

Chapter 1- The Day Everything Changed

January 3rd, 2011

Oscar woke to the blaring sound of the alarm.

Around him, the cramped room stirred awake as his three roommates groggily climbed out of their beds. Oscar dropped down from the top bunk, nearly bumping shoulders with Finn as the four of them squeezed past each other toward their lockers.

The room already felt too small.

Oscar opened his locker and grabbed his towel, underwear, and toothbrush. Only by reaching the communal showers early enough would he get hot shower. Otherwise, the line becomes long enough that even taking a bath in time becomes difficult.

“Hey. Guys, look.”

Oscar turned toward Jake, the youngest among them. Sixteen years old, though he claimed to be eighteen to qualify for farm work. Jake stood by the room’s only window with his face pressed against the dirt-stained glass.

“What is it?” Takao asked through a yawn.

By then, the rest of them had crowded toward the window as well. Oscar climbed onto the lower bunk for a better look outside. Then he paused.

A long convoy of military trucks rolled through the streets below. Jeeps. Armored vehicles. Even a few Tinkertech transports. Each vehicle carried either the emblem of the E88 Guild or the ABB.



Oscar frowned. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen this many vehicles together in Brockton Bay. Hell, he hadn't even known the city still possessed this many working vehicles.

“The fuck is happening?” Finn muttered.

Oscar watched the convoy for another moment before answering. “Gate break.” Only to receive flat looks from his roommates. He sighed and clarified. “I mean a big gate break. Likely a B-class.” He paused. “Maybe even an A-class.”

Jake immediately shook his head. “No way. A-class Gates don’t appear near Brockton Bay.”

“And who told you that, idiot?” Finn asked before smacking the back of Jake’s head. “One appeared two years ago.”

Oscar frowned, and considered telling Finn to not hit Jake. But despite being the oldest among them (biologically), Finn was somehow also the most emotionally unstable. Telling him not to do something would only end in an argument. And he didn’t want to deal with that this early in the morning.

Jake winced. “Oh. Right. Forgot about that one.” He scratched his cheek awkwardly. “Didn’t Lung clear it by himself though? Why can’t he just do that again? I mean, we even have Armsy and Leet now.”

“Because that A-class Gate was discovered before it opened, which means the monsters were still trapped inside when Lung got there.” Oscar explained patiently. “But if this is an A-class gate and it has already broken open, then the monsters are likely scattered everywhere by now.”

The room grew quieter. “Is it really that dangerous”? Jake asked. “I mean... that’s a lot of trucks.”

“It is.” Oscar said grimly. “A-class monsters are strong enough that even one of them could wipe out a minor settlement before reinforcements arrive.”

Nobody spoke for a while after that.

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Oscar waved Takao over. His friend’s eyes lit up immediately as he slipped into the spot beside him in line.

“Thanks for saving me a place,” Takao said.

Oscar nodded silently, his eyes searching through the crowd. “Where are Jake and Finn?” he asked after a moment.

“Still waiting in line for a bath.” Takao said and the two of them exchanged tired, exasperated looks.

Then a loud siren echoed throughout the city. It went off once before going silent.

Both of them immediately stiffened. As did everyone else in the mess, the entire place going still for a moment before it resumed.

They had all gone through enough drills to know what a single siren meant. It was meant to prepare them for the possibility of having to run to the nearest shelter should monsters invade the city.

And considering how powerful Brockton Bay's Hunters were, Oscar's earlier guess about an A-class Gate suddenly seemed far more believable.

"Do we really have to go to work at a time like this?" Takao asked quietly, his shoulders tense.

Oscar closed his eyes. They both already knew the answer to that. "We do," he said, and then mockingly sang "Because if we don't work~"

"...the city doesn't eat~" Takao finished, and the two of them let out hollow chuckles at the slogan before falling silent again.

The line continued inching forward, and eventually, Takao spoke again, his voice much quieter this time. "Hey, Oscar."

"What?"

"Ever think about leaving this place?"

"As in this world?" Oscar asked dryly. "Pretty often."

Takao didn't laugh. And Oscar glanced at him properly then, realising how serious his friend was being.

Takao looked down at the empty tray in his hands. "I've been trying to get a job within a Guild."

Oscar frowned slightly. "And how exactly are you planning to pull that off?" To him, the idea sounded about as realistic as climbing Mount Everest barefoot.

"I've been saving half my paycheck for the last year and a half," Takao explained. "Maybe I can bribe someone important enough."

Oscar doubted that very much. If the rumors were true, the amount Takao had saved over a year probably counted as pocket change to even low-ranking Guild officials. Hell, a Guild Gatekeeper earned three times what they did. And they did back breaking labor for 12 hours a day.

But Oscar didn't know how to say that without crushing the little hope his friend still had left. Hope was rare in places like this. But at the same time, he didn't want his friend getting scammed either.

"Maybe," he said in the end.

He and Takao picked a table near the corner of the mess hall and set their trays down.

Breakfast looked as miserable as always. A loaf of hard, tasteless bread that occasionally came with stones mixed into the dough, and a bowl of thin gruel with chunks of monster meat floating inside. The meat smelled terrible and somehow tasted even worse.



Oscar Rector

They ate in silence. Until someone slammed a tray onto their table and joined them. Oscar glanced at the third person and inwardly groaned. It was Tyson.

Tyson was exactly what the city folk imagined when they talked about refugees. Violent. Short-tempered. Ruthless. The sort of man who would ruin another person's life if it meant climbing one step higher himself.

And now, Tyson was here. Worse, he was smiling.

"We don't want to buy whatever you're selling," Oscar said before Tyson could speak.

"Hey now." Tyson raised both hands innocently. "Can't a guy visit his old friends?"

"We're not friends," Takao said flatly. That surprised Oscar as Takao usually avoided confrontation whenever possible.

Tyson ignored the comment completely. "Good thing I brought good news then."

"Whatever it is, we don't want to hear it," Oscar replied.

"Not even if it's a Guild job?"

Oscar sighed the moment he saw Takao's attention sharpen. "Don't listen to him," he warned.

Takao glanced at him and briefly hesitated before turning back toward Tyson. “Which Guild?”

“The Elite,” Tyson announced proudly, spreading his arms wide. As if he were the owner of the Elite. “Strongest Guild in the world.”

“Protectorate’s still considered stronger,” Oscar muttered, though he already knew there was no point in this argument.

“What’s the job?” Takao asked.

Tyson leaned forward slightly, grinning. “Super soldiers.”

Oscar frowned immediately upon hearing that.

“Lord Marquis is expanding his branch,” Tyson continued. “Creating Bio-enhanced troops for clearing low-level Gates.”

“And he’s recruiting from refugees?” Oscar asked skeptically before looking toward Takao. “Come on, man, you’re smarter than this. When was the last time a Guild willingly hired refugees?”

“Uncle Shun got hired by the ABB,” Takao argued quickly. Too quickly.

“Because their last driver got eaten by monsters,” Oscar shot back.

Takao ignored him. “It can’t be that simple,” Takao said cautiously. “Oscar’s right. Guilds don’t hire from the refugees. What’s the catch?”

Tyson stayed quiet for a second before lowering his voice. “The soldiers get physical and mental augmentations.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Takao asked.

“It means the Red Queen will work on improving their body, and their brain.” Tyson shrugged. “Thing is, she hasn’t worked much with brains before.”

“So there’s a decent chance she turns Takao into a vegetable,” Oscar said flatly, only for both Takao and Tyson to ignore him completely. He glanced at his friend in despair.

No. Don’t do this.

“I’m in,” Takao said.

Tyson’s grin widened instantly. “Knew you were the smart one.” He stood up from the table. “Meet me outside in half an hour.”

Then Tyson walked away, though not before throwing him a slimy smirk.

Once Tyson was gone, Oscar turned and stared silently at Takao while his friend hurried through the rest of his meal without meeting his eyes.

“Takao,” Oscar said quietly.

“I know,” Takao replied. He finally looked up, jaw tight. “I know the risks. I’m not stupid.”

“You’re acting pretty stupid right now.”

“Maybe I am. But what else is there?” Takao asked. “You don’t believe I could get a job in a guild either. At least this way, I have a chance.”

“A chance to become a vegetable. Or worse.”

“What else is there?” Takao asked, his voice getting raw from emotions. “You want us to work in the farms for the rest of my life? Until we’re old and grey. Or until a monster gets to us?” He looked down at the food on his tray. “This isn’t living, Oscar. And I want to live. Even if only for a moment.”

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Oscar stood at the bus stop and stared at the man lying in the alley across the street. A druggie, probably. Maybe dead. Maybe unconscious. Oscar wasn’t sure he cared enough to find out anymore.

Takao was gone.

The only real friend he had in this life had walked away with Tyson less than half an hour ago. Most likely toward his death.

Oscar tilted his head back and looked at the dull gray clouds hanging over Brockton Bay.

What's the point of living in a world like this?

Part of him felt tempted to run after Tyson. To ask for a place in Marquis' super soldier program too. But no. He was not that far gone. *Not yet.*

He exhaled heavily, his shoulders drooping as he looked around the city properly for the first time in a long while.

The roads had more potholes than actual pavement. Most of the streetlights no longer worked. And garbage filled the alleyways because nobody bothered cleaning them anymore.

'I'm living in a ghetto,' he suddenly realised. And for some reason, the realisation brought him great amusement.

A group of children played outside a brothel across the street, giggling without a care for the cruel world they lived in. The sight almost brought a smile to his face as he turned and studied the rest of the place.

The street they lived in once used to be a market of some sort. But storefronts that once held actual businesses now housed refugees packed together like livestock.

Oscar's gaze drifted toward one of the few stores that was still operating. A restaurant. One that sold real, edible, tasty food.

The prices had horrified him the first time he saw them. And he knew for a fact that the only reason other refugees hadn't robbed that place blind was because it supposedly belonged to a Hunter.

He and Takao had never eaten there. Both of them kept saving their miserable salaries for some vague future that never seemed to come any closer. Now Oscar wondered if maybe they should've gone once.

Just once.

At least they would've had one good memory together, in a sea of countless bad ones.

A loud engine interrupted his thoughts. The transport truck finally arrived, bearing the symbol of the E88 Guild across its side.

'Technically, we work for a Guild too', Oscar thought bitterly. Technically being the important word there.

He climbed into the back alongside the other workers. Bodies pressed together immediately until they were packed in shoulder to shoulder like sardines in a metal box. Then the truck pulled away toward the farms.

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Being crammed into the back of a transport truck sucked.

It sucked even more when the truck sat motionless for fifteen whole minutes while dozens of sweaty workers packed shoulder to shoulder slowly turned the inside into a furnace.

At least when the truck moved, cold air blew through the gaps in the metal walls.

“What the hell’s taking so long?” someone grumbled nearby. A few others muttered their agreement before the complaints slowly died down.

The job sucked, true. But being unemployed sucked even more. Oscar only needed to hear one story about a man selling his wife to a brothel to feed his family before deciding he never wanted to end up jobless in Brockton Bay.

He rose onto his toes to see what was causing the delay and caught sight of the massive wall ahead of them.

It was thirty meters tall and surrounded the entirety of Brockton Bay, except for the side facing the sea.



Oscar frowned as he noticed the number of guards patrolling it today. There were far more than usual, and more were still climbing onto the battlements.

Then, from somewhere far in the distance, came the faint sound of gunshots, followed a second later by the muffled sound of an explosion.

The metal cage of the truck trembled, letting out a rattling sound, and the entire went silent instantly. Nobody complained after that.

Five minutes later, the city gates opened.

The convoy rolled forward together and passed through the giant steel entrance. Moments later, the gates slammed shut behind them with a thunderous *thud*.

Oscar slowly let out a breath as he looked across the land beyond the city.

Farms stretched endlessly into the distance. Or at least they used to.

Most of the land closest to Brockton Bay looked dead now. The soil had turned black and oily, poisoned by old Bio-Tinker crops imported from Earth Cheit years ago.

A single one of those plants could feed an entire family for months. But nothing came without a price.

Nothing grew in those fields anymore. And Oscar didn't know how long it'll take for those fields to recover, or if they'll ever recover at all.

The dead fields stretched for miles, broken only occasionally by abandoned watchtowers rusting beneath the gray sky.

At one point, they passed a line of military trucks parked beside the road. In the distant field beyond them lay the corpse of a giant monster. It looked vaguely humanoid.

Even from that far away, the smell made Oscar gag.

‘Well, at least someone’s losing harder than me’, he thought while watching workers climb over the corpse to butcher it for meat. ‘Or maybe not, considering I might end up eating that thing tonight.’

Eventually, nearly eight miles from the city, real farmland finally appeared again.

The greenery felt almost soothing to look at.

Rows upon rows of towering Bio-Tinker crops swayed in the wind. These newer plants supposedly came from Blasto and were meant to be far more environmentally friendly.

Oscar might’ve believed that, once.

The convoy split apart there. Their truck turned onto a dirt road and rattled forward for another mile before finally grinding to a stop.

Oscar climbed out and stretched his aching limbs. Instinctively, he turned to make some sarcastic comment to Takao about prison transports. Then he remembered Takao wasn’t there anymore.

His mood darkened immediately.

More distant gunshots echoed somewhere far away.

Today just keeps getting better and better.

Oscar grabbed his tools and started walking. It took nearly fifteen minutes to reach his assigned plot.

Large alien plants covered the field, each one only slightly shorter than him. Every plant produced a single fruit each day roughly the size of a papaya.

His job was simple.

Harvest the fruit. Pack it into crates. Carry the crates back to the road. Fertilize the soil. Remove weeds. Repeat the process endlessly until the day ended.

Easy work in theory. Mind-numbing in practice.

‘Another day of trading away my youth for a shitty room and shittier food,’ Oscar thought as he got to work.



Despite spending years in these fields, he had never actually tasted one of the fruits himself. From what he'd heard, they tasted amazing and were so calorie-dense that a single bite counted as an entire meal.

It was food for the Middle-class of Brockton Bay. Far too expensive for refugee trash like him.

Every now and then he felt tempted to steal one. Then, common sense rears its ugly head.

The guards in the watchtowers weren't only watching for monsters. Plus, the entire harvest process was cataloged sternly. If even one fruit disappeared, somebody would notice.

The E88 Guild was 'supposedly' less barbaric than the ABB. That didn't mean Oscar wanted to discover what happened to workers who stole from them.

He paused briefly and glanced toward the nearest watchtower.

The guard stationed there lounged lazily in his chair while taking another swig from a beer bottle.

'Nothing inspired confidence quite like seeing our defenders drunk before noon,' Oscar thought dryly before returning to work, letting out a hum to pass the time.

Sometimes he wondered if this was what slaves in old history books felt like, working endless fields from sunrise to sunset.

Then again, slaves probably didn't have to worry about monsters eating them alive halfway through the workday.

'My suffering is bigger than your suffering,' Oscar thought dryly. 'Clearly that means I win.'

He reached for another fruit. Then paused.

Something felt wrong.

Oscar slowly straightened and listened carefully for the chirping of birds or insects.

All he heard was silence.

Then someone screamed before the scream cut off abruptly.

Ah, fuck.

Oscar immediately ducked low into the crops, trying to make himself as small as possible. Gunshots echoed somewhere nearby. Then came a monstrous roar. It was closer this time. Much closer.

Oscar froze as he heard something large moving through the fields. The tall plants rustled violently as whatever it was sprinted through them at terrifying speed.

Then a farmer somewhere in the adjacent plot screamed. The movement instantly changed direction. Oscar caught a glimpse of something large and black racing through the crops before it vanished from sight.

More gunshots erupted. Not from any one direction anymore but from everywhere. Then another scream tore through the neighboring field.

Oscar cursed under his breath and broke into a run, his heart hammering violently against his ribs as he sprinted toward the dirt road.

The moment he emerged from the crops, he spotted another farmer stumbling out from the opposite side. The man looked straight at him, tears streaming down his face. “Help m—”

Something massive yanked him backward and the farmer vanished into the crops.

Oscar’s mouth went dry.

He turned toward the watchtower just in time to see the guard firing wildly into the fields. Bright plasma bolts ripped through the crops, setting entire sections ablaze.

Screams echoed from every direction now. Monster roars answered them. The sounds overlapped into pure chaos.

Another group of farmers burst out onto the road together. Oscar instinctively took a step toward them—

Then a truck came roaring around the corner and slammed directly into the group.

The sound was horrifying. Bones cracked. Bodies burst apart. Blood sprayed across the dirt road as the truck drove straight through them without slowing down.

Oscar stared in shock as it sped past him, chunks of flesh and broken bone still stuck to the front grille.

“RUN!” “GET TO THE SHELTER!” “THIS WAY!” Voices screamed from all directions at once.

Oscar blinked blankly for half a second, unable to even remember where the shelter was supposed to be. Then he saw the crowd running toward the watchtower and remembered. Underground bunker. Built for monster attacks just like these.

Oscar began to run, until someone slammed into him from behind. Oscar stumbled forward, nearly falling before another worker shoved past him hard enough to knock him onto the dirt.

Pain shot through his back as boots trampled over him. He rolled aside just before someone stepped on his head and forced himself back upright.

By then, nearly every farmer had flooded onto the road, all sprinting desperately toward the watchtower. Oscar joined them, running desperately. Then stopped abruptly as a monster stepped onto the road ahead of them.

For the first time, Oscar got a proper look at one.

It resembled a giant feline nearly the size of a horse. Its fur was so black it looked like a hole carved into reality itself.



Several farmers shakily raised their rakes and shovels, trying to be brave. Trying to convince themselves they still had a chance.

Oscar knew better. An E-class monster was typically as dangerous as an elephant. If that elephant was completely immune to pain and so aggressive that if you shot down three of its limbs, it'll use its fourth to drag its body toward the nearest human in an attempt to kill him.

Then someone behind Oscar screamed. He turned just in time to see another monster burst from the crops, clamp its jaws around a farmer's torso, and drag the man screaming back into the fields.

Oscar looked around wildly. The crops were moving everywhere now. His stomach dropped. There wasn't just one monster, or two. There were many and they were everywhere.

The smell of smoke thickened rapidly as fires spread through the fields from the guard's wild plasma shots.

Ahead of them, he saw the feline monster lunge into the group. Its claws flashed once. And a farmer split open from shoulder to waist. Blood and organs spilled across the dirt.

The watchtower guard fired again. This time at the monster in front of them. And missed.

Oscar watched helplessly as the plasma bolt punched straight through two fleeing farmers before tearing the arm off another and burning away someone else's leg entirely.

That was the breaking point. The crowd shattered.

“RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!” “SCATTER!” “NO, STAY TOGETHER!” “GO TOWARD THE SHELTER!” People screamed contradictory orders as panic consumed them completely.

One farmer bolted blindly into the crops... straight into the jaws of another waiting monster.

Everyone scattered after that. Some ran toward the tower. Others fled deeper into the fields. Oscar ran into the crops too. Open ground was death. At least inside the fields he might stay hidden a little longer.

He sprinted while staying low, weaving desperately through the towering plants as screams echoed all around him.

By pure luck, he reached an irrigation channel before anything caught him. Oscar threw himself into the freezing water. The cold hit his body like a physical shock and for a moment his vision blurred completely.

Then survival instinct forced him to move again.

He submerged himself almost entirely beneath the muddy water, leaving only his face exposed enough to breathe.

Nearby, someone screamed. Then another voice cried out farther away. More screams followed. Monster roars echoed constantly now.

In the distance, gunfire and explosions thundered across the farms from multiple directions at once. As if multiple battles were happening simultaneously everywhere.

Oscar raised his head a bit to look at the guard tower in the distance and watched it get overwhelmed by the monsters. He leaned back and exhaled slowly. “Good riddance,” he muttered bitterly.

The guard had probably done more damage than the monsters themselves. Most of his plasma shots had missed entirely and set the fields on fire instead.

The smell of smoke was much thicker now. Even without looking, Oscar could tell the crops were burning.

Somewhere nearby, he heard a guttural growl. Close. Very close.

Oscar closed his eyes. *So this is where I die.*

Strangely enough, the thought didn't frighten him nearly as much as it should have. Maybe because this life had never been worth much to begin with.

Sleeping in a cramped room infested with bedbugs. Waking before sunrise every day. Eating food that barely qualified as edible. Breaking his back in the fields for miserable pay that vanished almost as quickly as he earned it. Was that really living?

And even if he survived today... then what? What did he even have to look forward to? Eventually he'd either grow old in the farms or die screaming in some ditch like everyone else. So what was the point.

Takao was gone too.

His only real friend in this world had willingly walked into some insane human experiment because even *that* sounded better than continuing their current lives.

‘I should’ve joined him,’ Oscar thought as he understood his friend now. Maybe all too well.

Another scream echoed across the burning fields before abruptly cutting off. This one close enough that he could hear the crunching of the man’s bones.

Oscar barely reacted. That realisation disturbed him more than the monsters did. He knew he should’ve been terrified right now. Knew he should’ve wanted to survive. Instead, all he felt was tired.

Deeply. Endlessly tired.

The sound of heavy footsteps slowly approached through the crops nearby. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

The monster was searching the fields.

Oscar remained curled inside the irrigation ditch, half-submerged in muddy water. He didn’t move. Didn’t breathe. ‘Should I get up and run?’ He wondered and realised that he no longer cared enough to try.

Smoke drifted overhead while ash slowly fell from the gray sky. Oscar stared upward at the distorted reflection of the clouds rippling across the shallow water around him.

Maybe dying wouldn't be so bad.

The footsteps stopped. Silence. Then... a massive dark shape moved past the crops only a few feet away from him. Oscar saw claws the size of kitchen knives. Saw black fur soaked in blood.

The creature sniffed the air once. And Oscar laid still. Not because he wanted to hide. But because he'd given up. Completely. And the moment he did—

Something inside him clicked.

The world distorted violently. The sound of burning fields vanished. The heat disappeared. Even gravity went away.

One moment he was lying inside a muddy irrigation ditch. The next, he was floating within an endless dark expanse, with five enormous suns burning before him. Each one felt impossibly vast and powerful.

Oscar's breath caught in his throat. *What... is this?*

The moment the thought formed, something answered. Like understanding forced directly into his mind.



Power. Charges. Potential. All ready to be used by him.

He stared at the five burning suns floating before him and let out a weak chuckle. The sound felt foreign to his own ears. Like he'd forgotten how to laugh somewhere along the way.

But then another chuckle escaped him. Then another. Soon he was laughing properly. A deep, ugly laughter that tore out of his chest hard enough to make his shoulders shake.

Then the laughter died and got replaced by tears.

‘Couldn’t you have come sooner?’ The thought echoed bitterly through his mind. ‘All these years... for what?’

Sleeping in filth. Eating garbage. Breaking his body for scraps while pretending things might someday improve. And now? Now the power finally appeared after grinding him down into this hollow shell of a person.

Oscar wiped his eyes with trembling fingers and let out another bitter laugh.

“This world really fucked me up,” he muttered.

Years ago, he would’ve killed for something like this. For power. For a chance. For hope. And now that it was finally here...

Part of him genuinely didn’t care anymore. That part wanted to lie down in the muddy water and let the monsters tear him apart. To be at peace at last.

But another part of him resisted. A smaller, uglier part. The animal instinct that wanted to survive no matter how miserable survival became. That instinct whispered only one thing: ‘Maybe things can still change.’

Oscar exhaled slowly.

‘Fine. I would survive a little longer.’

The moment he made the decision, understanding flooded his mind naturally. On how to use the charges.

One charge created a Rating 1 power. Adding two charges to that turned it into Rating 2. Three more charges gave Rating 3. And so on.

‘How do I get more charges?’ He wondered, and more realisation filled his mind.

Conflict, danger, survival, violence. Be it against monsters, or other humans. All these things generated more charges.

Oscar almost laughed again. Of course. Typical Worm power. Then, he thought on how to use the charges.

At first he considered creating a power that would simply let him escape. Flight, maybe. None of the monsters he’d seen so far could fly so a flying power should let him escape easily enough.

After all, why should he risk himself for strangers? The only person he actually cared about was probably being carved apart in some underground laboratory already. But if conflict earned charges...

Then running away now would only keep him weak forever.

Oscar closed his eyes briefly and made his choice.

Three charges went into a basic Mover power. And immediately, his body felt lighter, faster. Same with his thoughts.

In front of him, three of suns vanished, leaving him with only two more.

He placed one charge into Blaster ability. A laser. Small. Focused. Chargeable. It would let him kill the monsters.

The final charge went into a Thinker power called 'Perfect Aim'.

Oscar returned to his body and opened his eyes. The world immediately felt different. The water moved slower than before.

He rose carefully from the irrigation ditch and noticed a monster emerge from the fields. Its eyes fixed directly onto him.

Oscar raised his hand instinctively. And a thin beam of red light burst from his fingertip. The laser struck the creature directly between the eyes with a crackling hiss.

The monster flinched. A small patch of flesh burned black.

Oscar frowned, realising that his laser beam was not powerful enough.

Then, the master growled, and charged at him. And Oscar had no more time to think.

Oscar moved, ducking low as the monster's claws sliced through empty air where he'd stood a fraction of a second earlier.

Oscar stumbled sideways through the mud, nearly losing balance as the beast shot past him.

Fast. Even with his Rating 2 Mover power, the monster was still too fast.

The creature dug trenches into the dirt with its claws as it twisted around immediately.

Oscar fired again. And again. And again. Thin beams struck its face repeatedly, causing small burns and wounds. Each laser beam caused about as much damage as a handgun bullet. It wasn't enough.

'Rating 1 power really is garbage,' Oscar thought distantly as the beast lunged again.

Oscar jumped sideways, barely dodging its claws and slid through muddy water as the creature passed overhead close enough for him to smell blood and rotting meat on its breath.

Oscar came up gasping and then climbed out of the irrigation canal before backing off, all the while his hand kept firing laser beams into its face.

One beam struck its left eye. And the creature recoiled violently with a furious roar before charging once more—half blind now but no less deadly.

Oscar backed away quickly, running into the fields as the crops blurred around him. He was fast now. Faster than any normal human would ever be. But the monster was faster and rapidly closing the distance between them.

Oscar stopped retreating. Raised his hand. And held the charge this time.

Heat rapidly gathered around his fingertips. The air itself distorted faintly around his fingertips. The monster lunged at him. Getting closer and closer as its jaws opened wide enough to bite his head off.

Then Oscar fired.

The laser exploded outward in a beam several times thicker than before. It burned through the creature's skin, its skull and finally, entered its brain, cooking it black.



The creature's head snapped backward violently before the body collapsed and skidded across the muddy ground for several more meters. Then it stopped moving.

Oscar stood there, taking deep breaths while smoke rose from the hole in the corpse's skull. The monster twitched and spasmed a few times. Then went still.

He stared at it silently for a second. Then pointed his finger at it and shot it a few more times. The smell of cooked meat was nauseating. But he kept at it until its entire head was a mess.

For some reason, he expected it to move. To get up and attack him. As if it was mere pretending instead of being actually dead. But... it didn't.

'I just killed an E-class monster,' he thought. Strangely, that realisation didn't bring him any sort of triumphant feeling. Instead, he continued to feel the earlier deep hollowness within him from when he'd given up on life.

'I'm emotionally fucked,' he realised.

Then, a warmth blossomed within his chest. He focused inward, into that same dark space from before, and found five more suns where just moments ago, there had been none.

His power gave him an understanding of just how these charges had come into existence.

Taking part in his first ever battle, killing the monster, and being in a life and death situation.

'Fighting was indeed the right decision then,' Oscar thought numbly before thinking about how to use the charges.

He eventually placed three charges in his Mover power, and two charges into his Blaster power, upgrading them both into Rating 3 and Rating 2 powers.

Then, he slowly lowered his finger and fired on the ground a few times. If before his laser beams were as strong as a handgun, then now, they were as destructive as rifle bullet.

His thoughts were also much faster than before. And his body felt even lighter. Before Oscar could truly process these changes, another harrowing scream echoed somewhere in the distance.

He slowly raised his finger, charging his laser power once again, and then rushed toward the sound.

Let's see how many more charges I could get today.

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Crystal fought alongside the rest of the Brockton Bay Brigade as chaos consumed the forest.

Monsters were everywhere. And not just one type either. There were acid spitters hid among the trees, oversized beasts trying to get a bit out of them, or armour creatures bulldozing through the burning forest.

Thankfully, there were no C-class or flying-type monsters, or the battle would be even more difficult than it already is. Even then, the variety of monsters made the battle unpredictable. And dangerous.



Despite being a hunter for four years by now, this was her first A-class Gate Break. And this was not even the main horde. Just a small part of it that the Brockton Bay Brigade was charged to deal with lest it flatten some minor settlement in its way.

Crystal shot another laser beam at a dog-type monster and missed, letting out another curse.

How had Armsmaster's drones missed an A-class Gate this close to Brockton Bay? And even if they had somehow failed, Dragon still oversaw the entire northeastern region from Boston. A Gate this dangerous should never have broken open.

Crystal fired another laser blast. And a van-sized monster exploded apart mid-charge, its body turning into steaming red chunks across the forest floor.

Another creature spat globs of acid toward her so Crystal darted sideways through the air while her shield absorbed the remaining spray in flashes of golden light.

Even if the shield failed, her Tinkertech bodysuit would protect her long enough to escape.

She immediately counterattacked. Her laser lanced toward the acid-spitter... and missed as the creature twisted aside at the last second before disappearing deeper into the trees.

Crystal frowned.

Mom wouldn't have missed that shot.

She considered chasing after it when a blur suddenly shot past her, and toward the Acid-spitter. Victoria smashed into the monster like a missile, and the creature's skull burst apart beneath a single punch before Victoria looped back around through the air wearing an annoyingly bright grin.

“Thirty-two!” Victoria announced proudly.

Crystal forced a smile onto her face. She wanted to scold Victoria for diving so deep into the monster lines. Especially with how fragile Victoria's personal shield still was. But she stopped herself. She didn't want to become overbearing, like she so often felt her own parents being with her.

So instead Crystal only said, “Good job. But be careful. There are too many monsters today.”

Victoria grinned. Then immediately dove back toward the fighting. Her Tinkertech bodysuit and additional Tinkertech forcefield likely the only reason she was still uninjured despite her recklessness.

Crystal exhaled slowly and tried not to think about how her own count was still only twenty-nine. ‘This isn't a competition.’ She reminded herself.

Crystal pushed forward again, firing rapidly into the forest while explosions and monster roars shook the ground around her. She spotted four

smaller creatures charging through the smoke below and immediately descended toward them, lasers already gathering at her fingertips—

Movement flashed from the corner of her eye.

Crystal barely had time to flare her shield before something massive slammed into her. Her personal shield shattered instantly and the impact sent her crashing through branches before both she and the monster smashed into the forest floor hard enough to crater the dirt beneath them.

Her Tinkertech barrier saved her, but it didn't negate all the damage. Pain exploded through Crystal's body, and her ears rang violently.

The truck-sized creature pinned her with one massive arm while raising another overhead, claws spread wide enough to tear her apart in one strike.

Crystal's heart skipped. For one brief second, she felt fear. Real fear. Then training took over.

She twisted one arm free, took aim and fired.

The laser obliterated the monster's raised limb in a spray of blood and burned flesh. Before it could recover, Crystal sent another blast straight through its face. The creature's skull burst apart.

She freed herself from its loosened grip and flew away before its corpse could collapse atop her.

A soft chime echoed from her Tinkertech wristwatch. “Thirty.”

One of their Collection Drones would arrive soon to retrieve the core.

She rose quickly and glanced around instinctively. Nobody seemed to have noticed her mistake. Good. The last thing she wanted was for Victoria to gloat about how she put herself at risk right after telling her to be careful.

Right then, Uncle Mark’s voice crackled through the comms.

“Everyone fall back. Now.”

Crystal immediately took to the air. She found Eric and grabbed hold of him to compensate for his slower flight speed before the two retreated together through the smoke-filled sky.

Moments later, thousands of glowing white orbs descended from above.

And the forest disappeared beneath explosions.

Entire sections of burning woodland vanished in pillars of fire while dozens of monster shrieks echoed from every direction as they perished.

Crystal shook her head slightly. Most people didn't realise it, but Uncle Mark was the strongest Blaster in the Brigade. His power took time to charge up and lacked the flashy elegance of her mother's or her own.

The rest of the family regrouped shortly afterward.

Crystal's eyes drifted toward Victoria's watch. Thirty-five. Her jaw tightened slightly. 'The only person I should compare myself to is the version of me from yesterday,' she reminded herself firmly.



Then her mother appeared beside them in a blur. She stopped in front of her and Eric, scanning both of them carefully for injuries.

Crystal clenched her fists reflexively. 'I'm not weak enough to get hurt by C-class monsters.' The protest stayed trapped inside her throat. She knew her mother meant well. Even if the concern sometimes felt suffocating.

More importantly, she refused to look childish in front of Eric and Victoria.

Aunt Jess flew beside her a moment later and lightly bumped Crystal's shoulder. "How was your first monster horde battle?" Jess asked playfully.

Despite everything, Crystal smiled faintly. "It was... chaotic." And that was saying something considering she had already spent nearly four years clearing Gates.

Aunt Jess opened her mouth to speak but then paused as explosions thundered somewhere deeper in the forest, followed soon by monster roars.

The fighting wasn't over yet. Far from it.

"What now?" Crystal asked.

"That," Carol replied while casually listening in from several meters away, "is a good question."

A bloodied Collection Drone flew overhead and dropped several monster cores into her mother's waiting hand before speeding away again.

Dragon's technology never stopped being impressive.

"I suggest we return," Uncle Mike offered in the tone of someone already expecting rejection. "We've done enough. The kids need rest."

"I don't!" Eric protested immediately.

“Neither do I,” Victoria added confidently despite her Tinkertech shield sitting deep in the yellow by now.

Everyone looked toward Crystal and she gave UncleMike an apologetic smile. “I’m still good to fight as well.”

“I say we push deeper,” Carol said. “Hunt some stronger monsters. Maybe even a few A-class creatures.”

“A-class cores would be nice for the Tinkertech shields,” Her mother said thoughtfully.

“Or we could trade them for lesser cores,” Her dad offered while smiling warmly toward Eric and her.

‘I can earn my own Boss cores.’ Crystal thought, looking away. Even inside her own head, the thought sounded embarrassingly petulant.

“Or that,” Carol said with a negligent wave before casually forming a hardlight spear and throwing it into the distance.

A wounded monster trying to crawl through the trees died instantly as the spear pinned it to the ground.

“Who’ll watch the kids while we’re gone?” Uncle Mike asked while scanning the battlefield carefully for any other monster that was still alive.

“I’m not a kid, Uncle Mike,” Crystal muttered while crossing her arms.

Mike at least looked mildly apologetic.

“We can help!” Victoria offered immediately.

Crystal already knew the answer to that before anyone even spoke. B and A-class monsters were far too dangerous for them.

“No,” Uncle Mark answered firmly. And Victoria sulked instantly. “You’ve already done your part. The three of you are returning to the city.”

“What? No! I don’t wanna go back yet!” Victoria protested.

Carol turned toward Victoria slowly. “Victoria,” she said flatly. “What did I teach you about following orders during missions?”

Get her, Aunt Hitler.

Victoria immediately looked down at her boots. “To follow orders at all times,” she mumbled.

“Then do so.” Carol dismissed her with a glance before turning toward Mike. “Escort them behind the military lines and return afterward.”

Crystal noticed the way Mike’s expression tightened slightly. He hated being ordered around. Especially by aunt Carol. But he also wasn’t the sort to argue during active operations.

Before the mood could worsen further, Aunt Jess smiled brightly and rested a hand against Mike’s shoulder. “I’ll escort them.”

Mike visibly relaxed and gave his wife a grateful smile.

Sometimes Crystal honestly felt like Aunt Jess did half the work keeping the family together.

“Very well,” Carol agreed, giving Jess a dismissive nod.

Then Aunt Jess gathered her, Eric, and a still-sulking Victoria before leading them away from the burning forest.

— —

“How was your experience with your first large-scale combat, Eric?” Aunt Jess asked as they slowly flew back out of the burning forest.

“Call me Shielder while I’m in costume,” Eric grumbled with a pout. “And... it sucked. I sucked. My lasers are too weak to hurt anything except the weakest monsters, and even then they barely do any damage. I’m useless.”

Aunt Jess stopped midair and turned toward him so abruptly that Crystal nearly flew past her.

“Don’t ever say that again,” Jess said firmly. “You are not useless, Eric. The fact that your shield power is stronger than your lasers just means you’re the kind of person who wants to protect others instead of chasing glory.”

Crystal highly doubted powers worked that way, but she nodded anyway. “She’s right,” Crystal said. “Remember that spider monster from last year? When my shield failed? If not for you, I would’ve gotten hurt.”

Eric looked unconvinced. “If not for my shield, your Tinkertech barrier would’ve protected you anyway,” he muttered before glancing away. “And... I know I’m not useless. I just want to be as good as you and Vicky.”

“Keep trying, cuz. You’ll get there eventually!” Victoria said cheerfully while flying upside down in front of him with an upside-down thumbs-up.

Crystal envied Victoria’s ability to pull off aerial manoeuvres like that without getting dizzy.

“I guess,” Eric replied weakly, forcing a smile that Victoria completely failed to notice was fake. Then he turned toward Aunt Jess. “We should head back faster. That way you can rejoin the team sooner.”

Jess nodded, and the group continued flying toward the perimeter.

The closer they got, the more wrong things looked. The trails of smoke and scent of burnt flesh was the first sign that something had gone very wrong.

When they reached the parameter, Aunt Jess gasped.

Several military vehicles with E88 symbol guarding the path leading toward the farms had been destroyed. Some were flattened to the earth, while others looked like they had been peeled open by giant claws.

Dozens of monster corpses littered the area around them.

“Some of the weaker monsters must’ve slipped through,” Aunt Jess said as she descended beside one of the wrecked vehicles and studied one of the monster corpses.

Crystal landed nearby, and peeked inside the vehicles. The E88 Guild members stationed there were either dead or missing.

Judging by the blood trails leading into the fields, Crystal doubted the missing ones were alive for long.

“These idiots had one job,” Victoria muttered as she casually stepped on the skull of a twitching monster corpse until it burst beneath her boot with a wet crunch before bending down and pulling the core from its ruined head. “These E88 never fails to disappoint.”

“Victoria!” Crystal snapped. “Show some respect for the dead.”

“What?” Victoria shrugged carelessly while wiping blood from the glowing core. “I’m just telling the truth. If they were getting overwhelmed, couldn’t they have called for reinforcements? This whole area falls under E88 jurisdiction. Where even are their Hunters?”

“Maybe the other sectors got attacked too?” Eric suggested quietly while staring toward the horizon. Thin trails of smoke rose in multiple directions now.

Crystal’s stomach tightened slightly.

“Did the entire defensive line get breached?” Aunt Jess frowned deeply before pulling out her communicator. “Wait here. I need to contact your parents.” She stepped away to make the call.

“Do you think the farmers are okay?” Eric asked softly while staring toward the distant fields that fed much of Brockton Bay.

“Judging by the smoke rising up from that place, likely not.” Victoria replied, the worried frown on his face showing that at least she wasn’t

completely heartless. “But then again, most of them are refugees so it’s not like it matters.”

Never mind.

“Refugees are still people, Victoria,” Crystal said tiredly. She felt like they’d had this exact same argument dozens of times already.

“Yes,” Victoria replied immediately. “People who commit most of the crimes in the city. People who overcrowd everything just by existing. People who turned half of Brockton Bay into a slum—”

“Can we *not* do this right now?” Eric interrupted with a frustrated frown. “Are we helping those farmers or not?”

Victoria blinked at him in mild surprise. Then she became thoughtful. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt,” she admitted. “If nothing else, I’ll get more cores. I’ve been saving up for a high-end Tinkertech gun from Leet.”

Crystal raised an eyebrow. Leet’s creations were absurdly expensive. And he usually never sold any of his tech. Someone was almost certainly scamming Victoria. For a brief moment Crystal considered warning her. Then she decided against it.

Let her suffer the consequences of her arrogance for once.

“We should wait for Aunt Jess,” Crystal said instead. “Then decide what to do.”

Victoria scoffed loudly. “As if Aunt Jess would let us help. She’ll ask our parents for permission, and they’ll never allow us to fight monsters unless they’re hovering over our shoulders.”

“That...” she hesitated, unsure of what to do here. Yes, she hated how much their parents restricted them, but she knew that they did it for their own good. After all, when it comes to fighting monsters, a single mistake is all it takes to end a Hunter’s life.

“Come on, sis,” Eric pleaded. “We should help.”

“Yes,” Victoria added with an annoying grin. “Think of all the refugees dying heroically without us.”

Crystal clenched her fists. ‘Mother is going to kill me for this.’ Still... she glanced at the thick smoke rising from beyond the horizon.

If the defensive line truly had collapsed...

“Fine,” Crystal relented at last. “But we stay together and minimise risks.”

“Speak for yourself,” Victoria snorted. “If it’s only E-class monsters, I’m not in danger at all.” With that, Victoria shot into the sky without waiting for another word.

Eric gave Crystal an apologetic look before flying after her.

Crystal turned back toward Aunt Jess one last time. Jess was still focused on her communicator, too distracted to notice her charges slipping away. Guilt twisted in Crystal's chest.

'Sorry Aunt Jess,' she thought with a sigh and then flew after them.

--

They arrived at the farm to find complete chaos.

The crops were burning, and the smoke had grown so thick that it was difficult to see more than a few dozen meters ahead. Half-eaten farmer corpses lay scattered everywhere, while black smoke drifted lazily into the sky.

Most significantly, there were no gunshots anymore. Meaning the defenders were likely all dead.

Crystal coughed as some of the smoke slipped down her throat, then gagged at the smell of burned human flesh. You'd think it was something people eventually got used to after smelling it enough times. But no. She never truly got used to it.

The rustling of grass alerted her and she looked up in time to see a half burned monster rush out from within the burning farm and leap up at them... only for Victoria to catch it by its throat before she ripped its head off in a single, smooth motion.

Despite herself, Crystal felt impressed. That was pretty cool.

“Well,” Victoria said looking around as she casually extracted a glowing core from its skull before tossing the corpse aside like garbage, “this is a clusterfuck.”

Instead of replying, Crystal quickly pulled out her Tinkertech mask and activated its breathing filter. Most Gates had breathable air, but every now and then you encountered environments that weren't. Volcanic Gates with sulphuric fumes. Underground caverns with barely any oxygen. Or the occasional monster capable of spewing airborne toxins.

Still, she never thought she'd actually need the mask outside a Gate.

She glanced toward Eric and Victoria and felt a wave of relief upon seeing both of them copying her action and taking out their own masks.

For a moment, she'd genuinely feared one of them might've forgotten.

‘I need to have more faith in them,’ she reminded herself. ‘Otherwise I'm no different from our parents.’

“What do we do?” Eric asked quietly as he stared at the destruction around them, looking lost. At moments like these, Crystal was reminded that Eric was still relatively new to all this.

“Now we fly around and kill every monster we find,” Victoria replied with a shrug before looking toward Crystal. “If any of the refugees are still alive, it should help them, right?”

Was that nervousness in Victoria’s voice? Or was I imagining things?

Crystal took a moment to think before replying. “If I remember correctly, every watchtower around here should have an underground shelter beneath it. Most of the farmers probably ran there once the fighting started. The monsters will likely catch their smell and go after them.” She pointed toward the nearest tower. “Let’s go there first.”

Victoria shrugged. “Works for me. Lead the way, captain.”

Crystal rolled her eyes at Victoria’s playful tone before flying toward the closest watchtower, Eric following close behind.

When they arrived, they found a group of monsters clawing into the earth around the shelter entrance. Judging by the exposed concrete beneath them, the creatures had already reached the outer wall and were trying to break through.

Then Crystal heard it. Muffled screams, crying, and the terrified voices of the farmers trapped underground.

One of the monsters finally dug deep enough to peer through a gap in the concrete. And the screams and shouts suddenly exploded in intensity.

Crystal fired before the monster could dig any further. Her laser erased the heads of two monsters in an instant while Victoria rushed forward, grabbed another by the tail, and swung it hard enough to crush three more beneath its body.

“Thirty-two,” Crystal’s Tinkertech watch chimed. And by the time the fight ended, her count had risen to thirty-four. Victoria’s had already reached forty-one.

Normally, that would’ve bothered her. But right now, Crystal mostly felt relieved that she hadn’t gotten Eric and Victoria killed.

Logically, she knew they were strong enough to handle E-class monsters. Still... this was the first time she’d ever led a team on her own. The burden was heavier than she’d expected.

Suddenly, she found herself respecting her mother more than she already did.

“You were right,” Victoria said with a grin as she extracted another core from a shattered skull. “The monsters really are gathering around the shelters.” She then floated over the hole the monsters had dug and shouted downward. “Hey! You guys alright in there?”

“Yeah!” someone shouted back desperately. “Did you kill the monsters?”

“Are you guys Brockton Bay Brigade?” Someone else asked, peeking up through the hole.

Victoria puffed out her chest proudly. “Of course we are. You’re safe now.”

Crystal let out a quiet breath of relief. They had saved their first survivors successfully.. “That’s good to hear. Vicky, now let’s head to the next tower th —” She stopped. Eric was gone.

“Eric?” She shouted. No answer. Her pulse spiked. “Eric! ERIC!” Crystal looked around the smoke-filled terrain frantically as panic began clawing its way into her chest. Then —

“I’m here!” Eric flew down from atop the watchtower holding a Tinkertech plasma rifle. One of the standard E88 models.

“Where did you get that?” Crystal asked, doing her best not to snap at him for wandering off alone during a battle.

“It was up there,” Eric explained quickly. “The guard was dead anyway, so it’s not like he needed it anymore.” Then his expression turned hopeful. “Can I keep it? Please? Mom never lets me use Tinkertech weapons.”

Crystal stared at him for a moment before sighing. “Fine. Just don’t shoot me or Victoria in the back, alright?”

Eric immediately brightened. “Alright!”

Crystal shook her head. She really hoped this wouldn’t come back to bite her later. Then all three of them froze as a scream echoed somewhere in the distance.

They exchanged a glance. And immediately flew toward it.

— —

They arrived at another watchtower after nearly half an hour of nonstop searching and fighting. By this point, Crystal felt mentally exhausted. The heat and smoke weren’t helping in the slightest.

The moment she saw the hole leading into the underground shelter, her stomach sank. The monsters had gotten inside before they arrived.

After all, this was the third breached shelter they’d found.

Crystal let out a frustrated snarl, feeling like she had failed these people even though she knew there was nothing she realistically could’ve done. Still, a treacherous part of her whispered: ‘If Mom had been here instead of me, she would’ve saved them.’

“What do they even make these shelters out of?” Victoria muttered, kicking a loose brick hard enough to shatter it into pieces. “Paper?”

“Do you think the city will be attacked too?” Eric asked quietly.

Crystal rubbed at her temple beneath the mask. “These weak monsters won’t achieve much if they attack the city,” she said. “Most of them probably won’t even reach the walls. No. The farmers are the ones truly in danger here.”

“The Guilds shouldn’t have sent these people out today,” Victoria said, fists clenched at her sides. “Not when they knew there was a Gate Break.”

Crystal briefly considered pointing out that their family technically owned part of these farms too, even if maintenance and daily work had been outsourced to other Guilds long ago. Instead, she only sighed. “Let’s keep moving.”

The others nodded.

It wasn’t long before they arrived at another scene of devastation. Only this time, it looked different. Instead of dead farmers, the fields were littered with monster corpses.

Every single one had a burnt hole in its head.



“Looks like Iron Rain finally woke up from her beauty sleep and sent someone to save her workers,” Victoria muttered as she crouched beside one of the corpses and dug into the ruined skull with practiced ease before pulling out a glowing core. “Huh.” Victoria held the core up toward them. “They forgot to extract the core.”

“Maybe their Collection Drone malfunctioned,” Eric suggested.

“Or maybe they planned to come back for them later,” Crystal replied, giving Victoria a pointed look.

Taking monster cores from another Hunter’s kill was strictly prohibited under the Unwritten Rules after all. It was the type of thing that could lead to Guild Wars.

“Any guesses who did this?” Victoria asked as she carefully placed the core back into the monster’s skull.

“Could’ve been Alabaster, Victor, or maybe Crusader,” Eric offered with a shrug, surprising Crystal slightly. She hadn’t realised he paid this much attention to the city’s Hunters. “All of them use Tinkertech weapons.”

“Not Alabaster,” Crystal said immediately. “His aim isn’t this good.” She crouched beside another corpse, studying the burn marks around the destroyed skull. “Besides, it doesn’t necessarily have to be E88. Could’ve been one of Leet’s drones. Or someone else entirely.” She rose back to her feet. “Let’s keep checking the shelters. If we keep following the trail, we’ll run into whoever did this eventually.”

“Could also be a new cape,” Victoria pointed out as they took back to the air.

Crystal slowly nodded. That possibility had crossed her mind too. After all, FUBAR situations like this were more than enough to lead to trigger events.

A short while later, they arrived at another watchtower.

The good news was that the shelter beneath it remained intact. The bad news was that none of the farmers nearby had managed to reach it.

“Hey! Over here!” Victoria shouted.

Crystal rounded the tower and found two more monster corpses lying near the edge of the field. Just like before, their cores remained untouched.

“Look at this,” Victoria said, pointing toward the ground.

Crystal landed beside her and frowned. Human footprint. But only one. She looked around for the next print and found nothing.

As though reading her thoughts, Victoria pointed farther ahead. “Here.”

Crystal flew several meters forward and found another footprint. Then another several meters farther away. And another.

“Why are the footprints so far apart?” Eric asked as he descended beside them carrying yet another salvaged Tinkertech rifle. “Was he jumping around?”

“Likely some kind of Mover power,” Crystal replied. She mentally ran through every known Mover in Brockton Bay that could’ve left behind such footprints. Battery. Possibly Assault. But Assault was fighting in the frontline right now, and Battery rarely left his side. Besides, their Mover power relied on Brute power. Their footprints would’ve been far deeper.

She stared at the tracks again. “Possibly a new cape,” she concluded.

“I told you so,” Victoria declared triumphantly.

‘No. You made a random guess and happened to be right.’ Crystal thought but decided not to say that out loud. The last thing she wanted right now was another argument. “I don’t think we’ll find much else here,” she said instead. “Let’s move.”

“Should we collect the cores then?” Victoria asked. At Crystal’s look, she quickly added, “I mean, if this really is a new Trigger, then he probably doesn’t even know about the Unwritten Rules yet. We can just hand the cores back once we meet him.”

“That still sounds like a bad idea,” Crystal replied.

“Oh, come on,” Victoria whined. “It could make a good first impression. Maybe we earn Brockton Bay Brigade a new ally.” Then she grinned mischievously. “And if he’s handsome...” She trailed off, waggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“Ew. Stop being disgusting, Vicky,” Eric groaned before throwing a rock at her.

Victoria burst into laughter and darted aside midair to avoid it. “So?” she asked. “Are we doing this or not?”

Crystal hesitated. If this really was a fresh Trigger, then there was a good chance they genuinely didn’t know the rules yet. “...Fine,” she relented. “Let’s collect them.”

“Yes!” Victoria cheered. Then, before Crystal could say another word, Victoria shot into the sky. “I’ll circle around and meet you at the next watchtower!”

“Victoria, wait—!” She shouted but it was too late. Victoria was already gone. Crystal groaned internally, half suspecting that Victoria only volunteered to collect the cores because she wanted an excuse to split off on her own.

“Should we split up too?” Eric asked hopefully.

Crystal gave him a flat stare. “No. You stay by my side.”

— —

She flew alongside Eric through the burned remains of the fields. By now, most of the crops had already burned away, but thick smoke still drifted from their charred remains, reducing visibility to barely a few dozen meters.

“There!” Eric shouted suddenly, pointing toward a vague shape crouched low in the distance. He immediately raised his Tinkertech rifle and opened fire.

Plasma blasts tore through the smoke. The half burned monster sprang upright and began dodging wildly, but several shots still landed, burning deep holes into its flesh and slowing it down considerably.

Crystal considered helping before deciding against it. Eric needed this. Hopefully, getting more kills under his belt would improve his confidence.

Eventually, the wounded monster closed the distance and lunged at Eric — only to slam face-first into his shield.

Eric immediately dropped the barrier and unloaded the remainder of his plasma rounds directly into the creature's face until the rifle sputtered uselessly and the monster finally fell over. Dead.

“Four,” Eric's Tinkertech watch chimed. Eric let out a triumphant yell before quickly flying down to retrieve the core. “Look what I got, Crystal,” he said proudly, holding up the glowing monster core.

“Good job, Eric,” she praised smiling inwardly as she remembered her own excitement the first few times she killed a monster on her own. Then her eyes drifted toward the rifle. “But it looks like your weapon ran out of power.”

Eric blinked. Then he glanced down at the rifle and experimentally pulled the trigger a few more times. Nothing happened. A second later, the rifle clicked and its magazine popped open, revealing a completely drained monster core inside. The glow within it had faded entirely.

Eric stared at the fresh core in his hand before reluctantly slotting it into the rifle's magazine.

The weapon immediately hummed back to life. And Eric fired another test shot into the dirt. This one burned noticeably hotter than before.

Eric grinned. "Let's keep going."

Crystal nodded.

The two of them collected a few more untouched cores from nearby corpses before eventually reaching another watchtower.

Victoria was already waiting there for them with her arms crossed and a bored expression on her face.

"A few farmers inside," Victoria said, jerking a thumb toward the shelter beneath the tower. "Looks like our mysterious Mover boy saved them just in time."

"How long ago?" Crystal asked immediately.

"Maybe ten minutes?" Victoria shrugged. "Guy's fast." Then a grin spread across her face. "And get this. He's young. Probably around twenty~"

"Get your head out of the gutter, Victoria," Crystal sighed and then she froze. Her eyes narrowed toward Victoria's utility belt. "Victoria."

"What?"

“Why is your Tinkertech barrier in the red?”

Victoria blinked and looked down in surprise. “Huh. Didn’t notice.” She shrugged casually. “It was only a few monsters.”

“Clearly.” Crystal rubbed at her forehead. “From now on, we stick together.”

Victoria immediately frowned. “No. I’ll be fine. These monsters are weak.”

“We stick together, Victoria.” The last thing Crystal wanted was to explain Victoria’s death to the rest of the Brigade. Something like that would really destroy their family.

“You’re not my mom, Crystal,” Victoria snapped and took off before Crystal could stop her.

“Victoria!” She shouted but it was too late. Crystal cursed under her breath before turning toward Eric.

“Stay here.”

“What?” Eric protested immediately. “I wanna come too!”

Of all times... “No,” Crystal said firmly. “You stay here and don’t move. I’ll come back soon. Understood?”

Eric glared at her but stayed silent.

Crystal didn't have time to argue further. Victoria was already disappearing into the smoke. She gave Eric one final look before taking off after her.

Unfortunately, the smoke made visibility terrible. And Crystal quickly lost sight of Victoria entirely. 'Why does she have to be so arrogant? Why can't she just listen to me for once?' She thought in growing irritation.

She activated the comms. "Victoria? Victoria, respond." Nothing.

Crystal grimaced. 'Just my luck.' The longer this dragged on, the more she regretted splitting off from Aunt Jess. Then—

"...help..."

Crystal froze midair. The voice had been faint. Weak. And distinctly feminine. And that terrified her.

Because the only girls out here were her and Victoria.

"help..." The voice rang in her ears once again. And Crystal immediately shot toward the sound.

The voice grew louder as she approached, sounding strained and pained, like someone barely clinging to consciousness.

Then Crystal reached the source and froze.

A naked young woman lay trapped beneath the corpse of a massive monster.

The creature itself was enormous. D-class at minimum. Possibly even C-class.

Crystal's stomach dropped. This was the first monster of this level she'd seen breach the perimeter and reach the farm. If more of them had reached this area, then Victoria could be in great danger.

Still, as she studied the scene, she couldn't help but wondered. 'What happened here? Who killed this monster? Was it the girl? She must be a cape. But why was she naked?'

Crystal's thoughts suddenly felt sluggish. Slow and muddy. But she forced herself forward anyway. The girl needed help.

Crystal rushed forward to help... and the "corpse" *moved*.

The giant monster exploded upward with terrifying speed. And Crystal only had enough time to notice the fleshy tube connecting the naked lower

half of the “girl” to the monster itself before massive jaws slammed shut around her.

Her personal shield shattered instantly. Then her Tinkertech barrier activated. Cracks immediately spread across it under the monster’s bite.

Crystal fired wildly into the creature’s mouth, beams of red light tearing chunks of flesh apart, but the monster refused to let go.

Her belt flashed from green to yellow and then to red as the cracks on the Tinkertech barrier grew with each passing second.

Panic finally hit. *No no no—*

She fired faster. Harder. But the barrier continued cracking. Then the warning alarm began to beep. And real fear finally struck her.

Am I going to die here?

Suddenly... something yanked her backward. The world blurred. And the monster’s jaws snapped shut on empty air.

Crystal stared blankly for a moment before realising she was no longer trapped in the monster’s jaw. And that someone was carrying her.

She’d been saved.

“Oh,” she breathed shakily, “I’m glad you finally came back, Victoria—” She froze mid-sentence as she looked up properly and realised that the person carrying her wasn’t Victoria.

It was a muddy farm worker around her age, staring toward the monster with a disturbingly calm expression.

‘He’s kinda handsome,’ Crystal thought distantly before immediately feeling mortified with herself at the thought. ‘I just died. I’m not in my right mind,’ she told herself.

The boy glanced down at her. “Are you alright?” he asked, his voice sounded strangely apathetic.

Before Crystal could answer, the C-class monster roared and charged toward them. The farm boy blurred and suddenly they were half a field away.

‘Oh. He’s the Mover we were looking for.’ Crystal suddenly felt stupid for not realising it sooner.

“Can you walk?” the boy asked, his gaze not leaving the monster. “I need my arm free to shoot.”

Only then did Crystal notice the glow gathering around his hand. *A power similar to mine.*

“Yes,” she replied quickly before taking to the air. The last thing she wanted right now was to slow him down further.

The monster charged again. And the boy fired in response. A bright laser slammed into the creature’s face, leaving behind a deep burn but failing to penetrate fully.

‘His Blaster power is weak,’ Crystal realised immediately. And yet— Despite being a fresh Trigger, he was still willing to fight a C-class monster head-on. Crystal felt a strange flicker of respect.

“My lasers are stronger,” she said quickly. “Distract it. I’ll kill it.”

The boy gave her a simple thumbs-up before immediately darting around the monster at incredible speed, firing rapid laser shots into its face and eyes.

Crystal charged her own power and fired into the monster’s back, blasting a crater into its armored hide. The creature roared and turned toward her.

The fake human figure attached to its tongue rose once again. “Help!” it screamed.

For one horrifying instant, Crystal felt the urge to rush forward again. Then she crushed the impulse immediately.

Not this time.

She fired directly at the fake body instead, vaporizing it into bloody chunks. The monster screeched in pain... and immediately took another laser directly through one of its eye, courtesy of Mover boy.

The fight dragged on after that.

The two of them worked together surprisingly well. Mover boy distracted the creature while Crystal steadily carved larger and larger wounds into it. Eventually, she gathered one final blast and fired directly through the monster's skull.

The creature collapsed heavily into the dirt. Dead.

Crystal didn't take chances and continued firing until the entire brain had been thoroughly cooked before finally landing beside the corpse. She reached into the ruined skull and pulled out the glowing core before tossing it toward the new Trigger.

The farm boy caught it one-handed and slowly turned it over. "Is this..." he asked quietly, "a monster core?"

Definitely a fresh Trigger.

"Yes," Crystal replied as she landed in front of him properly for the first time. Now that the fighting had stopped, she could study him more carefully.

Tall and broad shouldered with Sharp eyes. Covered in mud and blood but somehow still unnervingly calm.

Crystal suddenly became very aware of how close they were standing and unconsciously licked her lips. “So,” she said before her brain could stop her, “what’s your name, handsome?”

The instant the words left her mouth, Crystal wanted to slam her own head into the dirt. *Handsome? God, that sounded so cheesy. Victoria must never learn of this.*

The new Trigger merely stared at her with the same detached expression he’d worn this entire time. Then he slowly pocketed the core. “Oscar,” he said. “Oscar Rector.”

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Powers gained in this chapter so far

Rapid Movement (Mover): Rating 3

Laser Beam (Blaster): Rating 2

Accurate Aim (Thinker): Rating 1

New Charges: 9