisa, *yes*, I'm *sure*."

"Can you stop asking?" said Amy snippily. One, jittery hand curled and made an abortive move towards her mouth, as though to take a drag from a cigarette that wasn't there. "It's not like the answer ever changes."

"Sorry," said Lisa. "Sorry. Just... Yeah. Nervous."

I fidgeted a little. So was I. In fact, I didn't much like this entire plan, if I was honest. Unfortunately, without access to the ley lines, a lot of my options for getting to Coil using other methods simply weren't feasible, and even if I'd been so inclined, I wouldn't have dared risk just blowing him up, base and all, when there was an eleven-year-old girl who was probably secreted away somewhere inside.

Plan B wasn't much better. I just had to hope Plan A worked and we could get in and out without being noticed by any of his mercs.

It took us another twenty minutes before the base was in sight, the bare skeleton of a twenty storey high rise, with naked steel beams exposed to the open air. At the bottom, where the ground floor would go, there was an expanse of gravel laid out, and a fleet of construction vehicles that had been left for use at a later date. A tall, mesh fence stretched around the site, encircling the property to keep out anyone who thought to poke their nose unwanted or try to steal any of the tools.

“Oh,” Lisa murmured. “So, it’s *this* one.”

“You recognize it?”

Thank God. If it had turned out to be one of the bases Lisa hadn’t ever been to, well, I didn’t want to imagine how much time we’d have wasted — how much time he would have had to slip away and escape — wandering around, trying to find him. Even with her power, I didn’t like the risk that had to it.

I felt the cloak shift as Lisa nodded. “One of his newest ones. If I remember right, he’s still getting things settled in, although it’s basically done.”

I worried my bottom lip a little. How many bases did this guy *have*? What kind of money could he throw around that he could afford not only to finance a team of villains and an army of mercenaries, but also build *multiple* underground bunkers on what was probably prime real estate? And if he had that kind of money in the first place, why did he even bother, instead of retiring to a beach somewhere and sipping expensive wines for the rest of his life?

That wasn’t important. The important thing was...

“Can you get us through?”

“Easily,” she confirmed. “I don’t know where *everything* is, but I remember enough about the way to his office to get us there without trouble.”

“Good.”

A big, sturdy padlock held the fence’s gate closed when we got to it, and I turned to Lisa and held out one hand.

“Key?”

“Oh,” she said and started rummaging through her pockets. “Right. Yeah. Hang on a sec.”

I’d made a total of three things over the past few days, not counting the band over Lisa’s face, all of them rushed and probably not nearly as good as I would’ve honestly preferred them to be. Naturally, one of them was the pendant Amy now had, a mirror of Lisa’s, that did exactly what ours did: protected her from bullets and projectiles. No matter what Amy said, there was no way I would have brought her along without it.

Secondly, of course, was the invisibility cloak, rewoven out of a bedsheet by Arachne. It had taken the longest of the three, and in fact, I hadn’t been sure I would get it done on time for tonight. Somehow, though, I had, and I’d even managed to get a solid four hours of rest in my bed — the

only reason I was even a functional human being, right now. How good the cloak was, I couldn't be sure. It was a rush job, so while it definitely covered the visible spectrum, I wasn't anywhere near certain it was absolute enough to cover infrared and other sensors of that type.

And there was no way it covered sound or smell, so if Coil had motion sensors, the jig was up, either way. I didn't exactly like it, but there was nothing I could do about it.

"Here," Lisa mumbled, handing over an innocuous silver key.

"Thanks," I replied quietly as I took it.

It really didn't look like anything special. It was just a spare house key, one of mine that had been sacrificed in order to become a tool for just this moment. If someone were to see it, they wouldn't think anything about it, and even I might forget about it later and continue to use it as an ordinary key.

But it wasn't, anymore.

I crouched down, and Lisa and Amy followed me onto their knees as I cautiously lifted up the front of the cloak so that I could reach the padlock. If Coil had any secret cameras pointed in this direction, I'd just have to hope that no one monitoring them was paying enough attention to notice me.

Once I had the padlock in hand, I took a second to offer a silent prayer — to who, I didn't know, just as long as they were listening — and I carefully pushed my key into the keyhole.

It slid in without resistance.

I let out a breath through my nose. So far, so good.

Slowly, gently, I turned the key, and through the undersuit of my costume, I could feel the tumblers shift and move beneath my fingers, until, finally — *click!* — the shackle snapped up and open. I felt my lips tug into a grin.

It worked.

Lisa let out a low, relieved chuckle, and even Amy made a breathy, quiet sound that might have been a laugh.

"Have I told you your powers are bullshit, recently?" asked Lisa. "Because they *so* are."

"You're telling me," I murmured.

The third thing I'd made was a "skeleton key," so to speak. It was a device designed for the sole purpose of opening locks, no matter how complicated or complex. Whether it was a padlock or a bank vault, as long as it counted as a lock, this key should open it.

Now, whether that meant *electronic* locks or *biometric* locks, like the kind that required a password or a retinal scan, for *those*, I had no idea. Maybe if I'd have enough time to put the effort into making this

thing *really* good, rather than just “good enough” for what we needed, it could do something like that. Something this low quality and half-assed, though? Probably not.

“Here.” I handed the key back to Lisa, and she took it and stuffed it back into one of her pockets.

I was the only one in costume, mostly because I was the only one who had it readily available. Unfortunately, my costume did not come with pockets, a frustrating inconvenience. Wherever my powers came from, couldn’t they have included at least a pair of them in my pants?

I stood slowly as the cloak fell back into place, and Lisa and Amy followed me back up. Then, I reached out and carefully pushed open the gate.

The squealing hinges were like sirens in the otherwise quiet lot, and I cringed, hoping that no one noticed the racket, and pushed until the gap was just wide enough for each of us to squeeze through. For a silent moment, I waited, listening for someone coming to investigate, but there was nothing. All I heard was the sound of my own breathing and the *thump-thump-thump* of my own anxious heart.

“You first, Amy,” I whispered.

“Right.”

Sidling sideways, she stepped carefully through the gap, sucking in a breath of air as her chest and stomach passed the steel bar that framed the gate. The last thing we needed, I thought, was for the loose fabric to get snagged on the fence.

“Careful with the cloak,” I cautioned, following her closely.

“I’m being careful,” she assured me.

I started squeezing myself through, and to my left, I could feel Lisa doing the same as closely behind me as she dared. Luckily, I was in better shape than Amy, and though I’d never say it out loud, being basically flat made it much less a chore to get my chest through.

It took only a few seconds to make my way, and Lisa not much longer. When we were through, I closed the gate behind us, wincing as it squealed again, and left it there. As long as no one inspected it too closely, they shouldn’t notice the lock was undone.

“Where is it?”

Lisa pointed to a metal hatch, surrounded by a concrete rim, labeled with warnings and bright yellow biohazard signs to ward off anyone too curious for their own good. “Over there.”

Amy made a disgusted noise. “That’s not what I think it is, is it?”

Good god, I certainly hoped not.

“Yes and no,” said Lisa grimly. “No, it’s not a sewage pipe, but yes, it’s going to smell like shit.”

“Great,” groused Amy. “I’m going to have to take a *really* long shower after this.”

“You can keep those clothes, too,” I muttered. Fortunately, even though Amy was maybe ten or fifteen pounds heavier than me, I liked my clothes to be fairly loose and comfortable, so she hadn’t had any trouble slipping into a pair of my jeans and a tee-shirt. “I don’t think I’m gonna want them back.”

“I might just burn them and be done with it, then.”

“Both of you,” Lisa promised. “I’m taking both of you shopping. And it’ll be on Coil’s dime.”

For a moment, as we reached the hatch, we fell silent and hesitated. We stood still, looking down at the warning signs depicting biohazard symbols and men in hazmat suits, and it seemed like each of us was waiting for one of the others to take charge.

“Well.” Lisa sighed at last. “This is really it, huh?”

“Yeah…” I glanced at her. “You nervous?”

She snorted. It *was* a stupid question, though.

“We’re about to walk into the heavily fortified secret base of an amoral villain with enough money to afford not only his own cape team, but a professionally equipped army of mercenaries. It’s entirely possible that this same villain has coerced a high level Thinker — who may, I’ll admit, even be more powerful than I am — to work for him, so he probably knows we’re coming and has prepared himself accordingly. All of that, and three teenage girls are going to try and bring him down without outside help.”

She grinned.

“*Hell yes*, I’m nervous. But I’m also *way* past ready to take this sonuvabitch *down*. So let’s get this show on the road, huh?”

She reached back into her pocket and pulled out the skeleton key I’d used earlier, then slotted it into the lock on the hatch and turned — with a lot more confidence than I’d had at the gate. When the lock clicked, she stuffed the key back into her pocket and pulled the hatch open.

Amy gagged, and one hand immediately shot up to cover her nose. I couldn’t blame her.

“Oh, fuck, that’s *rancid!*”

“Yeah,” said Lisa. “Really helps sell the ‘innocuous drainage hatch’ angle, doesn’t it?”

It certainly *smelled* like one. Morbidly, I wondered how many dead animals Coil had left to rot at the bottom just to sell the illusion that there was nothing of interest inside.

“Unfortunately, it’s only going to get worse until we get inside the base proper. My advice? Hold your noses shut and think of England on the way down, because this is *not* going to be pleasant.”

She took the lead, and after a bare moment of hesitation, I grimaced, pinched my nostrils shut, and followed. Amy didn't seem any more eager, but she *did* fall into step behind me.

Like that, we made our way into the dark and took our first steps into the belly of Coil's lair.