

Tyranny 6.2

If I never had to brave such a place again, it would be too soon.

Just as Lisa had said, the smell *did* get worse and stronger the further we went in, and even holding my nose didn't stop the cloying taste of it in the air from sticking to the back of my tongue. What made it all the harder was that there was literally *nothing* else to focus on; aside another door we'd passed through, the long hallway was monotonous and completely unremarkable. It looked just like any other storm drain probably did, and perfectly uniform concrete walls did not make for an interesting study.

Hell, even knowing that this *was* the entrance to a secret base, it almost had me fooled, that was how bare and ordinary it was. There weren't any visible wires or cables, there were no traps, no security cameras tucked flush against the ceiling or hidden in the nooks and crannies. There was nothing at all to suggest there was anything nefarious going on down here, nor that anyone had even *been* down here since it was first constructed.

Finally, after what seemed like a mile of walking, we entered a small room with a blank, featureless door, completely lacking in external handles or openings. No place to put a key and not even a keypad to enter a password. It was nothing but a gigantic slab with what I imagined were internal hinges. The only other thing in the room was a surveillance camera that I *almost* didn't see, at first glance.

I turned to Lisa, gestured to the camera, and mouthed, '*Sound?*'

She took a short look at it and then shook her head. "We're good," she whispered. "It's video only."

"Should we take it out?"

Lisa grimaced and sighed. "Admittedly, this is the part where my plans start to get a little...well, vague."

"I don't like the sound of 'vague,'" I said.

"Eh." She wobbled her hand demonstrably. "The problem we have is that this is where it's basically impossible not to get discovered. We take out the camera, we get discovered. We open the door, we get discovered. What we'd have to bet on is that whoever is watching the cameras isn't paying attention. On the other hand, if we wait for a shift change or something, we could *probably* make it inside like that without anyone noticing, but that could take hours and there's no way of knowing if they'd even open the door for that, so we could be waiting until morning for something that's never going to happen."

"And what about the door itself?" Amy asked. "I'm not really seeing a way in. So unless you've got some kind of trick up your sleeve where we have to tap *Shave and a Haircut* in a specific spot or something..."

I mumbled an agreement. The door was impressively solid and looked like it was designed to withstand a nuclear blast. While there were certainly heroes — such as Herakles, Gawain, or

Siegfried — who could bust it open without much trouble, it kind of defeated the point of doing this quietly if we broke down the door, and without a keyhole or something to interface with the lock, I doubted my amateur skeleton key could do the job.

Lisa, however, wasn't bothered.

"Fortunately, we don't have to worry about any of that, because *I...*" She reached into her pocket and produced her cell phone, grinning as she waggled it. "...happen to have something that makes this entire thing much easier."

"A cell phone?" Amy asked flatly. "What, does it transmit the password that unlocks the door or something?"

"Better," said Lisa as her grin inched towards her trademark Cheshire. She typed something on her phone, which let out a muted chime when she tapped *send* — she actually had *service* down here? "I have something that even Coil probably doesn't expect. Ha!"

In front of us, the large door rumbled and clicked, and then, miraculously, fell open — just enough that we could pry the gap farther so we could slip inside. Lisa turned to Amy and me, triumphant.

"A guy inside," she concluded. "Turns out not everyone in Coil's employ is totally okay with all of his, uh, *business practices*, considering some of the lines he likes to cross. There's a couple of mostly decent people who got dishonorably discharged and didn't have the option to turn him down. If you can provide enough of a financial incentive to convince them to listen to their conscience, then..."

"You *bribed* one of Coil's mercs?" Amy whispered incredulously.

Lisa shrugged. "Easier to find which one it'll work on when you have a power like mine." She gestured to the door as she shoved her phone back into her pocket. "We've got about forty-five seconds before the door closes automatically. That's all the time my inside guy could buy us."

Which meant we couldn't afford to sit here and discuss the kind of bullshit Lisa's power let her get away with.

"Right," I muttered. "Let's get going."

Together, we shuffled over to the gap, and through the fabric of the cloak, took hold of the door, then carefully prized it open. The hinges, to my surprise, didn't so much as whimper, but then, with walls made of solid concrete, even the slightest sound probably echoed through the whole place. A secret base would be much harder to keep secret if it made a racket that woke up half the city every time you came and went.

The moment we had it open enough to slip through the gap comfortably, we let go of the door and made our way inside one at a time, just as we had at the gate. The room we entered — blessedly — had none of the utterly hair-curling stench of the outside tunnel, and was constructed of more solid concrete, thick enough it could probably double as a fairly good Endbringer shelter. It had two levels, and we stood atop a series of metal walkways above a lower floor maybe ten or fifteen feet beneath us.

It was surprisingly dark, I thought. The lights had been almost completely shut off, leaving the entire room to be lit only by a few dim floor lights from the level below and a few lamps that had been wired and strapped to the edges of the walkways. It lent an eerie, almost horror movie vibe to the whole place.

As the door swung closed behind us and locked automatically, I frowned down at the next obstacle: the metal walkways.

“How are we going to get through here without alerting the whole base?”

“Very carefully,” Lisa muttered. “Roll your foot as you step and we should be able to get through here nearly silently —”

BANG

The sound of a gunshot echoed like thunder through the room, and something slammed into me from the front, catching the fabric of the cloak as it went, then tinkled as it fell to the walkway under my feet.

Lisa swore. “Shit —”

BANG-BANG-BANG echoed more shots as the three of us dove to the side — Amy and me in one direction and Lisa in the other. The cloak pulled away between us, leaving Lisa completely exposed and Amy as a disembodied torso. As the sudden burst of gunfire came to an equally sudden end, the sound of the bullets clattering to the walkway was deafening in an entirely different way.

I looked towards Lisa, and in spite of the fact that she couldn't see me, her alarmed face turned to mine and our gazes locked.

What the fuck?

Carefully, cautiously, I raised myself up and looked down the hallway immediately across from the door. *BANG-BANG* came the report of two more shots, but they went wide as I ducked back down, catching the cloak and tearing it halfway off of me. Somehow, they'd been able to see me — but in exchange, I'd also caught sight of the flash from the gun that had shot at me.

I whipped the cloak off — it obviously wasn't working, at this point, so it was more of a hindrance than a help — then tapped Amy and gestured over in Lisa's direction once I had her attention. Then, I flattened myself against the floor and started to crawl over to her, and just behind me, I could feel Amy doing the same.

“What now?” Amy asked once we got over to her.

Lisa grimaced. “Well, sneaking through the base is obviously out.”

Her sour tone told me all of the things she didn't say.

“We're on a time limit, now,” she continued. “Which means the only real thing we can do, aside from retreat and try another day —”

“— is force our way through,” I concluded.

Lisa nodded grimly. The smile that curled her lips lacked any trace of mirth. “Got a hero who’ll make this easier on us?”

I considered my options, for a moment. The different heroes I could use to get us through here and to Coil, with who knew how many mercs between us and them.

“I have a couple in mind, yeah.”

“Think you can get us out of this mess, then? You’re in the lead, now, Chief.”

I didn’t answer her directly. Instead, I got my legs underneath me and pushed myself up to stand. Immediately, the rapid *BANG* of more gunfire started up, again, and rounds pelted me like fingers poking at my chest and arms. I didn’t pay them any mind, because even if it was possible that they could eventually overcome my amulet, I didn’t intend to wait long enough to see if they even could.

As I had so many times before, I reached out and through myself, into the vast halls of legend where resided the heroes that my power called upon. Only one rose up and offered himself to me, and I stretched out, grasped him, and pulled him into myself.

“Set. Install.”

My first instinct was to reach for one of my invincible heroes, someone like Siegfried or Herakles or Achilles — heroes with Noble Phantasms based in some form of invincibility or ability to ignore damage. Even Gawain, if I used his Noble Phantasms right, would have worked just fine for that. Any one of them would have turned me into a walking tank.

However...

My body changed. The long hair that marked me as my mother’s daughter shrank back into my head and fanned out, turning silver. I shrank — only an inch. My face morphed and shifted. The clothes that formed my costume expanded, hardened, lengthened, and became a suit of armor, done in purple and deep, navy blues. At last, an enormous shield formed in my hand, so big and so heavy that its bottom rested against the floor.

...none of *those* heroes protected the precious friends who were standing with me.

I hefted the enormous shield in front of me, then slammed it home with the full weight of its incredible mass — all as though it was as light as a feather.

“Get behind me,” I ordered.

Lisa and Amy scrambled to their feet and huddled next to me behind the bulk of my shield, even as more bullets peppered our location — and bounced impotently off the surface of Lord Camelot without leaving so much as a scratch.

Of course. This was Lord Camelot, after all, the shield of Sir Galahad of the Round Table. It was an embodiment of that castle and its towering walls, built from the Round Table itself, and as long as

the heart remained steadfast and true, it could never be broken. To imagine that mere bullets would be enough to even scuff it was laughable.

Light flashed suddenly, the air sizzled in its wake, and I had to blink my eyes as the searing yellow afterimage of a laser — dissipating like so much rain water against my shield — burned itself into my retinas. Even with Galahad's speed, I hadn't been able to see it before it hit.

"Fuck," hissed Lisa. "That's a laser! Coming from...some kind of barrel attachment, Tinkertech, obviously. They *all* have it!"

"What the fuck?" Amy demanded. "What kind of money does this guy even *have*? Fucking...an army of mercenaries, funding a team of capes, making super secret bases, and he can afford to shell out for *Tinkertech* weapons, now, too?"

Light flashed — again, again, *again*, accompanying the rolling beat of gunfire, and they all stopped impotently as they reached Lord Camelot. I looked over the edge with narrowed eyes, but Galahad had no special vision, and the lighting was poor enough, and even poorer down that hallway and with the lasers messing things up, that I could only catch glimpses of the enemy when they fired their weapons.

At least six, I saw. Probably more.

"Bond villain, remember?" said Lisa. "If you have to ask 'how much money does he have,' then the answer is probably 'more than enough.'"

"How are we supposed to get through, then?" asked Amy. "Bullets are one thing — and I'm still trying to get used to the idea that this flimsy piece of gold around my neck makes me bulletproof — but if they're slinging fucking Tinkertech lasers around, I don't want to push my fucking luck!"

"How should I know?" snapped Lisa. "I'm a Thinker, not a Brute! If you shoot me full of holes, I don't regenerate!"

We could probably sit there until the mercs ran out of ammo, or whatever counted as ammo for those lasers of theirs. In a game of attrition, Lord Camelot would always win. However, we *did* have a time limit, and if we took too long, if we waited them out, then Coil would be long gone and this all would've been for nothing.

Nothing for it, then.

"I'm going." I glanced back at my two friends. "Stay here. As long as you're behind the shield, you'll be protected."

They both did a double-take.

"Wait, what?"

"What are you —"

But before they could mount a protest or try to argue, I was gone, ducking smoothly around my makeshift barrier and into the line of fire, and once I was clear, I *moved*.

There was no better way to describe it. Siegfried had been fast, like a comet, as inexorable as a mountain and racing along at a constant speed. He was a hurricane, all harsh wind and unstoppable strength, pounding down before you realized he was upon you. Galahad, it seemed to me, was *faster*. He was like lightning, an incredible flow of motion and power from one point to another, a raging river fed by torrential rain. He didn't dash, he didn't sprint, he simply *moved*.

In an instant, I crossed the walkway, soared down the hallway, and was among the crowd of mercenaries, bullets pinging uselessly against the shield of Galahad's power that I'd gathered around me like a second skin. My fist was already in motion by the time I'd come to a stop — *CRACK* — and with a thunderous sound audible even over the staccato roar of gunfire, I snapped one man's rifle in half with a single well-placed strike of my fist.

“Shit!”

“What the fuck!?”

“How did she — !?”

A second strike hit the first man's solar plexus, driving the air from his lungs — but not killing him. As he collapsed to his knees, I was already moving onto the second man right next to him, effortlessly pushing away the barrel of the gun that was swinging in my direction, and I grabbed his other arm by the wrist and executed a perfect hip throw. *Twist — crack — scream*, and his shoulder was dislocated.

The thing about the hand to hand martial arts employed by the Knights of the Round Table — and probably knights of the era of plate armor in general, now that I thought of it — was that it focused *way* more on disabling strikes than on lethal ones. And that made sense, because cutting or punching through reinforced metal plates was *really hard* to do. Instead, the goal became striking at vulnerable points, at forcing your enemy into a disadvantageous position where you had easy access to stab into the gaps between plates with your sword.

This was almost pitifully easy, I thought as I spun around and stopped a spray of bullets from another merc by pressing my palm against the muzzle of his gun. I took hold of the barrel, then used my speed, strength, and leverage to twist the shoulder strap and pull his arm tight against his back. A quick blow to the back of one knee weakened his stance, and I threw him into the first man, who was still wheezing as he emptied his stomach onto the walkway.

A fourth swung his rifle around to shoot me, but I stepped forward and pushed the barrel upwards, sending his shots into the concrete ceiling. A yank pulled him off balance and tore the gun from his hands, and I slid smoothly behind him, looping the strap around one arm, and then grabbing the other and trapping it, too. In seconds, I had him trussed up with the strap of his own weapon.

Number five, in contrast, came at me with a big, wicked-looking combat knife — and I trapped the blade between my thumb and fingers, then snapped it off at the hilt like it was nothing more than a twig. Before he even had time to be surprised, I dropped the blade, grabbed his wrist, and did another hip throw, planting him face first into the walkway. While he was stunned, I took the wrist

still in my hand, pulled his arm behind his back until it *hurt*, then tied the strap of his gun around it, such that if he tried to pull his arm free, he'd choke himself.

The last guy got a shot off before I could turn to him, but the laser glanced off like everything else had, ineffective. A quick, light jab to his throat brought him down, gagging, and while he clutched at what would wind up being a very painful bruise, I took his gun away and snapped it in half over my knee.

Lisa and Amy were still huddled behind my shield when I made it back over to them, though Lisa was brave enough to peek out over the edge to check it was me.

“How many?” she asked immediately.

“Only six,” I replied.

Amy peeked out, too. “Holy fuck,” she breathed. “That can't have been more than ten or fifteen seconds!”

Lisa grimaced. “That means the rest of them are camped out by his office door.”

“How many?” I asked this time.

“At least two squads,” she answered. “Maybe...ten to twenty more mercs. The rest are spread out at his other bases, but the biggest concentration is always at the same base he is.”

I frowned and considered my shield for a moment, then nodded to myself and let Galahad go. “Release.”

In an instant, I was back to normal and Lord Camelot was gone, leaving a divot in the floor. Lisa, who no longer had something to hide behind, blinked at me, surprised.

“You're not going to keep it?”

“I've been using my powers pretty extensively the past few days,” I answered truthfully. “The longer and harder I use an Install, the harder it is on me, so I'm rationing them right now so I don't faint the moment we're done, here.”

I was still feeling pretty good, in those terms. I wasn't noticing any fatigue, yet, so I could probably pretty comfortably keep using my Installs, at least as long as I didn't get into a protracted battle like with Lung.

Even so, the last seventy-two hours had been the most concentrated use of Installs I'd had since getting my powers, and using Galahad's Mana Defense skill would get pretty draining pretty fast. I didn't want to risk it.

Lisa grimaced. “Right. You still good to go?”

“I'm fine.”

“Then we keep going.” She jerked her head in the direction of the hall. “Coil’s office is that way.”

I led the way, just because I was undoubtedly the most durable of our group, with Lisa’s hand on my shoulder to offer me silent directions. We rolled our feet as we walked, carefully but quickly, and made our way down the hallway and past the moaning mercs I’d already disabled.

The base was bigger than I’d initially assumed, based upon that first wide, open area at the beginning. The hallways split off at the end, then turned at right angles to, I could only imagine, sweep around and link back to that main area. There was a spiral staircase, the kind made of perforated metal boards, off to one side, but Lisa didn’t direct us down it so Coil’s office must have been on the first floor.

We were coming up to another intersection when she abruptly squeezed my shoulder and pulled us to a halt. When I turned to look at her, she pressed a finger to her lips in a shushing gesture and made several hand motions that I interpreted to mean that Coil’s office was down the hallway to the right.

I took a steadying breath and reached into and through myself again.

Silently, without saying a word, I Installed Medea, again, rather than Galahad.

As Lisa took a step back, pulling Amy with her, I stepped forward and around the corner.

“Αργος.”

A shimmering, glass-like barrier appeared in front of me, just as a volley of purple lasers shot forth, aimed at me. They *pinged* off of it with a chime-like sound, followed immediately by a hail of gunfire from conventional bullets. My shield spell absorbed the hits like they were nothing.

Of course it did. This spell was comparable in strength to Herakles impenetrable skin. Breaking it would require something much more powerful than some bullets and a few lasers.

I gestured with one hand and cast my next spell.

“Ατλας Πάντα.”

In an instant, all of the gathered mercs froze as the air pressing down on their bodies suddenly became as a physical force, trapping them in place. Calling it “like molasses” would be an understatement; it was more like a steel mold now held them where they were, unable to do more than breathe. They couldn’t even have pulled the triggers on their guns.

With the enemy immobilized, I gathered more of Medea’s power and incanted my second spell.

“Ύπνος Πάντα.”

Instantly, they started dropping, muscles relaxing, eyes drooping, bodies sagging in place, held up by my previous spell, as my second commanded them to sleep. Several managed to hold on for a scant few seconds, fighting against the pull, struggling to keep their eyes open and stay awake, but it was a

useless fight from the start. One by one, even those who hadn't immediately fallen began to fall, until at last, all of the mercs were asleep, frozen upright.

With a wave of my hand, the first spell was released and they all collapsed bonelessly to the floor.

Truthfully, tactics like this were something I would have preferred to use for subduing people. One of the reasons I hadn't tried with Bakuda was because I hadn't known exactly what she was capable of and what she might try to pull off, whether it would even *work* or if she had some kind of Tinkertech contingency that would blow up in my face — literally.

I hadn't wanted to gamble on people's lives — *innocent* people's lives — with the possibility that it might not work. Or worse, that it *would*, but backfire horrifically.

Here, though, there were only mercenaries who had willingly thrown their lot in with someone like Coil. I had no such worries.

“What'd you do?” Amy asked curiously.

“Put them all to sleep,” I replied. “A relatively simple spell, really. Simpler and...probably much safer than anaesthesia. They'll wake up later without any side effects or anything, at least.”

“How long will that last?” asked Lisa.

I frowned.

“It depends. Against trained, disciplined ex-soldiers and mercenaries... Maybe an hour.”

In truth, I had no idea. A spell like this, something that attacked the mind more than anything else, could be resisted with enough willpower. It would be easier or harder depending on whether it was expected or not, so someone mustering all of their might to stay awake and fight the spell could even throw it off completely, and even those who couldn't might only be affected for a few minutes if they still succumbed, but if it was a surprise attack, then it would be doubly effective.

Someone like Alexandria or Eidolon or Legend, or someone with a strong will like Armsmaster, or even powerful enough guys like Lung, they might actually be able to shrug it off after a brief moment of drowsiness.

On the other hand, when the measuring stick was *Herakles* and other prominent Greek heroes, who would have barely noticed it, it was much harder to figure out whether *any* real person could resist it at all, let alone ignore it outright.

I let out a breath — “Release.” — and became Apocrypha again. I looked over at Lisa and gestured to the door that stood just beyond the pile of mercs. “You ready?”

Lisa hesitated, then her lips pulled tight and she nodded. “Yeah.”

We went down the hallway, carefully stepping over the downed mercs, and when we arrived at the closed door, Lisa pulled out my skeleton key and unlocked it, then pushed the door open and

revealed, in all his glory, the costumed form of Coil, sitting at a surprisingly ordinary desk with a computer.

He was underwhelming, in the end. I'd been expecting...ugliness. Scars. Missing fingers or limbs. A monacle or a shaved head, with tattoos of snakes all over. A physically imposing body. The sorts of things people associated with villains in Bond movies or stereotypical megalomaniacs in one of Earth Aleph's Schwarzenegger action movies.

Instead, he was the exact opposite. Small. Not short, really, but thin and wiry, the sort of skeletal thinness that seemed about two steps shy of starving to death. I could even see the outlines of each individual rib through his costume. Even his costume was simple and uninspiring, a minimalist black bodysuit with a single, undetailed white snake that slithered up and around his head. Later on, I found myself thinking that his smallness as a man accurately reflected his smallness as a person.

When we stepped inside, he was frozen, rigid — with fear, with surprise? I didn't know, and I couldn't see any part of his face that would give it away — hands curled tightly around the armrests of his plush office chair.

“Heya, Bossman,” Lisa said gleefully. “Surprised to see me? Alive?”

He didn't respond, still rigid and frozen. I stepped forward and he jerked, lurching back in his chair as though he'd been punched.

“Wait,” he said, panicking, “wait, I can be of use to you! I have money, influence — an in with the PRT! I can... I can clean up the Boat Graveyard, hire the Dockworkers! You'll never want for anything ever again!”

I just stepped closer and prepared to enact my curse.

“Coil,” I began, voice heavy with the weight of centuries, “I've beaten your agents, I've beaten your defenses, I've beaten *you*. By right of conquest, I demand these boons —”

BANG

And red blood spurted across his desk.