

I clenched my fists as I watched Jack Slash smirk and raise his hands, like a cat who caught the canary. I did my best to look around discreetly, searching for an avenue of attack, watching people run, pushing through doors and alleyways, and leaving the community area. Thankfully, they seemed very focused on me, letting the innocent civilians run and flee. Jack appeared to relish the chaos, though his eyes never left me.

In all honesty, Jack wasn't really my main concern, as there wasn't much he could do to hurt me. His ability to project the blades he used wouldn't likely hurt me. Hell, they probably wouldn't even make it through most of my strengthened clothes. The Siberian, on the other hand, was a significant threat, as was poor little Bonesaw. The zebra-striped woman was well known to be an unstoppable brute strong enough to maim Alexandria. At the same time, Bonesaw was rumored to have dozens of the virulent plagues she stored on her person, even *inside* her person. I couldn't discount any of them, it was too risky, especially since it seemed to be well within her tinker specialty.

"I found Crow, she is helping people evacuate," Alya said into my ears, having to speak up to be heard over the screaming. "I'm getting the golems ready as well. Buy us time."

I subtly nodded, before focusing my full attention back on Jack, who was clearly waiting for my response.

"I can't say I feel the same enthusiasm," I admitted, doing my best to loosen the iron clench I had going in my hands. "We were worried you might eventually show up, but we had hoped you would be smarter than that."

"How unfortunate," He responded with an exaggerated frown. "We went through all this work, only for our host to be rude."

"Not very nice," Bonesaw agreed, folding her arms as she stood beside Jack. "I worked hard on your present too!"

She gestured back at the three abominations behind them, the amalgamations twitching and spasming as they tried to stand still.

"She really did, and they came out so well," Jack agreed, smiling like a proud father, Bonesaw preening at the attention. "They are the whole reason we could come here like this, after all! Without them and Ironrot, we wouldn't have any idea how to take down so many of your fancy, shining metal men."

"So that's why you're so confident," I guessed, doing my best to focus on Jack Slash and Siberian at the same time. "You figured a few metal controllers could take care of them."

"Well, just two," Jack responded with a shrug. "Turns out affecting metal directly is a bit of a rare ability. Ironrot volunteered the moment he heard we were coming here, seems like he really hates your metal people thing. Ferrion here... well, he was a hero, so Bonesaw needed to convince him to tag along."

"Now he is a good boy three times over!" Bonesaw added. "No swearing, no talking back, and no pesky trying to escape!"

"This... that thing is one person?" I asked, my stomach twisting as I watched the biotinkers work twitch and shift.

"Well... technically it's three people, all jumbled up and split back apart!" Bonesaw admitted excitedly, happy to talk shop. "The important part is that Ferrion's brain is in the lead, and I managed to work their powers in all three of them! Isn't that cool?"

"You... did this to him, to three innocent people... Just because one of them could control metal?" I asked, forcing myself to look at them, my eyes trailing over the bulb at the top of each abomination. "You did this to innocent people?"

"Oh, don't get angry, Arcanum. He's three times the man he was before," Jack said, Bonswaw snickering at his joke.

Even the Siberian smiled.

I held back a shiver as the completely naked villain, striped with black and white, stared into my soul and smiled. Something about the cap stirred deep in the uncanny valley, stoking an eldritch horror of something pretending to be human, to lure you in.

"And the rest of your people?" I asked, looking around as if expecting someone to be coming closer. "Where are they?"

"Oh, well, there is the good news!" He said, happy to keep talking. "You worked so hard to build up your friends at New Wave, making your own allies as well, I figured we would visit them at the same time! I'll admit, I'm a little concerned that Shatterbird's scream didn't reach here, but by now, the Pelhams are having their own meeting, and Burnscar is burning down your forest home."

Before I could ask, Alya was in my ear.

"There is smoke coming from the forest, but it's around the edges... and seems to be fading rather fast," Alya assured me. "Whoever he sent there must have run into Kali and her wolves."

Again, I nodded, and rather than trying to speak without getting caught, I sent the mental image of Olivia on her phone, then an image of New Wave. Last I knew, they were having a planning meeting after the kids got out of school, so they should all be together.

"So let me get this straight," I said, letting out a long breath. "You split up your party, sent some of them after a team of capes that seriously outnumbers your people, have years of experience, and are all enhanced by me and my gear. Then you sent another group of people to my home. The home and workshop of a known, powerful tinker... Why are you the leader again?"

I could see, for just a moment, a slight crack in Jack's persona. My refusal to cower, followed by my questioning, irreverent response, was clearly not what he was looking for. Still, he had excellent control, because the crack vanished almost as fast as it popped up.

"My people will be fine, they are more than enough power through whatever half of New Wave has to offer, and Mannequin was excited to study your particular brand of tinker tech," Jack assured me. "Ironrot will make quick work of whatever metal constructs you throw their way, and Bonesaw's new pets will tear through any of them here."

Before I could respond, Alya was right back in my ear, keeping me updated as I did my best to stall out Jack.

"Crow called Lady Photon, both Ironrot and Crawler are down, the latter very, very dead," She explained. "And in case you're worried, Ironrot's powers did not work on the golems. New Wave is dropping off Panacea at Shatterbird's epicenter, then coming here. Almost all of the golems and guardians are incoming, and we've evacuated the closest loop of buildings."

Again, I nodded, suddenly feeling a lot more confident. I had been pretty confident that my guardians and golems wouldn't be affected by whatever Ironrot could do, but it was very nice to have that confirmed.

"The only problem is that all of the constructs I make are all Manton-protected," I explained, using a term he would understand, despite it not actually working that way. "Powers like theirs tend to have a really hard time working on any of them. In fact, I think you'll find them to be completely immune. But don't take my word for it."

I whistled, and after a moment's pause, nearly two dozen golems came pouring out of the nearby buildings. Most of them were metal, the newer refined versions that stood just a bit straighter and looked a bit less chunky. There are also a pair of wooden golems, as well as the slightly smoothed over stone golems, the ones that were almost melted by Lung.

That made Jack pause, his eyes narrowing slightly. The three abominations behind him reacted without words, waving their hands as they tried to snag the metallic golems in whatever abilities they had. At first, nothing happened, their mismatched hands waving to no effect. Then bits of metal around the constructs began to float, as they pushed their powers further. When my golems refused to move, Jack Slash scowled.

"Hmm. Well... it seems like you were correct. I would have sworn that should have worked." He admitted, seeming genuinely confused that his plan had failed. After a moment, he shook himself, his arrogant confidence returning in full force.

"Oh well, that doesn't mean they can't take them apart the old-fashioned way."

The Bonesaw crafter horrors gestured again, and the floating scraps of metal started slamming into the golems. It started with smaller bits, only getting worse as larger chunks of nearby buildings began slamming into them. The metal golems were more than tough enough to take it, but the others were quickly taking damage. After a few waves of debris, they began to

slow down, before eventually stopping altogether. Jack Slash was silent, but I could see a settling anger under all of his bravado and acting.

"Unfortunate. I suppose it might be time to re-group. Such a pity, I had so many plans," Jack Slash admitted with a sad frown, covering his frustration. "Siberian, if you would..."

The moment he said her name, giving her permission to attack, the daunting frame of the Siberian moved with startling speed. The concrete beneath her feet cracked and crumbled as she leaped towards me, her hands carving through a metal golem as if it were made from clay, tearing it apart as it got in her way.

I leaped backwards, simultaneously activating my flight harness and pulling my annihilation rifle from my holster. It came free with a slight pop, and with a burst of speed, I flew upwards, leaving the ground just as Siberian reached me. I rocketed upwards, doing my best to aim downward as the known cannibal cape, looked up, gave me a hungry grin, and leaped off the ground hard enough to leave a crater behind.

She slammed into me hard enough to crack my ribs, her pure speed and power completely bypassing my own enhancements, destroying my ablative shields without even slowing. Her impact doubled my upward momentum, and as she wrapped her hand around my neck and pulled her fist back to throw a punch that I knew would utterly destroy me...

I pulled the trigger.

My annihilation rifle fired, the barrel pressed directly against her stomach. I had no idea how it would affect the cape, as she had proven before to resist some insane, destructive effects. What I did know was that this was absolutely danger close, and if something funky happened, I was in the splash zone of one of my most dangerous creations.

I clenched my teeth, preparing for the backlash, only to blink as Siberian simply... disappeared. Forced myself to slow down, almost unconsciously healing myself of my broken ribs and bruised neck, looking around, trying to find the dangerous cape.

"Alya..."

"She is back on the ground," the elemental answered. "Looking just as confused as you are."

I swooped back down, and sure enough, where she was, on the ground not too far from where she had cratered the ground, jumping up to catch me. She spotted me floating and immediately jumped again, but I saw her coming this time, and I fired as she was hurtling towards me.

This time, with a gap between us, rapidly shrinking as it was, I had a much better view of what was happening. The ball of annihilation fired from the end of my weapon spun out across the gap, slapped into her...

And they both vanished, popped like soap bubbles. It was so sudden, so immediate, that it felt like it was impossible, like I was watching a glitch in reality.

"Rooftop to your left," Alya stated after a short pause.

I spun, lined up the shot, and managed to pop the previously thought indestructible cape just a dozen feet from her, grabbing me again.

"Tell the others to focus on finding Jack Slash and Bonesaw," I told Alya. "I'll keep Siberian busy until we can think of something!"

Alya confirmed my directions before warning me where Siberian had reappeared. We continued this dance, with Siberian leaping at me with increasing ferocity, while Alya barely managed to warn me in time. Twice, the striped woman managed to catch me, forcing me to sacrifice my leg and arm, both of which she shattered, but thankfully didn't tear off. I thankfully managed to heal myself in the one or two seconds it took for her to reappear.

"William...I think I've spotted something," Alya said. "A man in a nearby van flinches every time you destroy the Siberian."

"What?" I asked, sounding confused. "That doesn't make any sense, he-"

"Behind you!"

I spin around, just in time for the Siberian to once again slam into me. Again, I could feel my ribs creak and crack, but this time she had managed to grab my arm, as well as the opposite shoulder, preventing me from aiming my rifle at her. She smiled a big, smug grin at me as she began pulling at my arm, slowly overwhelming my durability. I screamed as she pulled my arm from its socket, crushing the other shoulder as she pulled more and more and-

The shattering sound of nearby lightning rolled over us, close enough that it rattled my bones. Suddenly, the Siberian stopped pulling me apart, her eyes going wide in shock. Then, just as she had before, she popped, disappearing and leaving me alone as I flew across the sky. I quickly healed my right arm and called my rifle to me, whirling around, looking for where she would appear as I healed my crushed shoulder.

"Alya, where is she?" I asked desperately. "Can you see her?"

"She's gone, William," She responded, sounding confident. "The guy I spotted, who was flinching? He was summoning her. She was a projection. I struck him with a lightning bolt, and she almost immediately disappeared. She hasn't come back, not in my range, at least."

"Well... fuck. Okay, that's something we can unwind later," I said, shaking my head. "Risky, but good call, Alya."

"I had no choice. Lightning wouldn't work on her, and she was pulling you to pieces," Alya responded, seeming sure of her choices. "I had to take the risk."

"Thank you for saving my life," I said, sending her a grateful sensation through our connection. "Any idea where the others are?"

"They are out of my range, but Crow said they would be following Jack Slash," she answered. "Weaver should have no issue keeping track of them easily, and the whole golem and guardian network is following. They won't escape."

"Let's go find the," I said, shaking my head. "I want to be there when I tell Jack Slash his trump card is dead."

"Last I saw them, they were heading west," Alya explained.

I nodded, and after a breath, I flew west, pushing my flight harness as fast as it would go.