

'Claws and Effect'

Chapter 1:

I leaned back against the park bench with a contented sigh, letting the early afternoon sun soak into me. It wasn't often I caught a break during the day, but sometimes I got lucky. Today was one of those days – all my contacts were busy, and I'd already wrapped up all the cases I'd been working on. Until somebody came up with something, I was free as a bird.

Crumpling up the wrapper from the hamburger I'd nabbed from a street vendor on the way over, I pitched it at a nearby garbage can, and was gratified to see that it went in. Being able to have a relaxed lunch was a treat too...usually I was grabbing energy bars and a bottle of water in-between missions instead of having a proper sit-down meal.

That sunlight felt *good*...I had to stifle a yawn as a pleasant drowsiness crept over me. Yawning again, I stretched indolently, hearing the leather of my costume creak from the strain. A male pedestrian walking by looked over at me, and promptly walked into a lamppost when he couldn't seem to get his eyeballs back to where they belonged.

I smirked to myself as he staggered away, clutching his head in pain. I'd gotten used to how most people reacted to my looks over the years, but every now and again I'd get a good laugh from some of them. And there were days when a good laugh was welcome.

Paragon City was no stranger to cute girls in skimpy (usually spandex) costumes - they were literally all over the place. Even with that saturation level, though, a fairly tall, curvaceous woman wearing a tight and revealing leather costume with high-heeled boots usually got a second glance. Especially when she also had very prominent cat ears, and a tail swishing lazily through the air behind her.

Okay, okay, maybe I had been a little exhibitionist in my stretching. But basking in that sunlight just felt SO damn good that I was giving semi-serious thought to napping all afternoon on the bench. I reached over to where my drink was sitting, condensation beading and trickling down the sides of the cup, and picked it up and took a long pull on the straw.

Cold, liquid sweetness flooded my mouth, and I sighed blissfully, savouring the gulp of vanilla milkshake I'd taken for a moment. I swallowed finally, and felt the pleasantly numbing cold work its way down to my stomach. My second indulgence for the afternoon...I was going to have to think about taking an afternoon break more often if this was what it could be like.

As I sat there quietly enjoying my drink and the relative peace and quiet, my ears picked up the sound of purposeful footsteps approaching my bench, coming from behind me. The drowsiness that had been hanging over me vanished in an instant as a surge of adrenaline shot through my veins.

After a tense moment, I forced myself to relax – it was only one set of footsteps, and there was no attempt at stealth or subterfuge, so it was highly unlikely one of my enemies had decided to track me down to settle a score.

Besides, his scent was of somebody highly nervous – and I couldn't think of anybody other than Crey goons or Council stooges who had reason to be nervous around me.

So I waited, taking another leisurely sip of my milkshake. The footsteps slowed down as he came around the end of the park bench and stopped, looking at me. Mentally, I gave him bonus points for not having his eyes fixed on the neckline of my costume.

“Um, hi,” he looked at me hesitantly. I cocked an eyebrow inquisitively at him and took another pull at my milkshake as I waited for the rest of whatever he was going to say. “Are you Saberkitten?”

“That's me,” I nodded, looking him over. Typical average guy – about five-foot-seven, hundred and sixty-five pounds, wearing a windbreaker over a t-shirt, jeans, and running shoes that were long past their best days. He was a clean-cut kid, with black hair, and green eyes. Age-wise, my guess pegged him at around nineteen or twenty. “Something I can help you with?”

“Well, Professor Smythe sent me actually,” he sounded apologetic. “He said you might be able to help me out with, um, a problem I'm having.”

“Great,” I tried to keep my voice neutral, but it probably didn't work too well. Professor Jonathan St. John Smythe worked for the branch of the Paragon City administration that dealt with ‘paranormal humans’ – people like me. Smythe was a good scientist, and he'd helped me figure out some of what had happened to me when I'd first ended up here, but good grief...the man was the almost textbook example of a science nerd crossed with the absent-minded professor.

And he just didn't seem to be able to clue in to why I might be a little testy after hours of being poked and prodded in various sensitive places with instruments that all seemed to be glacially cold. I was convinced he refrigerated all his equipment before I got there, but I never did manage to prove it.

I sighed to myself – I may not have been fond of the old goat, but if he was sending people to me for help, I at least owed it to him to listen to their story.

My visitor seemed to be fascinated by my ‘exotic’ appearance, and I sighed inwardly, mentally bracing myself. Looked like it was going to be one of *those* kinds of discussions again.

“How do you get the ears to stay on when you're fighting?” he ventured, confirming my guess.

“Well, we're kind of attached to each other,” I shrugged, taking another slurp of my milkshake. One of my ears twitched, unconsciously mirroring my irritation at the question. I saw the light dawn in his face as his startled gaze flicked from my ears to my

slowly thrashing tail behind me.

“Yes, it’s real too, and no, you can’t touch it,” I cut him off as he opened his mouth to ask another question, one I was sure I’d already heard before. Two years of looking like this, and it was still the same stupid questions over and over and over again. Luckily (for him), today was a good day – my earlier tangles with the Council had pretty much worked out any ‘aggression issues’ I might have had.

“I wasn’t going to ask,” he sounded wounded, but I didn’t really care. I’d had my tail literally yanked by grabby kids in shopping malls, slammed in doors by ignorant AND impatient bastards, and even stepped on during one of the rare occasions where my opponents had managed to put me down. When you’ve got a body part that seems to be directly connected to your pain receptors, you make damn sure that other people keep their hands OFF.

By the way, I don’t make exceptions on that one, especially for kids. Leaving pain aside for a moment, it took me over two hours to get the damn bubblegum out of the fur the last time some little brat grabbed it.

My expression must’ve been pretty sour at that point because the kid was looking even more nervous that he’d been when he first arrived and looked half-ready to bolt. I shoved the irritation aside and tried to give him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “So, what did you need a hand with?”

“Well,” he looked hesitant. “It’s about my brother. I think he’s in, um, trouble.” He shifted his feet and looked down at the ground. “I was kind of hoping I could find somebody to look for him.”

“Look for him?” I echoed, cocking an eyebrow. “If he’s missing can’t you just tell the cops?”

“I did,” he fidgeted harder. “They said they’d put out a bulletin on him, but that he was likely still out with his ‘buddies’.” I cocked my head, giving him an appraising glance. His body language spoke volumes about something he wasn’t telling me.

“You’re going to have to level with me, kid,” I noisily slurped down the last of my milkshake and tossed the cup at the trash bin nearby. “How long has he been missing, and why are you acting like the cops don’t care?” The look he gave me was guilty and worried in equal measure.

“Well, he’s...he’s had some run-ins with the cops before,” he flushed and looked away. “I’ve tried to get him to smarten up, but he just wouldn’t listen.” He sighed. “He’s been hanging around with a group of guys who want to get into one of the other gangs here, and they’ve been trying to do stuff to impress the local big-shots. You know, small stuff like graffiti on walls, things like that.”

“Go on,” I nodded. Small wonder the cops hadn’t seemed interested – they were so swamped trying to deal with either the Hellions, Skulls, or Outcasts they weren’t likely to spare much concern for somebody who was “known to police”. Not unless he was known for having mutant powers or something.

"Well, four days ago they decided they needed to do something bigger," he flushed and looked away. "I tried to talk him out of it. But they went anyway."

"Talk him out of what?" I prodded, wishing the kid would just get to the point.

"They wanted to break into this warehouse they'd been watching," he jammed his hands into his pockets and started pacing agitatedly. "He said they'd seen lots of trucks going in and out delivering stuff, and they figured there must be something worth stealing in there that they could nab. He said they didn't have any security and that the warehouse looked deserted most of the time."

"Oh hell," I muttered, rubbing at the bridge of my nose with my fingers. "Deserted warehouses" didn't exist in Paragon City – if you had a building that looked abandoned, then it was a sure bet that somebody had set up shop there that didn't *want* to be noticed. If it wasn't the Hellions, then it was the Skulls or the Outcasts. And if it wasn't the gangs trying to lay low, then it was probably somebody with enough firepower to make sure that they didn't get noticed. Unless they were total knuckle-dragging Neanderthals, anybody with an IQ above that of a retarded amoeba should have known that. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," he looked glum. Fishing in his jacket pocket, he pulled out an oily, stained piece of yellow paper that looked like a packing slip and handed it to me. "I found this in his things – I think they picked it up when they were scouting out the place."

I unfolded the crumpled piece of paper and squinted at the faded lines on the paper. I immediately saw two things that made my blood run cold – the first thing was that it was a packing slip all right, and it was for guns. Lots of high-powered, very illegal guns.

The second thing that was making me feel like I'd been kicked in the stomach was the barely legible logo in the corner of the paper. It looked like a flaming comet with a large 'C' embedded in the center, surrounded by an elongated diamond-shaped outline. I recognized it immediately.

The Council.

I swore under my breath as I crumpled the paper. The stupid, STUPID bastards had tried to rip off a Council storehouse. If they were lucky, they were dead. If they weren't lucky...my jaw clenched as I tried to avoid thinking about what they could do with a batch of fresh 'volunteers' for their insane super-soldier experiments.

For one brief, disorienting second, it seemed like I could smell antiseptic fumes, and I again felt something akin to slivers of white-hot fire racing up my arms. Gritting my teeth, I shook my head, forcing away the memories.

As the remembered pain faded from my arms, I became aware that the hand that had been holding the packing slip had clenched into a tight fist, and the afternoon sunlight was glittering off the trio of razor-edged ten-inch blades that had sprouted from between my knuckles.

My claws.

The kid had turned bone-white and started backing away from me, and I speared him with a steely glance, stopping him in his tracks. "What's your brother's name, and where was this warehouse?"

Chapter 2:

Independence Port. I can't think of a more wretched hive of scum and villainy anywhere, Ben Kenobi's opinion about Mos Eisley spaceport notwithstanding.

What? So I watch old movies from time to time. Did you think I spend absolutely all my time fighting for my life against crackpots with 'master plans' to conquer Paragon City and use Stateman's cape for their beach towel? Even us hyperactive scrappers need to unwind now and again, and I like watching old movies at home. I can relax and enjoy myself, munch some snacks, and not have to pretend I can't hear the whispering and muttering going on behind my back.

I shifted my position a little, trying to ease the cramps that were starting to bite into my leg muscles. I'd been perched in my little lookout spot for about an hour and a half now, neatly tucked out of sight behind some steel girders and pipes running from a nearby refinery. It was the type of spot that most people wouldn't think of looking - primarily because under normal circumstances, most people wouldn't have been able to get to it.

But when you've got cat-like agility and instincts, you learn really quickly that doing the unexpected can keep you alive. It's not paranoia if they really ARE out to get you - and I'd managed to piss off enough of Paragon City's assorted criminal element that I wasn't going to take anything for granted.

So I waited semi-patiently, trying to ignore the pungent cocktail of dead fish, harbour debris, industrial fumes, and petroleum vapour that saturated the air around me.

As I crouched there in the shadows, factory and dock workers and other pedestrians went about their business on the streets below. I had to fight not to leap from my concealed niche a couple of times as a couple of them were grabbed by Tsoo gangsters and shaken down for 'protection' money. Part of being on a stakeout is keeping a low profile, and to suddenly have an enraged scrapper landing on them and carving dire retribution out of their tattooed hide would have given away my position.

So I stayed hidden and silent, grinding my teeth as I witnessed a couple more shakedown, mentally promising myself that I'd track them down later and get the victims their money back - with interest. As I tore my gaze from the street, I realized that I'd clenched my hands into fists again, and my claws were gleaming brightly in the darkness. Six steely blades, slightly curved with chisel-pointed ends, much like the tip of a katana blade.

Damn it, I'd done it again. I forced myself to relax, taking deep breaths and

unclenching my hands. My claws slowly slid back into my hands, vanishing into my gloves as they retracted into their housings with a metallic grating noise. I stared at the backs of my hands, my jaw clenching for a moment, then resumed my vigil.

Most people thought my claws were built into my gloves in some kind of fancy high-tech spring-loaded gadget. Only a select few people knew the truth: my claws were cybernetic devices that had been surgically implanted in my arms when I'd been strapped down to a table and drugged into a stupor so that I couldn't resist. I wore the gloves partly to deflect curiosity by giving people an easy explanation for where the claws came from.

The other reason I wore them was to hide the scars.

I stared morosely past the tangle of piping at the warehouse in the distance. Even in my mind's eye, I could see them: three thin lines of whitish scar tissue running from the knuckles on my hands up past my wrists to a point halfway up my forearm. The marks of surgical butchery by some freakish group of mad scientists. Bastards.

My body could heal from damn near anything thrown at me. I've regrown skin after having it burned off by the toxic slime spewed from walking corpses, regenerated broken bones after being slammed into the ground by shambling rock creatures, and I've even had the pleasure of getting to hold my innards in while my hyped-up metabolism repaired the lucky slash that some jackass with a broadsword had half-eviscerated me with. No matter what I got blasted or maimed with, my body always healed from it as good as new, with no blemishes or signs of the violence I'd just endured. But the scars on my arms were permanent.

The human body is actually quite remarkable in its ability to heal itself. Over the years, there's been all kinds of indications that, given a chance and the right conditions, people can fully recover from very serious injuries. There are just two problems with 'normal' healing: it's slow, and over time your body loses the ability to repair itself. The repair mechanisms basically lose their 'memory' of how your body's cells are supposed to be. So if you can find a way to ensure that the cells never lose that memory template of how things are supposed to be AND drastically speed up the healing process, well hey, you've got somebody who can heal perfectly from anything, right?

I was the result of somebody taking that theory and running with it to an extreme. Kidnapped off the street for no good reason that I'd ever been able to discern, I'd been dragged off to some clandestine lab somewhere and kept drugged-up as they went about experimenting on me.

First, they genetically rearranged my DNA by fusing it with cat DNA – I don't know what kind of cat, but I'm willing to bet it was a wild one of some kind. I developed keener senses and reflexes as a result, but I also got a tail and genuine cat ears out of the bargain. I also started getting predatory thoughts about my captors....but I'm pretty sure that probably would've happened anyway, given the circumstances.

For the second step to the process, they'd strapped me down and implanted the claws in my arms. I regained consciousness a couple of times during that process, and it was not pleasant at all. They'd quickly anaesthetized me again, but not before I'd gotten

to feel surgical implements cutting into my arms, and something running ribbons of fire up the nerve endings.

The final, irrevocable step to the whole twisted process had been a large injection of something that glowed a virulent green colour. Ever swallowed a mouthful of something so hot you can feel it burning its way down your gullet to your stomach? Now imagine what it feels like to have that sensation running through every vein and artery of your body all at once for several minutes. I know I screamed myself hoarse as it was happening before blacking out from the pain.

The injection did its work beautifully though – my body's metabolism was jacked-up and accelerated to the point that any injury healed almost immediately, and my body's cellular repair mechanisms became able to restore any damaged tissue to its original state.

And that was exactly why I could never heal the scars on my arms, or lose the feline characteristics. As far as my body was concerned, when the regeneration factor was induced in my physiology, I had always been this way. Anything that changed my physiology was vigorously rejected as my body healed itself back to its 'perfect' state. Quite ingenious, really.

I closed my eyes and took another set of deep breaths, forcing the rage back into its corner in my mind. This was one reason why I tried to keep busy all the time – sitting around waiting for something to happen gave me time to think. On days where I was feeling particularly down, my thoughts always seem to veer into dark, seething anger, and I really didn't need that. Especially not now.

A flicker of motion near the distant warehouse provided a welcome distraction from the slow burn my subconscious was doing. It was now starting to get close to dusk, and the light around the warehouse district was getting tricky to see by, but a large roll-up cargo door was slowly lifting on one of the truck loading bays. My gaze sharpened as shadowy shapes slowly emerged from the dark, cavernous interior. It was hard to see at this distance, but I could tell they were carrying guns. Their stance suggested they were armed, and a brief glint of long metallic objects in their hands confirmed it.