

May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Friday, 10:12 AM.

Squealer was almost as bad at singing as I was, not that I would ever admit that I was bad out loud, but somehow she managed to do it even more obnoxiously than me, it could have just been the higher-pitch of her voice, but I couldn't be sure.

Squealer was still going to be crashing on my couch for the foreseeable future, seeing as I had essentially made her homeless by scattering the Merchants, I felt some small measure of responsibility. The base was no doubt now completely overrun with PRT now, which meant that she didn't have a place to go home to, and all of her things were there.

I would have to figure out somewhere for her to sleep more permanently, she apparently hadn't had a place to stay in that wasn't the Merchant's base in years. I would also need to find a place for her to set up a new workshop if she were going to be making shit for the team.

I have been wearing my mask constantly since I had brought her here, even while I was sleeping, and it was getting really fucking old.

I thought about it for a while, I could probably ask Coil to find me someplace, he seemingly had a hand in every pot in the city. He also most likely knew of a place that would be appropriate for a Tinker to set up shop. The obvious downside to this was that he would be aware of where Squealer was, I had recently found out that Coil had a tendency for sneaking double agents into people's teams, so he might try to poach Squealer. I narrowed my eyes at her unless he had already gotten to her?

Nah, it seemed pretty unlikely.

It looks like I was going to be shopping around for a small warehouse or something. My beautiful treasure hill was losing more of its mass by the day, and it would probably get worse, at least until I could figure out a way to approach Coil about that raise, I would have to do something about that soon.

Squealer looked much the same as she had the day before, her face was still covered in splotchy purple bruises, but at least she no longer smelt like a dumpster. I had to threaten to toss her into the ocean if she didn't go clean up and in revenge, she had spent two hours in my bathroom using up *all* of my shampoos and most of my body wash. I couldn't help but think it was a worthy sacrifice to get rid of the smell.

I was pulled out of my musings when my phone suddenly started ringing. I snatched it up and held it to my ear, expecting it to be Coil with another job.

"Andy." Kayden's said darkly.

The angry tone of her voice did a lot for my ability to focus.

"Kayden?" I said curiously, "Why do you sound like you're about to kill someone?"

"Because I *am* about to kill someone," Kayden said furiously. "I just had the PRT come to my house and take Aster because the Undersiders unmasked the Empire."

What?

Why on earth would the Undersiders just do that out of nowhere? Wait, they probably didn't, Coil was running the Undersiders, was this another of Coil's plans cropping up again?

"What?" I said weakly. "Where are you now?"

"I'm at my apartment," Kayden said furiously, voice warped from the anger. "I'm going to *fucking* kill them."

Yikes.

"Hold on a minute," I said firmly, "Meet me on the roof of my apartment in ten minutes, don't wear your costume."

I hung up immediately, not wanting to give her the chance to argue and then run off into the city murdering people left and right. I was hoping that she would come straight here, I strode over to the bathroom and slapped my hand on the door.

"What the fuck do you want?" Squealers said annoyed.

At least her singing finally stopped.

"We have a problem, so hurry up!" I demanded.

My water bill was going to be massive if this two-hour shower nonsense continued for much longer.

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May 6th, 2011, Friday, 10:49 AM.

"It's not like I have anywhere else to go, dickhead!" Squealer said nastily. "It's *your* fault anyway."

This was like the fifth time we have had the same argument, fuck the stupid rollerblades.

"I am a *mercenary* and I got paid money to turn you into the coppers," I said defensively, "I didn't have to offer you a place in the team, feel free to fuck off anytime okay?"

Squealer made a frustrated noise in the back of her throat, but our attention was drawn to the rooftop access door as it opened up. Kayden stepped out of the stairway wearing plain clothes, a bag hanging by her side that no doubt held her costume, she stopped in front of us and I immediately noted that her eyes were red, no doubt from crying.

"I'm here," Kayden said tightly.

I blew out a long breath before jumping straight into the deets.

"I have been working for Coil *directly* for a couple of months now." I said honestly, "I have been working with the guy *indirectly* for around two years."

Kayden just watched me quietly, probably having no idea where I was going with this.

"Who the fuck cares?" Squealer yawned loudly.

I felt my eye twitch at her inability to read the current atmosphere, or maybe she just didn't give a fuck, I couldn't be sure.

"Shut up, it's relevant," I said annoyed. "The Undersiders are *also* working for Coil."

Kayden's eyes widened as she instantly made the connection I was leading her to, and fortunately enough for me, she was distracted enough by the information that she didn't immediately blast me off the roof.

"If the Undersiders were responsible for revealing the Empires identities," I said resignedly. "It was likely on Coil's orders."

"Get to the point, asshole." Squealer interjected, and I felt my eye twitch again.

Kayden was staring intently at my face now, but she still hadn't attacked me, so I took it as a good sign.

"I'm going to call Coil, and we can find out exactly what is happening." I explained quietly, "We can figure out what we are going to do about it afterward, is that alright?"

"Fine," Kayden said shortly.

I sighed before pulling out my phone.

"If you are both quiet he won't realize anybody is listening in," I suggested quietly.

Kayden gave a tight nod and I put the phone on speaker before pressing the call button, Coil answered immediately, leaving me off balance for a moment.

"Urchin," Coil said calmly.

Creepy, I hadn't had any time to figure out how to do this, so I would just have to handle it like I did everything else in my life, what's the worst that could happen?

"Coil, you fucked my teammate up pretty badly," I said cheerfully, no time for pleasantries. "Do you want your ass kicked now, or should I make an appointment?"

Kayden was now staring at me with a strange look on her face that I did my best to ignore. Squealer however had started laughing loudly in the background, I shot her a stern look which she couldn't see because of my god damned mask. I was seriously considering just revealing myself to her, so I didn't have to wear the fucking thing in my apartment anymore.

Fuck it.

I tore the thing off so she could see my face, I pointed at her aggressively, I'm fairly sure she got the hint because she made a zipping motion over her mouth, but the shit-eating grin plastered on her face betrayed her true feelings.

"I believe we can sort this out without the need for any violence." Coil said dryly, "If you would allow me a moment to explain?"

Kayden said nothing, showing a remarkable amount of restraint given that he had just all but confirmed that he was responsible for her daughter being taken from her. Kayden was definitely pissed off though, that much was obvious enough by her expression, but she was clearly more interested in getting information that might lead to either revenge or a resolution, and the best way to get either was to hear him out.

"Sure," I said pleasantly, "An explanation sounds fantastic."

Coil spent a moment composing himself before speaking again.

"I have been working on taking down the other gangs in Brockton Bay for over two years." Coil's voice said evenly. "This particular plan, to reveal the Empire's identities was instigated more than a year ago."

I had never heard the man talk like this before, and he was being remarkably open for some reason, maybe he *was* actually worried about me coming after him? He had also used the word instigated, did that mean that he had paid someone to discover their identities and it had only just now borne fruit? Or did Coil already have their identities for a long time and only decided to release them now?

Parallel to that, who else had Coil investigated to this extent? Did he know my civilian identity? The Wards? What about the other gangs, the Protectorate? This was actually pretty concerning, he might have the ability to fuck *everybody* over at the drop of a hat. He had already shown that he didn't care about the unwritten rules if they were between him and his goal, were we all under threat now?

"Purity only joined your team a little while ago, and it was entirely unexpected." Coil said calmly, "I actually *removed* her name from the informational packet before I sent it out because she was on your team. The reason they went after her anyway was because of her civilian connection to Max Anders."

So he hadn't gone out of his way to fuck her over *directly*, but she had still gotten caught in the crossfire because of his actions, so I couldn't exactly let it slide.

"So you only dumpstered her as collateral, that doesn't really mean much, considering the outcome was still the same," I said seriously.

This was truly a cluster-fuck, goddammit Coil.

"You are correct in that it was still a result of my actions," Coil said calmly, "I am simply explaining how this situation has come to be. However, I believe I was about to tell you how I would be seeking to remedy this situation."

I had been monitoring Kayden's face throughout the conversation to see if she was about to suddenly go nuclear, but while her face *was* tilting between anger and a forced calm she seemed to otherwise remain in control, she had also crossed her arms at some point, which meant they weren't pointed towards me, that was probably a good sign, right?

"Go on, then," I said cheerfully.

"The PRT currently has no actual proof of Purity's identity, only a strong suspicion." Coil said calmly, "It will not be enough to keep her daughter from her for more than a day or so."

"Yeah, but *everyone* will still think she is Purity," I interjected, seeing the massive hole in his argument.

Kayden Anders had been married to Max Anders, pretty obvious given the same last name. Max Anders had been revealed as the civilian identity of Kaiser and Purity had been his enforcer for *years*. Purity had quit the empire a couple of years ago around the same time that Kayden had also divorced Max, it was clear as day. There wasn't actually any physical proof that she was Purity, sure, but everybody would be making the same connection I just did, and her family was now at risk.

"It is possible." Coil admitted, "I am currently using some of my agents in the government to apply pressure on the PRT for acting on such weak evidence."

Agents in the government? How far did this rabbit hole go exactly?

Kayden seemed to be tilting more towards calm than angry now, a good thing for Coil's health if nothing else. Squealer was jiggling the imaginary zipper at the corner of her mouth, and I narrowed my eyes at her, don't you dare.

"Rest assured, her daughter will be returned to her within three days, along with one Theo Anders, Max Anders son." Coil said calmly, "He was also taken from his school by the PRT around the same time."

I watched as Kayden's eyes widened again, clearly, she hadn't been aware of this yet. I hadn't even known that there was a Theo, interesting. All of that was good but it definitely wasn't

going to stop villains, mercenaries, or any of the other gangs from going after Kayden's family to use as leverage against her or Kaiser. They weren't going to stop simply because the police let her off the hook with a stern warning to not be a secret supervillain.

"I am glad that you tried to fix the fuck up, man," I said honestly, I was genuinely happy that he wasn't suddenly taking enemy action against us. "But people will still come after her family, you *know* they will."

Coil paused for a long while at that, he was obviously trying to find something that would appease us enough to not come after him for what he had done. Not to brag or anything, but I was a pretty effective mercenary on my own, but now I had Purity on my side, that wasn't a fight anyone would walk into willingly if they didn't have to.

The first solution that had popped into my head was for them to change names and move to a different city, which sucked, but it *was* an option if Coil could facilitate it. Coil suggested it barely a second later, and I blinked in surprise. I watched as Squealer slowly dragged the imaginary zipper open, oh god.

Kayden spoke up suddenly, revealing her presence to Coil.

"I am not leaving Brockton Bay." Kayden said with forced calm, "If people come after my civilian identity or my family I can handle them."

I had almost forgotten that she was a villain that could melt solid steel and topple buildings. Anyone stupid enough to come after her *would* probably get deleted, but she had to know that it wouldn't help if they kidnapped her kid as a hostage. Squealer pretended to open her mouth and then closed it again without saying anything.

I twitched.

"Very well. If you change your mind, please don't hesitate to contact me and I will assist you." Coil said diplomatically.

I found myself frowning, it felt like he was getting off too lightly, and the man had navigated this conversation *easily*, seemingly without fear of the negotiations going badly. It had almost felt scripted in a way, was he using his mysterious Thinker power right now? Fuck I wish I knew what his power was.

"Are you satisfied with that Purity?" I asked quietly, somewhat distracted by my thoughts.

"Yes," Kayden said shortly.

Kayden looked exhausted and upset. Personally, I probably would have been pissed off enough to have gone and kicked Coil's ass anyway if he had fucked me over like that. Fuck it, strike while the iron is hot and all that jazz.

"Coil," I said cheerfully, "Renegotiation; You've been getting free work out of Purity since she joined, and we have Squealer on the team now as well. You'll be paying for the entire team instead of just me, can you cover it?"

Squealer looked interested in the conversation for the first time, instead of just doing her best to either piss me off or distract me.

"I'm getting *paid*?" Squealer said astonished.

I ignored her and Coil spoke up a moment later.

"That is acceptable, I will offer them the same deal you yourself have." Coil said calmly, "Is that an acceptable conclusion to this situation?"

I nodded in acceptance before remembering I was on the phone and that he couldn't see me.

"Yeah, we're good." I sighed, "Coil if something like this happens again I really will have to kick your ass okay?"

"Of course," Coil said calmly, seemingly unbothered by the threat. "I'll call you with the next job."

"Sure," I said simply, before hanging up.

I let out a loud sigh, what a shit-show. Kayden looked like she wanted to destroy something and cry at the same time, we both stood around in tense silence for a moment. Squealer just looked bored again.

"If nothing happens in the next couple of days, I'll go and get your daughter back myself, alright?" I said honestly.

I really hope it didn't come down to that, it would end up pretty much confirming that she was Purity if I were seen kidnapping her daughter from the PRT.

"Fuck." Kayden said quietly, "I hate this."

I stepped forward and patted her on the shoulder awkwardly.

"Worst case scenario, we kidnap your kids from the kidnappers and then set you up in another city somewhere," I said light-heartedly. "It will work out, I'll make sure of it."

Kayden let out what might have been a laugh if it didn't sound so much like a sob before she dragged me into a hug. I froze in her grip, before hesitantly moving to pat her on the back a few times. I stared over her shoulder at Squealer silently pleading for help, but she just started laughing.

Fuck you, lady, fucking help me.

"Yuck, cooties," I said nervously.

Kayden squeezed me once before letting go, and I found myself remembering the last time I had been hugged. Gaston, Size Queen, and Belle had dragged me into a group hug after we had completed our first mission. The memory brought a surge of emotion with it, and I did my best to fight it down, I moved my mind onto something else, while Kayden fought to regain her composure.

This entire situation could have ended a lot differently, I could have just gone straight out with Kayden and attacked the Undersiders in anger, the fight probably would have also drawn in some heroes at some point. Coil would have become our enemy, and he had a lot of resources to call in, it was a tip of the iceberg situation. I had recently discovered that the Travelers were also working the guy as well and would have likely become the next threat to worry about.

I knew about the Undersiders, the Travelers, Trainwreck, and I had a suspicion that another mercenary in Brockton Bay called Circus was also on his payroll. Those were all the ones that I knew about, but how many more were there that I didn't? Coil *also* had a private army of soldiers, all equipped with Tinker-tech weapons, outfitted with the best armor and gear that money could buy.

There was also nothing stopping him from hiring any number of other teams to try and take us down as well, like Faultline's team or even someone from out of town. Meanwhile, I wasn't even sure where his base was located, other than a guess that it was probably somewhere central in the city. The first meeting I had with the man occurred in Downtown, which meant that he could somehow move a bunch of heavily armed guys around the city with impunity, which spoke of familiarity with the area or an undetectable method of transport.

I would have had to hire a Thinker or capture some of his caps to try and figure out where he was hiding in the first place, which would mean waiting or trying to track down somebody else first. It would all take time, all the while Coil would have been sending *more* threats our way and planning more shit against us.

I wasn't too worried about the individual capes, I was confident enough to give myself good odds against just about anyone in this city if they came after me alone, I could always run away as well, but constantly fighting off ambushes from multiple teams would suck balls.

I would like to imagine that I would have conquered all of the teams sent after us and then found where his base was, beaten the crap out of him along with his army, but I knew that in reality, the entire situation would have been a gigantic cluster-fuck that we thankfully managed to avoid having to deal with.

"If what Coil said was true," Kayden said quietly after she had recovered. "I should go home and wait for the PRT to get in contact with me."

It seemed like the best idea, provided nobody decided to go after her in the meantime. The PRT would hopefully contact her civilian identity soon and tell her what was happening with her daughter.

“Yeah,” I said easily, “If you need help, or just somebody to talk to, you know where I live.”

I waved vaguely at where Squealer was standing.

“She is also here I guess,” I said dryly. “For whatever that’s worth.”

Kayden glanced over at the other woman before turning back and raising an eyebrow at me, I shrugged at her.

“Fuck you, idiot.” Squealer said annoyed, before glancing at Kayden. “I’m a better company than this dickhead.”

I felt my eye twitch again, goddammit she was annoying.

We all said our goodbyes and Kayden left the same way she came, looking a lot calmer than she had when she first arrived. Squealer immediately followed her down the stairs, no doubt heading back to my apartment.

I sat down on the edge of the roof and watched the city below. I needed to be more careful in the future, so shit like this didn't sneak up on me again. If I had checked the news this morning I would have had a couple of hours to prepare for this, which would have been *super* helpful if we had needed to go attack someone.

So, Coil had unmasked the Empire, all those capes now had their civilian lives ruined, what kind of effect would this have on the city? The heroes would no doubt go and try to arrest all of the Empire at their homes, they were all criminals after all, well most of them at least. People like Kaiser, Hookwolf, Fenja, Menja, and Stormtiger weren’t likely to go quietly, I had less information about what most of the others were like, other than the team-up with Alabaster or my brief meeting with Othala, Victor and Rune.

None of those capes would be able to go back to their homes now, so they would have to remain hidden away in the city somewhere. They would also probably have their bank accounts locked down by the police, which means they would soon be needing money. The likely result of that was that all of the ousted capes began stealing food or money to survive. More crime meant more heroes patrolling, which meant an increased risk of capture for all of the other capes running around the city.

Goddammit, Coil.

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May 6th, 2011, Friday, 11:19 AM.

Eventually, I headed back down to my apartment, still deep in thought and when I arrived

Squealer was curled up on my couch watching a news report. It was a live reporting going on near Medhall, discussing the Empire's destructive retreat across the city. They had been attacking people, destroying buildings, and looting. Nearly all of their normal restraint was gone now, as they tried to find resources and safety, anything they could do to keep their heads above the water-.

I regretted the thought instantly.

There were additional reports popping up of skirmishes with heroes all over the city, they had a clip of Hookwolf hanging off a three-story building with his giant metal arm jammed inside to hold himself there, he was shaped like a gigantic metal wolf, entirely comprised of dangerously moving metal pieces. The glass windows of the building had been shattered and were falling down to the distant ground below.

Hookwolf was one of the most powerful capes in the city and now he no longer had to color between the lines, I watched as he tossed a car down the street, and it slammed into another building. How long would this go on for?

The Empire was the largest gang in the city, with fourteen parahumans, it was a ridiculous number of super-powered people to have on a single local team. In Brockton Bay, the Protectorate had eight heroes. The Ward's had seven, and New Wave had eight. If any of the smaller teams tried to fight them alone they would get completely manhandled. Fortunately enough, it seemed that the Empire had split off into several smaller groups instead of one large unbeatable unit and were now scattered all over the city.

I sighed as Hookwolf tossed another car into a building, this wasn't going to be a single-day event, the city was going to be a warzone for a while it seemed.

Coil really knew how to get the ball rolling.

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Author Notes (12/05/2020):

So this was the direction I decided to take the unmasking situation, it will probably annoy some people. I tried to have everyone act reasonably, rather than emotionally, but perhaps it came off a little too reasonable.