**Reconstruction 15.3**

I dreamt of blood, and of fighting, and of *power.* When I woke up, though, the memories seemed to slip through my fingers, only the barest of details sticking, like debris caught in the drain at the bottom of a sink. Grabbing the rod of black wood that laid on my desk, a bit I’d grown from the branch that Panacea had modified, I grabbed a titanium-gold knife with a near monomolecular edge and sliced off a disk. I’d tried to cut the ‘wood’ with a normal steel blade, but it’d just bounced off unless I hit it hard enough to crack the material, but that tended to shatter the knife as well.

Concentrating, I could use Kaiser’s power to make blades that were insanely sharp, but it took too long to use in combat, though I *was* slowly getting faster. Putting the knife down carefully, not wanting it to stick *into* the shelf, *again,* I focused on the disk. Pulling from memory, I grew it outward from the central point, dozens, then hundreds of almost hair-thin branches growing out of it in slender, branching networks.

Watching it, I tried to make it move, but it was odd, with too many pieces to maneuver easily. I stopped, then shifted my way of thinking about it, imagining myself as being the central disk instead of puppeting it, not moving it intellectually, but instinctually. The little black bush of wooden tendrils began to move falteringly, but it was a bit easier to work with now, and I got it to move across my table back and forth a few times.

Shifting my thoughts once again, I pulled the tendrils together, making a long, sinuous shape, that was part snake, part millipede as it moved, twisting back and forth, but also with the tips of hundreds of little tendrils walking it along in conjunction with the larger motions. I remembered metal as well, and I could extend bits of golden metal over the ends, but not as I had, not all at once, and I needed to do each tendril individually. Glancing at the clock, I realized I’d been at it for nearly an hour without realizing, and I was nowhere close to done.

Making it flow with susurrus of a hundred tiny taps, I directed it up onto a shelf, climbing up the sides of the furniture by reaching tentacles around things to provide grasping pressure in a way that even I didn’t quite understand, before letting it rest. I felt someone outside my door, and they’d been there for several minutes, but they were standing there, waiting, occasionally moving their limbs fast enough to move the air to a level I could tell, but that was all he, or she, was doing.

Gearing up into casual wear, I opened the door to see Herb with his hand raised to knock on the door. “Can I help you?” I asked, when he froze.

“Um. . .” he trailed off, looking down the hall, unsure. Rolling my eyes, I stepped aside and waved him in, closing the door behind him. “Thanks. Right. So. Um, I talked to Cauldron,” he said, hesitating, looking to me for a response.

“I assumed you would,” I replied neutrally.

“And they wanted to know about a lot of things, but I didn’t tell ‘em that much, and I didn’t say anything about your dad other than he, ya know, *exists*, but that I didn’t know where he was, or how to contact him, which I *don’t*, and even if they wanted to talk to him he’d probably see them coming so he’d leave, so they’re going to leave him alone!” he said in a rush.

I blinked, thinking about what he just said, “So you told them we have a Contessa, and when they try to find him, and can’t, they’ll know he’s a Blindspot, and want to kill him. *Lovely*. My fault for mentioning him, but did you *not* understand the ‘don’t give them straight answers’ hint I gave? My bad, again for not being clear. What else did you tell them?”

Herb winced, but kept going, “But they don’t know how to find him, so he should be fine. Um, I also told them about Spookytown!”

“Spooky. . . *You told them about our plans to buy Brockton Bay?*” I asked acidly. “You told *the Cape illuminati* how we were planning to *absolutely wreck their masquerade* by *buying the city and turning it into an industrial center powered by parahumans?”*

“What? *No*, I left that shit out,” he said quickly. “No, I said how we were gonna buy the city, and clean it up, and try to seal off all the weird shit, and turn it into a big park thing for the safer ones, oh, and how you wanted to get people to study the others to figure ‘em out . They were *super* interested in that, and said they’d help! Only, I said we weren’t going to accept a loan, since we were good for money and, like, I *just* paid off the last one, so they’re gonna help on the legal end!”

“I. . . you. . . *how?*” I sputtered, not having expected that at all.

He grinned nervously, “So, I did good?”

I thought about it, trying to examine the angles. The fact that we were going to be flush with cash was going to become obvious as soon as we started buying the property, and I’d already managed to put myself on their watchlist, if not at the top, so they would’ve noticed anyway. “*Probably,*” I said, “It all depends on how you did it, and what you said. So, again, *how?*”

Herb’s grin broadened, “I told them how their entire ‘what happens when the man breaks down and everybody’s on their own thing and parahumans take over’ thing wasn’t gonna work, and how, like ya said, *havin’* an office around and pretendin’ to work kinda undercut the whole thing, though they explained how it wasn’t about not havin’ government *at all,* just not enough to stop the bad guys, but then I pointed out that if they wanted that they shoulda had an understaffed office, not one that coulda, shoulda, woulda, didn’t.”

I nodded, following his explanation. *Probably*. “And?”

“And how while just ‘cause *one* experiment was fumbled up between all recollection-”

“That’s not what that that acronym means,” I interrupted.

“That doesn’t mean they couldn’t run a *different* experiment, and also do some social conditionin’ stuff too!” he continued, acting like I hadn’t said anything. “And by makin’ the powers not scary, it’d get people used to them, and also help ‘em understand it, so we’d be better at makin’, or understandin’ Tinkertech, since that’s what fucked up Behemoth to the point he tried to go Hiroshima on India, and they agreed!”

I looked at him, “And that. . . that *worked*?” I asked. He nodded, but paused, wincing. “*What?”* I demanded.

“I *kinda* cheated,” he admitted. “But yeah, it’ll work.”

“Cheated, *how?*” I asked, trying to figure out how he could’ve ‘cheated’.

He shrugged, “I copied their powers, and used ‘em against ‘em.”

I looked at him, trying to connect the dots that were *obvious* to him, *because he already had the completed design.* “Addiction-less Melange,” I replied instead with the air of someone sharing a deep revelation.

“Uh, what?” he asked, confused.

I snorted, “Oh, I thought we were just making vague comments without context to the point they were *practically meaningless*. You explain yours, as I *wasn’t there so I don’t know what you mean,* and I’ll explain mine, as I think I could guess, but I *shouldn’t have to when we’re discussing important intel.”*

He winced again, “Right, sorry, it all just makes sense in my head.”

“Then maybe you should consider that, short of me picking up a telepathy power, *we’re not in your head, we’re in this room,”* I stated, wondering why I had to explain something so *basic*. “It’s *okay* if you over explain. I’d kinda be *the biggest hypocrite in the world* if I complained, wouldn’t I?”

Laughing, he agreed, “True. So, since *everybody* was there, I copied Contessa powers, and Alexandria’s, Eidolon’s, and poindexters, er, I mean Numberman’s. That was. . . *different.* I could crunch, like, *all* of the numbers, even the ones that don’t actually exist; and see the Paths, and how they’d work; and have enough time to figure out the paths, cause time went all *tiiiiiiiiiiiiick toooooooooooock*; and a Stranger power to make myself seem normal while acting normal for the cameras while readin’ them like they were books. Or, like, comics, since it takes me a while to read actual books. Paintings? Yeah, so I Pathed a Path around her Pathing my Paths so she wouldn’t realize I had Paths to Path which woulda change her Paths to Paths I didn’t want to Path, and figured out how to spin it so they’d say it was hunky, and figured out how to make it work, like for realz, and then said it in my normal charming way!”

“Like an idiot?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Yeah! So they didn’t even think that I was a thinker, or a Thinker!” he agreed, and I could practically hear the capital T. “And with those powers, and what they’re doin’, they sure as fuck ain’t ‘thinkers’ either, so I fit right in! So, what the fuck’s Melange?”

I just looked at him, having to laugh, and not able to. I’d been worried he’d fuck it up, like he’d fucked up *everything* since we’d got here, leaning on what I thought was a friend, only to find he was a treacherous ‘ally’ in the *worst* way, to the point I’d wondered if I’d just been fooling myself this entire time. But I’d been wrong. Wrong *now,* not then. I don’t know what it took, to finally extract his head from his ass, but I was thankful for it.

*This* was my friend, who’d I’d been missing this entire time. Not the man who’d condemn a girl to torture, or keep me in the dark just to manage me, but who’d take a thorny problem I was grappling with and make it *stupidly* simple. That entire thing was so twisty, but so fucking *simple* that it boggled my fucking mind. A seemingly high-risk plan with the very things that made it a risk neutralized, done in a way that was so crazy no one would see it coming.

“Spice Melange is the substance from the Dune novels that, among other things, made you a *precog*, which in turn made FTL travel possible in that universe, but it was *deadly* addictive. I thought you copied Contessa’s power, and just walked the Path to get what you wanted, so high level precog without the addiction, but not. . . *that.* That’s. . . *fucking brilliant.”*

He seemed taken aback, “*Really?* Um, I mean, yeah, of course, that’s me, Mr. Smart Guy!”

“More like Mr. *Wise* guy. Smart would be if you were more like Numberman,” I pointed out.

Grimacing, he shook his head, “Yeah, fuck that noise, dude’s a *douche*, and his power just makes it exponentially worse, and ‘cause of him I now know what that means, so I’m 110% sure the guy’s a dick.”

I wanted to point out that’s not how percentages work, then thought about what he just said and realized it was a joke. “Fair enough,” I smiled. “Okay, that. . . Did you do that right away?” I paused, realizing I should explain that, but he was already responding.

“*Yeah,*” he said, looking askance at me. “If you’re gonna cheat, cheat hard.”

Nodding, I looked back over the conversation, “Which means that you revealing what you did about dad was on purpose, because you *knew* it’d work out that way. Dude, why didn’t you *open* with that!”

“Well, I wanted ya to think I was smart,” he said, “And show you I was tryin’. You said words were cheap.”

Looking at him, I had to shake my head. “They *are*, but *telling* me things is an action in of itself. And copying their powers, if you were doing it in a way they couldn’t tell, in order to outmaneuver them, *was* the smart thing to do, given how heavily they rely on them instead of *common fucking sense*. But, dude, *this isn’t a game*, it-”

“I *know* it isn’t,” he interrupted. “I mean, before I didn’t, but *now-”*

“No,” I cut him off in turn. “If you’re saying you ‘cheated’, ya *still do*. Cauldron doesn’t play fair, and neither should we. We shouldn’t do things that are *immoral*, but with the stakes we’re playing for, it’s not about ‘outsmarting’ Cauldron, who themselves cheat constantly, it’s not about being smarter, or better, or anything like that; it’s about *winning against The Warrior.* Using every resource you have, as long as it doesn’t violate your morals, *is smart.* Fuck man, *not* copying their powers because you wanted to ‘play fair’ or ‘win against them without it’ is what would be *dumb*.”

He winced, and I assumed he’d done *that very thing* beforehand, but he wasn’t *now* and that’s what mattered. “You work for them, but they’re both a major player and a major *obstacle* to us*,”* I said, shaking my head. “If you managed to keep them from fucking us over legally, while not actually giving away things that’d hurt us? *Great*. If you got fucking *Cauldron* to actually *help?* Dude, that’s an *unmitigated* ***win.****”*

*“You. Are. An. Asshole.”* Amelia groaned, from her place laid out on the mat. “And. I’m. Not. Giving. Up.”

Standing over her, I couldn’t help but grin, “I *said* you were going to start your training. And I’m not trying to get you to give up, I’m just trying to get you to a *base* level of combat proficiency. For better or for worse, that means sparring. A *lot* of sparring. And, unlike normal people, we can go hard enough to hurt, and have you back on your feet and ready to go in a minute. *Literally.*”

Catching her breath, she glared up at me. “You’re pretty fucking smug for someone in touch range. Why do I have to learn to hit people? I could just touch them and knock them out?”

I looked down at my foot, which was right by her hand. I was in my normal wear, sneakers and jeans, and just said, “Try.”

She hesitated before grabbing the bottom of my jeans, lifting it up to touch my leg and knock me out, only to see I’d put another layer underneath it, a pair of stockings which covered my skin completely. “You’re a *dick.* Who’s gonna be covered head to toe like that?”

“Anyone wearing spandex, which is like a quarter of all capes. Anyone in full armor,” I listed off. “Anyone in tight or tucked in clothing. Anyone-”

*“Ugh. Fine. Dick,”* she groaned, rolling to her feet, limping slightly as she got up. “But does *she* need to be here?”

*“Yep,”* Taylor responded, grinning broadly. “We could practice dodging, if you’d prefer.”

“Dodging?” Amelia echoed, only to pale slightly as the nearby air vent buzzed. “Np, I’m good.”

“You don’t have a Mover power, we won’t be using that,” I reassured her, coalescing a bit of Darkness and wrapping it in a shell of hardened air. “No, we’ll be using this.”

Amelia peered at the shape in my hand. “Is. . is that a wrench?”

“If you can dodge a Dark-wrench, you can dodge a fire-ball!” I pronounced, throwing it at her.

She stumbled backwards, almost getting out of the way. As soon as it hit her, I let go of it’s form, causing the Darkness inside to explode all over her. “What the hell, Lee!”

I glanced over to Taylor, who looked back at me, head tilting in confusion as she projected, *unsure-curious-funny.* “Really, neither of you have seen that? Okay, we need a movie night. Your education has been *grossly* mishandled.”

“I’m not busy tonight,” The bug-controller offered, as I dismissed the Darkness. Amy, who’d been glaring in the wrong direction, refocused back on me.

Walking over to her, I instructed “Hand.”

Still giving me the stink eye, she put her hand in mine, and I started to heal her. “You know I could mess with you, if I wanted to.”

I rolled my eyes. “One, we’ve established it wouldn’t stick. Two, good luck getting me to trust you in combat. And three, if you do that Taylor’d beat you black and blue, and I *wouldn’t heal you.* Now quit being such a baby, you’re already getting better at dodging her melee attacks, and she isn’t going that hard on you.”

“She’s *not?”* Amelia looked past me at Taylor, who waved a baton cheerfully. “And you’d only take her into a *mid-*level fight? What the fuck would be a *high-*level fight?”

“Lung,” I shrugged. “Or really any mass-combat scenario, like the E88 ambush, where we’ve got multiple capes with incredibly damaging abilities. As she is now, she could probably take the Wards on her own. Well, the Wards if I hadn’t been training Dean and Missy. Or the Merchants.”

“What about the coward guy?” Taylor asked.

“Basic Ramping Brute tactic. Hard alpha strike, and don’t stop until they’re unconscious. Or dead,” I called back. “Or get Panacea in range for a shut down, once she’s learned how to survive a knife-fight.”

“Knives?” the healer in question asked skeptically, the bruise on her jaw almost completely gone.

“*Knives,”* I stated authoritatively, and Taylor came over, having already heard the talk but still interested. “Are to be treated like fucking lightsabers in martial arts, as are any bladed weapon, at least the edges are. Human flesh, if you’re not a Brute, is easy to cut. It’s why *butchers* use them. If you’re in a knife fight, chances are you’re *going* to get cut, so the trick is to minimize the damage and prioritize defense. If you can disable, *awesome*, but *avoiding* the attack is paramount. Now, not only do you have to worry about Brutes, whose blows you *cannot* *block* because they can punt *cars*, though they’re usually only as fast as a normal person in defiance of physics, but there’s another type of cape you need to worry about in close quarters. They are?” I asked.

Panacea looked confused for a moment, before realization dawned and she let go of my hand, having finished healing. “*Strikers,”* she said in a way that said, ‘I’m being an idiot,’ waving her fingers.

“Considering you’re one of the strongest Strikers in existence, I thought you’d figure that out. Took her a bit longer,” I joked conspiratorially.

“Only like thirty seconds,” Taylor huffed, but with good humor.

“And if you can dodge effectively, you can also avoid Blasters,” I continued, forming a few more floating dark-wrenches. “Even the ones that can auto-target usually don’t lead fire, so if you’re moving, or change direction, you can slip by. Some have homing projectiles, but then they’re either slow moving, have a slow rate of fire, or have something else entirely that makes them easier to deal with than normal.”

*“Legend,”* Amelia pointed out.

*“Misses,”* I argued. “Though you have to be moving pretty fast for that to happen,” I admitted. “Thank Christ that guy doesn’t understand the full extent of his power, or he’d be an absolute *monster* on the battlefield. If I could get away with it, I’d pick up his power as soon as I could, but that won’t be for months, if I’m right.”

With the way my powers were unlocking, it’d likely be another six or seven *weeks* before the next major slot would unlock, and the minor slots were *definitely* slowing down. I had another minor slot, but I was waiting for another to open before I filled *that* one. Without a serious and immediate danger, I could wait to grab one that was particularly useful for my current problem, just as long as it wasn’t *hyper-*specialized. I was a sorcerer now, not a wizard, and I couldn’t just slot a power that I’d use once every few months, instead of one of slightly less use for that particular problem that I could use for a dozen others as well.

Panacea frowned, before slyly smiling, a mischievous glint in her eye. “Sensei, I have a humble request,” she asked with over-the-top politeness. I was instantly wary. “I’m not sure I *know* how to dodge correctly. Could you show me?”

That. . . wasn’t unreasonable. “Um, *sure*. I guess I could demonstrate-”

“But you can *fly*, sensei,” she argued. “No, I think I’d best learn from someone with *far* more practice than I.” She turned to look at Taylor. “Don’t you agree?”

I looked at Taylor as well, who was suddenly a lot less cocky. “My vengeance shall be swift and unexpect-shit!” she tried to promise, leaning out of the way as I sent a snowball whipping by her head. It was more like a ball of shaved ice, the closest I could approximate with my Ice Projectile power.

Forming a dozen, leaving them to float between us, Panacea grabbed one and threw it, missing as Taylor bent backwards over the slushy softball, flipping backwards into a somersault and landing lightly. “Oh now she’s just showing off,” the healer muttered, grabbing another and hurling at the other girl.

“Swift and unexpected!” Taylor declared, dodging, but even without powers I could tell she was having just as much fun as Amelia was.