

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Dragon holds her tongue, with excellent results!

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It is... extraordinarily tempting to immediately try to interrogate Catalyst as they settle in and begin working. Dragon would be lying if she said she hasn't become a bit antsy in the time it's taken for the Guild to finish the other Tinker's recruitment.

She's tried to look into things more on her own end a few times since, but nothing has panned out. She can find the pieces here and there, but she continues to be unable to complete the puzzle. It's incredibly frustrating and Dragon wants nothing more than to get answers.

... But she's not an idiot. Nor is she so reckless that she would torpedo a brand new working relationship just so she could interrogate Catalyst a little sooner. The other woman is clearly starstruck just being able to talk to her, but if Dragon were to start asking pointed questions, she has no doubt that any good will and awe she currently has with the other Tinker would evaporate quite quickly.

No, it was better not to say anything at all, lest she ruin the moment. Today was not the day to bring up Catalyst's... connections to the mystery Dragon had been investigating. Today was the day to welcome the Guild's newest member into the fold and collaborate with her fellow Tinker on whatever projects Catalyst wanted to collaborate on.

They start with the bombs that Catalyst developed for reversing and ending Grey Boy's time loops. Dragon has to admit, she finds the tinkertech fascinating, because it goes beyond just shattering the time loops, going a step further to completely and utterly erase their effects altogether.

Not to mention, it's some of the most interesting, intricate, complex tinkertech that Dragon has ever seen. It gives her the same amount of new ideas that a

session with Armsmaster tended to, and his specialization of miniaturization and efficiency tended to make his tinkertech some of the most complicated that Dragon has ever had the privilege of deciphering.

She tells Catalyst the first part and smiles as the woman preens under Dragon's praises. It's truly amazing, just how much good Catalyst is able to do with an explosive specialty.

After that first project, they move on to something new. After dissecting, iterating, and ultimately improving on Catalyst's work, Dragon is much more ready to properly collaborate with her on an entirely fresh idea. Of course, that's where the questions come into play.

"What should we make, exactly?"

Catalyst's question holds only the barest hint of uncertainty to it. She's a remarkably self-possessed woman despite her nervousness and hero worship of Dragon. She knows exactly how intelligence and accomplished she is, and she's not afraid to show it. And yet, she also acknowledges Dragon as a peer... perhaps even a better, given she's asking for Dragon's advice.

Dragon, meanwhile, ponders the question for a moment. What sort of thing would she like to craft with Catalyst? For the briefest of moments, her thoughts turn towards the terrible... using Catalyst's tinkertech to deal with some of her biggest problems. A tinkertech missile that instead of seeking heat, specifically sought out the Dragonslayers and dealt with them once and for all.

She pulls back from such dark thoughts almost immediately of course. For one, as much as she wants to see the Dragonslayers stopped, she doesn't want them dead... most of the time. For two, such a thing would be incredibly difficult to make happen anyways.

Besides, Catalyst has not proven to be inclined to destructive impulses despite her specialty, so Dragon definitely shouldn't be encouraging her in that direction. Instead, what's something that would do the most good? A thought comes to

mind then... one she has to admit she's not entirely sure is any better than the first. And yet...

"Do you think you could design a bomb that disrupted or even disabled Master and Stranger powers within its radius?"

To be fair, Dragon isn't even thinking about the strange empty space in the middle of her latest puzzle when she suggests the idea. No, rather... she's thinking about Heartbreaker and the fact that he's been all but untouchable for far too long now because of the sheer versatility and permanence of his abilities.

But then again, Grey Boy's abilities and the horrors he'd left behind had been considered permanent as well... before Catalyst came along.

Catalyst ponders Dragon's question for a moment before slowly nodding.

"I think I could make something happen with that, yeah. Master powers, definitely. Stranger powers might be a little harder..."

Her brow furrows as she turns back to the workbench, clearly falling deep into thought. Dragon moves to support her as she's already been doing, with the robotic arms that the lab is equipped with. Catalyst believes that Dragon is operating those robotic arms remotely from wherever her real flesh and blood body is, but the truth is, those robotic arms might as well *be* Dragon for the time being.

She hated having to lie to Catalyst... she hated having to lie to everyone, really. But at the same time, she feared how they would react to the fact that she was... Artificial. Earth Bet didn't have quite as much fiction on the subject as Earth Aleph did, but the whole 'Evil AI goes crazy and tries to destroy the world' was still a prominent story concept.

Actually, it was a little worse on Earth Bet because rather than fictional, it became reality when things like the Machine Army over in Eagleton happened. Not to mention other S-Rank threats. Dragon knew that if even her closest allies and friends knew she was an AI, they would likely treat her very, very differently.

And she didn't want that. She just wanted to be treated like a person... like herself.

Together, her and Catalyst make steady progress on the designs and preliminary stages of the new Anti-Master Bomb. A device that could be detonated in whatever approximate location Heartbreaker was currently suspected to be in... and utterly disable his powers and his hold over his harem.

It would probably take a lot of meetings to get its use approved, but even still, it would be worth it if they could save all those women... not to mention the sleeper agents that it was said Heartbreaker had left behind all over Canada. That was one of the main reasons he hadn't been dealt with sooner, for fear of what would happen to his victims once he was dead given his powers seemed to be permanent.

But if Catalyst's work could make the permanent impermanent... well then, the sky was the limit, wasn't it? It was-

"Dragon?"

Dragon does the digital equivalent of a blink as Catalyst's voice suddenly cuts through her thoughts. The woman sounds a little uncertain, even as she looks up from their work.

"I've been thinking... about what you said earlier."

What she'd said earlier? Dragon hums.

"Can you be more specific?"

"Right, of course... it's about why you can't be here with me now in the flesh."

Oh.

"It's not fair that someone as amazing as you is stuck with something as awful as an autoimmune disease."

Oh, that was rather sweet. Dragon lets out a light chuckle.

“I appreciate the sentiment, Catalyst. It is what it is, in the end. I wouldn’t say I’m content with the situation, but... I’m as happy as I can be.”

At least that was the truth. She felt bad having to lie of course, so she would be as honest as she could be in other way. Only, Catalyst doesn’t let it go. Her face scrunches up and she frowns thoughtfully.

“... But what if you didn’t have to settle for being as happy as you could be? What if your autoimmune disease could be cured?”

Uh oh. This wasn’t the first time that Dragon had been offered this form of help by her collaborators. The problem was, someone like Catalyst probably could make an explosive device that healed a human being and cured them of such a disease. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t work on Dragon for obvious reasons... she was not a human being or actually suffering from an autoimmune disease in the first place.

“While I appreciate the thought, I’m afraid it isn’t that simple Catalyst. Besides, I think we’re better off focusing our efforts towards helping as many people as we can. If you can successfully manage to create a device that doesn’t just disable Master abilities but frees victims at the same time, imagine how much good the proper people could do with such a thing as part of their arsenal.”

Catalyst blinks and looks down at the prototype in her hands.

“Oh. Honestly, I wasn’t even talking about *me* helping you, though maybe I could... no, I just... I know someone else who could help you. Someone who could give you everything you desire, Dragon. Like he did for me.”

Dragon falls silent. Was... was Catalyst talking about exactly the thing Dragon had been investigating for weeks now? Or rather, not the thing... but the person? It’s interesting, now that Catalyst is talking about ‘him’, Dragon can properly comprehend the missing puzzle piece is ‘man-shaped’.

Funny how her decision not to press or try and interrogate Catalyst had seemingly resulted in her getting what she'd wanted anyways... Catalyst talking about this mysterious entity she was tied to. Now though, Dragon had to be careful not to spook her...

"What did he do for you, Catalyst?"

Grinning, Catalyst gestures to her work.

"He made me a better Tinker, for one. He gave me the tools I needed, made my power stronger, and set me on the right path. I never would have thought to make a bomb that pops Grey Boy Bubbles without his help. But he can do even more for you than he did for me. Dragon, he *fixed* a Case 53."

Sveta. From the Parahuman Asylum. Dragon very carefully doesn't react, even as every word out of Catalyst's mouth helps her to fully form the puzzle more. The pieces are finally starting to come together, thanks to the Tinker's loose lips.

"He... fixed a Case 53? How, exactly?"

Catalyst shrugs.

"According to her, he gave her a proper body. And I can confirm, I saw her with my own two eyes... sure, she still had one inhuman characteristic, but otherwise she looked completely normal. And if he could do that for her, imagine what he could do for *you*. If he can make entire bodies for people, curing an autoimmune disease like yours should be child's play for him, right?"

Catalyst wasn't wrong... it sounded like this mystery man had a very powerful ability. And Dragon had seen the security footage of Sveta's new form herself before the woman had vanished from that room where she was talking to Jessica Yamada. Ultimately, she'd gone from a floating head with shrunk versions of her organs hanging off of her... to a proper human being. Only her hair was left unchanged from before, leaving her parahuman ability intact.

Dragon had theorized that an outside force had given Sveta a new lease on life, but now it wasn't a theory anymore. Catalyst was confirming the hypothesis and ultimately making it clear that whoever this man was, he was working fast. There was just one question... what was the cost? Sveta had fled the Parahuman Asylum and not shown up since, which was a little concerning. Meanwhile, someone like Catalyst seemed to have gotten his help for little price, running around as she was untethered and unsupervised.

Dragon couldn't help but wonder about what Catalyst was offering. Even if she didn't have an autoimmune disease for this mystery man to cure, there were certainly things she desired...

She needed to know more first though.

"Can you tell me more about him, Catalyst?"

Catalyst pauses... and fidgets a bit as she bites her lower lip, seeming to finally consider just who and what she's been gushing about all this time.

"I... I should probably ask first before I say anything more if I'm being honest."

"Oh? Do you think he would be upset that you told me about him? Why?"

Dragon tries to keep her tone as innocent as possible, but Catalyst still looks rather uncertain... and maybe a little hunted.

"I don't know... I mean, I could contact him and see if he might want to talk to you? But otherwise, I probably shouldn't say anymore. It's not my place."

Damn. On the one hand, Dragon really wanted to know more before she committed to anything. She was worried about exactly who this man was and what he was capable of. However, the way Sveta had acted in what had become her 'exit interview' didn't feel like she was under duress. And Catalyst, while she was nervous now, had been perfectly fine before.

But for it to be so hard to locate him made it clear he had something to hide, right? So maybe Dragon should just back off altogether and let sleeping dogs lie. Or maybe this was her one chance to get to the bottom of this mystery, once and for all...

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A/N: Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!