**Reconstruction 15.10**

Several days after my demonstration I hadn’t received a single word from the PRT, other than a *very* short e-mail from Director Piggot thanking me for my ‘well meaning assistance’, and for the sample of anomalous material I’d given them. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing, or a bad thing, but if I could ignore them without issue I was more than happy to.

In general, though, everything was quiet. Vicky was flying down to hang out with her boyfriend daily, as he was on strict orders not to enter Brockton Bay until their new Director took over, the entire department in limbo. Amy’s training was going fairly well, and she was progressing, having actually landed a blow on Taylor during our daily sessions. It was only the one, and Taylor had taken her down shortly thereafter, but it was tangible progress and had only served to galvanize the girl. Additionally, when I’d given Panacea the samples of the Space Warping plant she’d gone quiet, and then asked if I could get her the rest.

Some of it had been eaten by scavengers, or taken by the PRT, but a majority of it had still been where I’d left it, and I’d dropped the remains of the curiously still fresh plant off in her ‘lab’. She’d reassured me she wasn’t creating anything intelligent or self-replicating, so I’d let her work, knowing that if something happened, Overwatch would tell me.

Things were, honestly, fairly peaceful, and I was thinking about going back to training my own powers, something that’d been left by the wayside these last few weeks with Leviathan having been successfully rebuked, when Quinn’s voice chimed in my office. “Vejovis, we have a. . . situation.”

“Peril, politics, or personnel?” I asked in return, already getting up. He hadn’t sounded worried, which meant I likely had time to get there the normal way.

“The. . . last,” he replied. “Peril?”

“I couldn’t think of a word for combat that started with P,” I shrugged. “So, what’s up?”

“Sherrel is having an. . . issue,” his voice informed me. “I am assuming you had something to do with it, so you would be the best to solve it. She’s in her workshop. Also, please warn me if you do something similar to my powers.” With that incredibly opaque request, he disconnected.

Heading down, I ran into Panacea, who was wearing her costume for some reason, “Done with your project?” I asked her. Normally, I had to drag her to dinner, so seeing her out and about in the mid-afternoon was odd.

“What?” she asked, looking up at me in surprise. “Oh, no, just getting a late lunch.” *That* made me pause and look at her properly.

“One wasn’t enough?” I askedskeptically. We’d eaten brunch together, along with Taylor, after our sparring, hard-exercise on a full stomach being a recipe for disaster. Something about this situation seemed. . . *off.* That said, I didn’t have even the faintest *whiff* of the disembodied annoyance a mind-affecting power would incite in me. My mind then shifted to a Changer, but I took a moment to See her, but her power was there, the Bone White & Blood Red Flames wreathing her form, if burning a bit less actively as they tended to nowadays.

She grimaced, “Accidentally sniffed something that made me hurl. Complete Vomit-town. I cleaned it up,” she quickly added, “but, well, I’m kinda hungry.”

I stood there, staring at her. “Vomit-town?” I echoed, the phrasing just a little. . . *wrong*. Like something I’d expect her sister to say*.* Or Mouse Protector, only she’d likely say ‘vomit-ville’ for the added alliteration. But I *had* seen her powers, so it *was* her, and I wasn’t getting any other tells. She just grimaced and nodded. Still, Panacea was normally a lot more careful about things like that. “Need a pick me up?” I offered, holding up a hand. She didn’t look like she needed it, but-

“No, this’ll teach me to be more careful,” she disagreed, which fit what I expected her to say. We both knew, but weren’t commenting on the fact, that I was ever so slightly improving her physiology, like I had Taylor’s, every time I healed her. She’d been accepting of it with minimal grumbling when we were training, but she’d turned it down otherwise. Her stomach grumbling underscored her statement.

“Just be a bit more careful,” I warned slowly, getting the vaguest feeling that something was off, but I had no idea what it was.

She nodded, face flushing with embarrassment. “Yeah, can’t heal myself,” she agreed, turning away and walking towards the elevator I’d just vacated. Once more, her costume struck me as odd, as she’d tended just to go plainclothes more often than not. Then again, with the increasing number of people on base, maybe this was her way of flying the metaphorical flag. Checking one last time, her powers, the one thing that couldn’t be faked, the indicator that only I could see, were still there, and I shook my head at my paranoia.

Things had been quiet for the last few days, and after the giant ‘trash can on fire rolling down a hill towards a fireworks factory’ my time here had been up until about a week or two ago, I’d started jumping at shadows. If anything, whatever problem Sherrel was having was a welcome distraction, even as I felt a little guilty at being relieved at her, likely, distress.

Soon enough I was outside Sherrel’s Lab, one that had direct access to an elevator that connected to the freight platform that led to one of the base's exterior entrances. Opening the door, I heard Sherrel yelp and yell “Don’t come in!”

I hesitated, looking away, calling, “Are you decent?”

“Uh. . . what?” she replied, confused.

“Are you clothed?” I explained.

There was a moment of silence, “Why woundn’t I be? You want me to?”

“No,” I replied firmly, stepping inside and looking around. “Why don’t you want me to. . . oh,” I said, taking in what was laid out across her workshop.

Her truck, which had been a pain to get inside, had been completely reworked. Whereas before it had been a monster truck that’d appeared to have been rolled through the gaudiest junkyard in existence and then made, somehow, *more* obnoxious, now it was. . . *shiny.*

It was still *technically* a ‘truck’ but different in almost every way, the dirty metal and broken plastic had been replaced with shining, gleaming chrome and odd-colored panels. More than that, though, it no longer looked like a monster truck, though it was still bigger than normal, but more like an *actual* truck, with a boxy back end. Additionally, the entire thing looked like it was painted, or, as I looked closer, the metal *itself* had been made with swirling patterns that *looked* like paint, in twisting, swirling designs that caught the eye. It was almost half the size it used to be, but seemed just as. . . *intense*, only much, *much* more compact. I couldn’t tell what this thing could do, if it still had the same capabilities as the old truck, being Tinkertech, but, at least to me, it looked a lot more impressive, quality trumping quantity.

“Sherrel?” I called, looking under the truck, from which I could barely hear a soft whirring and faintly feel the movement of air in the otherwise silent, still room. She was there, flay on her back on top of a little wheeled platform, which was just as shiny as the truck, strips of lights shining an ever-shifting rainbow of colors along its sides. Wearing only a tank-top, a pair of jeans, and heavy looking boots, she was streaked with metallic grease as she looked back at me.

“Ya saw it?” she asked, expression forlorn.

“Saw what?” I asked, and she poked the undercarriage of the truck. “Oh, yeah, it looks good,” I smiled.

She blinked, confused. “Really?” she asked hopefully.

I started to reply, but stepped back, “This is awkward as fuck. How about we have a seat and chat.”

A moment later, she shot out from under the truck, the bed thing folding up into a chair, with such speed it became instantly clear she wasn’t wearing a bra. Pushing that odd thought out of my head, I took a seat myself on a bench of hardened air opposite of her as she glanced over at the vehicle with a frown. “So, Overwatch called me. Said there was a problem?”

Now that I could see her clearly, her face was smeared with that shiny silver grease, like she’d tried to snort a can of spraypaint. *Did she?* I halfway wondered, but that wasn’t fair, especially as I hadn’t heard anything about her using again. I felt a bit worse about that thought as I spotted the twin tell-tale streaks that told me she’d been crying, but on her back, the trails extending back from her eyes towards her ears.

Reaching into a pocket I ‘pulled’ out a handkerchief and passed it to her. She looked at it confused, before I motioned to my own face, and she blinked, reddened slightly, and accepted it with a quiet “Thanks.”

“So, what’s up?” I asked again, as she cleaned herself up, and, realizing that it also cleaned her hands, started rubbing the cloth on her arms.

She was giving herself time to think, and looked, curiously, at the still pristine white cloth before she handed it back to me. “My powers. Somethin’s wrong with ‘em,” she told me, looking off to the side. “I. . . I was lookin’ at my baby, but it just seemed *wrong.* Like it were *ugly*, and then I started ta work on it. I. . . I didn’t even realize what I was doin’ ‘til I was done, and then. . . is somethin’ wrong with me?” she asked hesitantly, looking up at me, worried. “I, I’m not who ya thought ya were gettin’, so. . .”

I just looked at her, not understanding what she was suggesting in the *slightest*. “So, what? Okay, your powers are a bit different, I’m not seeing the issue. It’s a very different aesthetic, but, your powers are still generally the same, right?” I asked, taking a moment to *See* her. Her powers still burned with Chrome & Black Rubber Flames. Banked a bit, but still there. The patterns in which they burned slightly different, but the source was the same.

“I, uh, yeah. . .” she trailed off, sounding just as confused as I was. “Yeah, sorta, but, uh, yeah. . .”

Breaking the awkward silence, I turned towards the vehicle. “So. . . what does it do? Other, than, you know, *be a truck*?” She hesitated, then started to get up from her chair, only for her legs to buckle and almost fall before I caught her. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she nodded, standing up on her own. “Just lost track o’ time workin’. Um, what time is it?”

“One in the afternoon,” I informed her.

She nodded again. “What day?”

“. . . Monday,” I said, sceptically. *“Why?*”

“Ah. . . whups?” she replied, glancing at the chair she just got out of. “I, uh, I’ve kinda been workin’ on this for a few days without, ya know, sleepin’. I’m good though!” she insisted trying to stand and failing as I shifted my grip on her, taking her hand in my own. “I just need ta, ta, oooooooh, that’s the stuff,” she half-moaned as I started to heal her.

“Minus the commentary, please,” I remarked dryly, helping her recover. “I’m assuming the thing you were sitting in had some kind of stimulant effect?”

Sherrel half-slumped over me, and I kept her now limp weight from falling over as she blinked lazily. “Wazza? Huh? Oh, yeah, no drugs. Not no more. Just, ya know, uses micro-ionization ta remotely construct adenosine triphosphate in key nerves ta keep ‘em goin’ an’ keep me from gettin’ tired,” she murmured into my arm. “Nuthin’ fancy. Gettin’ the neural interface ta move it with ma hands full took longer. Fuckin’ bitch ta get calibrated. Worth it.”

I was *pretty* sure that’s not how any of that worked, but that was part and parcel of working with Tinkertech. “Should I check in from time to time to make sure you’re okay?” I asked, shaking my head, finding it amusing how much the Tinker had that in common with Amelia, and Amelia’s likely response to such a comparison. She just shrugged slightly, leaning further into me.

I was content to continue healing Sherrel of her overwork, and clinically noted that, while still a *far* stronger reaction than normal, it wasn’t as bad as the first time I’d healed her. That said once she languidly wrapped her arms around and started to kiss her way up my arm, I shut it off and gently put her back on her feet. “And you’re fine,” I remarked dryly.

She swayed a little, blinking, looking around. “I, um, what, uh, hi?” she said, coming out of whatever state she’d fallen into, stretching like she’d just woken up. “I, uh, what happened?”

Shaking my head, I couldn’t help but smile.”You were talking to me about your rebuilding your truck, and passed out because you over-used your chair-thing, which kept you awake. So I healed you. Now, what’s the truck do?”

“Uh, ya want to know?” she asked, confused, like I was asking her something odd.

“No, I asked because I *didn’t* want to know,” I informed her, rolling my eyes. “Why is this surprising?” As a Tinker, *she* was the only one that’d know what her tech did, after all.

She looked down, her arms coming forward in a self-hugging gesture I’d seen enough from Taylor to recognize. “Well. Skidmark didn’t. Just that I could build it ta do what he wanted, and drive it. And, well, ya didn’t ask me to, so I, uh, just kinda built stuff.”

Sighing, I stood up. Sherrel was probably an inch shorter than Taylor, and I reached out, ignoring her flinch as I tilted her chin up so she could look me in the eye. “Please don’t judge me by the actions and standards of someone who *literally* calls themselves a shitstain. You spent all this time building it, Sherrel, the *least* I could do is spend a few minutes properly appreciating it.” I let her go, and looked to the vehicle. “So, it certainly *looks* impressive. What are its capabilities?”

When she didn’t say anything, I glanced back down, and noticed an odd look in her eyes, before she quickly rushed over to the truck, climbing up into the driver’s seat, she typed something into the console. The vehicle turned on, the sound almost musical, as the odd colored panels lit up in a riot of colors. It looked oddly familiar, so I snapped a picture with my cell-phone and sent it to Herb.

The engineering was running, the sound was distinctly *there* in a way that I could feel with Acoustokinesis, but not nearly as loud in the space as it should be, and without the normal drop-off that sounds should have. Before I could ask though, she was out of the car, had grabbed my hand, and was dragging me all around her creation, excitedly talking about a *lot* of things and processes, most of which I’d never heard of, though apparently the entire thing was powered by *fusion* cells. At my alarm, she reassured me that they were built so that, not only was it completely shielded so *she* wasn’t in any danger, as I’d asked about, but it was also built so that if containment failed they’d shut down rather than explode, though my worries just seemed to make her happier, and I wasn’t sure why.

It could apparently turn invisible. And inaudible. And it could hover. And it had laser cannons. And low-level Force Fields. And could seat two in the front, three snugly, with room for four more in the back. And could drive itself home. And a whole *bunch* of other things.

When I finally asked if it could do this much before, she shook her head, replying. “Nah, I never had the parts. I could make my own here, and what I couldn’t, I just asked Zils, and she had it delivered!” she smiled.

“Zils? Oh, right, Zilla,” I agreed, having somewhat forgotten about the base’s AI, as Overwatch had taken over managing things, and was generally working in place of the arcology’s management program for a lot of things, at least on my end. Now that I remembered, and seeing the amount of metals that’d gone into this, along with the scraps of metal to the side, I requested, “Actually, Zilla, how much went into this?”

The female voice replied, “Worth of materials on the current market is one million, four hundred and eight three thousand, three hundred and seven thousand dollars, and fifty four cents. Most of which were from the noble metals requisitioned by Ms. Bailey.”

I nodded, having assumed it would be something like that, given the amount of precious metals I’d spotted in the parts. To my side, Sherrel made a shocked, half-choked sound. “M-m-*million?*” she asked, white as a sheet. Looking at her creation in shock. “I. . . oh gawd, was that *gold?*” She approached the side, hesitantly touching the patterned metalwork, as if she were afraid it would pop. “I. . . I thought it was Aurum.”

“Aurum is the scientific name for gold,” I pointed out. “That’s why it’s symbol on the Periodic Table is Au.”

She looked at me, then her truck, then back to me. “P-please don’t make me take mah baby apart!” she suddenly begged, eyes wide, as if she were about to cry.

I frowned, having no idea why she’d jumped to that, or were this sudden change in attitude came from. “Why would I?” I questioned, allowing my confusion into my voice. “First of all, you *just* built it, and second, I’m sure it’s worth *far* more like this than any other way. I mean, not that that matters, since I’m not going to ask you to sell it. I said you wouldn’t need to, and I meant it.”

“But, but, *million*,” she stressed.

“Out of materials that *we can create easily,*” I countered. “I’ve got a deal with someone who can make metals. They can’t sell it on the open market without both crashing it *and* bringing pretty much every government down on their heads. Your creation’s a bit ostentatious, and *oddly* familiar, but it’s *fine.*” As I reassured her, my phone buzzed, and I saw that Herb had replied with one word: *Dekotora!*

Looking it up, even as she asked *“Really?”* I found why.

“*Really,*” I reassured her. “Also, it looks like your power’s still your power, it’s just changed its style a little. You’ve just gone a bit Japanese, apparently.” Showing her the images, and standing by the fact that her using so many expensive materials *wasn’t a big deal*, helped assuage her worries.

Asking Zillla to have the cafeteria send us up some food, I had Sherrel sit down and just *relax* for a bit. Not being healed, with her odd reaction to it, not in a work-frenzy like she’d been apparently in for *days*, just *chill*, with some pizza and beer.

It was during that conversation that the topic turned to Brockton Bay, and what we, the Penumbral Defenders, were doing in and about it. Of the anomalies that were within, and how we were dealing with them. Of the general plans for revitalizing the city.

I learned that the Merchants, though they’d apparently pulled out of the city, were likely going to try to come back once we started to rebuild. I learned of the *delightfully* named ‘Snowball’, though, to her disbelief, I had no idea what the term actually meant past the obvious, seasonal use.

*“I don’t do drugs,”* I stressed, “how else would I hear about that. And, as for the other thing, no, I’ve never heard of that before either. And I kind of wish I hadn’t.”

However, I had to agree with her. Powers *always* had a combat use, even if it was just running someone over with your Tinkertech truck, and while the ability to make drugs might be used to get your opponent high, or just a narrow use of a greater poison creation power, there was the possibility it was a Master power.

“You mean, Skidmark mighta been Mastered?” she asked, a hint of confused hope rising in her tone.

“Possibly,” I shrugged, wasting no time in nipping that in the bud. “But how he treated you *before* you showed up was all him.”

Her expression froze, before shifting into a scowl. “Oh. Yeah. *Fuck that asshole!”*

“I’d prefer to ignore him, as he isn’t worth *either* of our time,” I suggested, and, after thinking about it, she nodded, and we moved on.

The conversation continued to drift onto our general plans, of how, to rebuild, we’d need to first clear the wreckage, and how I wasn’t really sure *how* we were going to do that. With all the materials that modern, and not so modern, architecture used it wouldn’t be safe to just bury it, and it was one of a *dozen* problems I was currently struggling with.

“It’s easy to say ‘We’ll rebuild it’, but actually doing it’s a whole nother matter,” I opined. “It’s not like we can just recycle the materials.”

Sherrel went still, looking past me, her eyes distant. “Why can’t ya?” she asked.

“Because it’s all mixed together,” I said slowly, “And it’s been soaking in water, and smeared with god knows what, all left to rot for weeks in the sun. I have no idea how we’d even start, and moving that much debris would take forever, even *with* powers.”

Her eyes narrowed, seeing something that wasn’t there, and suggested, voice quiet, “And if ya didn’t have ta move it? If ya could recycle it right there?”

I nodded, “That would make it easier, but there’s the issue of how to recycle the material in the first place.” Taking a second to See her powers, they were active, reaching out *somewhere* to pull information. Focusing, I could *almost* understand it, but it was like watching someone browse the internet, not able to control it yourself. Through a screen covered in vaseline. Twenty feet away.

I could glean a *little* of what she was looking at, and shook my head. “We need something mobile. Not that Mobile,” I said, catching something about ‘flight capability’. Watching her power at work, it was almost like navigating a Vial, in that the winnowing process was somewhat similar, adding requirements that narrowed down possibilities, though not *nearly* as complex.

“How big?” she prompted, shifting through the blueprints.

“Big enough to go down a two-lane road, even if it takes up both lanes,” I suggested, already comparing it to my mental maps of the area. “Any bigger and we couldn’t move it easily, and smaller and we’ll have trouble feeding some of the debris into it without breaking it up, though I guess we could do that if we needed to.”

“Like. . .” she trailed off, getting up to grab a pen and paper, starting to sketch out her plans. The drawings were. . . basic, missing out on most of the details, but the more she narrowed it down, the clearer the image I could See outlined in the flames of her power became.

We hashed it out, balancing size versus output, efficiency versus maintenance requirements, and intake capabilities versus processing speed, and so on. Herb poked his head in halfway through, but, after a quick explanation on what we were doing, during which Sherrel fell silent, Herb just smiled, shook his head, and left.

We finished the plans, and moved her main truck to the side, getting started on our new device. Able to see it nearly as clearly as she could, I was an extra pair of hands, a crane, and a measuring device all in one. we were able to start easily, and I ‘stepped out’ to grab the materials, really just refilling the crate and stepping back in.

Sherrel started to flag, but a bit of healing and we were both good to go. I did check to see if, observing her like I was, I’d picked up the possibility of slotting in her power, but, sadly, even as hands on as I was being with her, the option wasn’t there. It wasn’t that big a deal, but would’ve still been nice.

Regardless, it was a third of the way done when we called it quits, just after four in the morning, Sherrel snoozing in a chair, and not *that* chair, a blanket draped over her while I finished installing the last plasma manifold in the series. Looking over at her, it struck me how *cute* she looked. Not trashy, not mean, just *really* into her craft, and I appreciated how she’d tried to work with the hand she was dealt, just like Amy, and Taylor, had, and how badly that road had led her to ruin. She wasn’t entirely blameless, I wasn’t about to start White Knighting, but, sometimes understanding led to sympathy, while other times to a deepening of hatred, and this was definitely the former. Sherrel didn’t have either girl’s spine, their iron will to tell the world to go screw itself before they’d give in, but there was the *hint* that, one day, she could, and in doing so be someone I could see myself respecting.

That thought however, was enough for my power to falter, and, glancing back to what I was working on, I realized I had *no fucking clue what I was looking at.* I could *vaguely* remember what I’d been doing, but had the oddest feeling that if I tried to continue, it’d go *very very badly.* Flying out of the chassis, careful not to touch anything, I looked at the plans we’d been working from and they, too, were no longer a touchstone, a diagram that helped me remember the plan. No, they were just a bunch of vague, meaningless scribbles.

Shaking my head, I gathered Sherrel up in my arms, and carried her back to her room, taking off her boots and tucking her in. I left a note that, if she wanted, we’d continue again tomorrow afternoon at two.

Heading back to my office, and the endless amount of paperwork that waited for me there, I thought that, while not the kind of crisis I’d been dreading, it had been a fairly nice diversion, as such things went.