**Investments 14.13**

“What do you mean that nuking the city *isn’t going to help?*” I asked, trying to figure out what the hell could be so bad it’d need .

My father replied evenly, “It will only spread the infection.”

*“What infection?*” I demanded. “*I have no idea what you’re talking about.”*

A long-suffering sigh was what I got in response, and I had to resist the urge to call Quinn. *I* might not be able to punch him through the phone, but Overwatch could. “You know how I can look ahead?” Medhu checked, not waiting for my response. “In an hour, monsters will start to pour out of Brockton Bay, killing everyone. They’ll be different types, each kind with it it’s own set of powers, and they won’t stop, spilling out across the countryside, going for towns, farms, anywhere there’s a lot of living things. It’ll take another two hours to realize that the monsters aren’t just killing their victims, they’re turning them into more of themselves. Another hour after that, when the first coordinated attempts to fight them back fail, that they’ll learn that parahumans that are taken turn into new kinds of monsters, and more of that monsters will start showing up everywhere, even miles away from the original, in minutes.”

“After another three hours, losing a lot more people, and Boston, they’ll nuke the source of the monsters, downtown Brockton Bay, but it didn’t stop them, and the blast spread something, people starting to turn even when there weren’t any monsters. That’s what’s happening in eight hours, if you, Charlie, and I do nothing. I’m doing what I can by telling you, Lee,” My father informed me. “I’ll get who I can away, but I’m not a fighter. I’ll send you the location. Stop this before it starts.”

With that, my father hung up, texting me geographic coordinates.

***“Fuuuuuuuuuuuck,”***I swore, *and things were going so well!*

Striding out the door of my office, I got to work. “Zilla, call everyone in the Penumbral Defenders to the meeting room, it’s an emergency, and they need to be there as fast as possible without breaking anything. If you have biohazard protocols for something sourced outside Eclipse, get them ready. Overwatch, I need you here now.”

In the hall, the lights dimmed slightly, the V.I. calmly stating, “Attention, possible exterior biohazard threat. Entrance is temporarily denied, and please do not attempt to re-enter if you exit Eclipse. Biohazard protocols have not been enabled, this is just a warning. Have a nice day.”

The lights returned to normal as Overwatch stepped into being beside me as I strode for the elevator, which opened in front of us. “Biohazard?” he asked.

“Precog warning of an Endbringer level threat from the red zone,” I told him, cycling through plans. Calling Herb, the phone rang, and rang, and rang.

“Heya, this is Break’s number, I’m out Breakin’ hearts and minds, leave a message and I’ll get back to ya! Beep!” his message stated, him actually saying ‘beep’ before the phone beeped.

“Break, this is Vejovis. I need you and your brothers here at Eclipse *now!* I know you’re on vacation, and you can go back when you’re done, but I need your help!” I stated firmly. “Call me when you get this message. If you don’t, there might not *be* a city left in a few hours!”

I hung up, hoping he’d get it. One thing that my friend had never been good about was being available, going incommunicado for days at a time. I’d hoped, given how high stakes things were here, he wouldn’t do that again. With any luck, he’d either call me back or be here soon.

The elevator stopped and I strode out, going through everyone and their capabilities. If it were a monster rush, I could use Karen and Victoria, armored to the nines, but the mutational aspect put a kybosh on that. I didn’t know if it was a mutagenic power, a super-disease, or something else entirely, but I couldn’t risk them that way. If I had more time Amelia might be able to make a few battle bugs for Taylor to puppet remotely, or those relay bugs she had before. If I had even more time I could go get the rest, as Kayden could provide air support, Raida could provide an operating platform for Taylor to work from, and Herb, Herb could fight by my side.

I wasn’t one hundred percent certain, but chances were that either my Immunity to disease or my Peak Condition power would help me shrug off the mutagenic aspects of whatever the hell these things did. With Herb and Boojack, we could likely handle whatever the hell this was, if we didn’t hold back, though I’d need to armor them both up to make it work.

The problem was, *I didn’t have a timeframe.* The only reason I was taking the time to walk was to let me walk into the meeting room with a basic plan, though my current plan *sucked.* If we’d gotten power armor, Quinn could accompany me, but we both didn’t *and* I hadn’t trained the man in combat, so that was a non-starter.

On Charlie’s end, his people likely wouldn’t be able to help. Tinkers all, only maybe the elementalist would be able to fight these things without being taken down, but I had to ask. Calling him, he picked up on the second ring, but I didn’t give him time to talk. “Mutational monsters are gonna breach the red zone in an hour tops.”

“Oh, that’d explain it,” was the entirety of his response.

“*Explain what?”* I demanded, stopping, getting a concerned look from Quinn, and walking once more.

“All the teams I was gonna send out died,” he told me offhandedly, though there was an underlying nervousness. “Some of it was checking out safe stuff, so we were kinda confused.”

“And your on-site staff?” I asked, narrowing in on the fact that, of the two precogs I knew, only one bothered to warn me.

I could here him say, “Hey, Déjà? Try it on Carl. Nothing?” His voice came back louder, “Yeah, whatever it was hit everyone. Shit.”

“Are you telling me that you aren’t having your pre-cog make sure nothing happens at your base as a *control?*” I demanded, anger flaring. “And you didn’t bother to *fucking tell me everyone sent out into the city died today?*”

“Hey,” he complained defensively. “I didn’t think about it okay? I’m sorry.”

Remembering why I didn’t like to work with my younger brother, something that had faded to the back of my mind lately, I focused on the important details. “Fine, whatever. Horde of monster that turn people into more of them and can assimilate powers are hitting in an hour. They’re coming from here,” I said, sending him the coordinates. “I’m going to the source and trying to stop it from happening. I need help that can’t be turned, you didn’t pick up Immunity, did you?”

“No. You need someone who can’t be infected? Fuck, I don’t have anyone like that. Riot’s armor isn’t airtight. He might be able to make something though,” Æonic offered.

“In half an hour? I want to stop them before they start to spread throughout the city,” I reminded him.

“Fuck, no. Sorry,” he offered lamely.

Mentally going through what I knew about the people he had on staff, I suggested, “What about the elemental chick? If she’s in a non-biological form she should be fine.”

There was a long moment, and I reached the door of the meeting room, which opened for me, the worried faces of Amy, Victoria, Dean, Karen, Sherrel, and Taylor looking back at me. I held up a single finger, asking for them to wait as my brother finally said, “I can’t I need her here. If it’s biohazardy, I need her to prep the base.”

“If we can stop it before it starts, *you won’t need to,”* I practically hissed.

“Sorry man, good luck. I’ll see if I can get anyone to help,” he told me, before hanging up.

*“Motherfucker,”* I swore, resisting the urge to throw the phone. *Fine,* if Herb wouldn’t respond, and Charlie wouldn’t help, it looked like I was doing this on my own. *Again.*

“Lee?” Taylor asked, concerned.

I turned to Quinn, showing him the coordinates. “Pull these up.” As he did so, I turned to the rest. “Okay people, we’ve got a situation, Endbringer class or above. I got a report from one of my Precogs, confirmed by another, that in an hour the cities going to be overrun, in six it’ll have spread to Boston, and in seven they’ll nuke here,” I explained, pointing at the area on the map, “Where the monsters are coming from, but it won’t help. The monsters have powers, can turn other living things into monsters, including people, and if they turn a cape, monsters with that power show up across the horde. It’s a hardcore Zerg scenario, and we’re out of Space Marines,” I tried to joke, but no one laughed.

“Like, the ones from before?” Karen asked, and I shook my head.

“No, this was probably what grabbed the bodies, though. And has been cleaning the streets of corpses,” I said, realization dawning as I spoke, causing me to pace. “Fuck, that’s why it’s going to spread. It’s either hungry, and has exhausted everything nearby, or has gotten enough biomatter, and numbers, that it can try for a rush.”

“What are we gonna do?” Vicky asked. “If everyone couldn’t stop it, what can we do?”

I looked around at them, “What you are going to do is stay here, and defend the base. What *I’m* going to do is try to stop this avalanche before it begins.”

A riot of protests met me, a mix of ‘not alone’s’ and ‘can helps’ that both made me feel a bit better about the group I’d gathered but reaffirmed my decision. With a wave of my hand, the entire room went dead silent, the sounds suppressed. “I’m not doing this because I’m ‘being stupid’,” I nodded towards Amelia, who tried to say something, only for no sound to be heard, “I’m doing this because I’m the only one who can. Fun fact, I’m completely immune to any and every disease, along with having a power that keeps me in good condition.”

“There’s a good chance that, whatever this is, I can at least resist it, if not flat out ignore it. Assuming it even gets through my armor. If someone starts to turn, the only one who could save them is probably Amelia, but then there’s a chance that *she’d* get turned to, and is your armor ready?” I asked her, dropping the muting effect.

“No but-” she started to say.

“But what? You can still fight? You can’t use your power through the armor I could give you, and the holes you’d need would be weak points and infection vectors,” I stated. I looked to the rest, “And any armor that I could give the rest of you would have a very limited air supply. There’s a difference between sealing armor so that Fog can’t get through, and something so narrow so as to block a power-enhanced virus,” I added, before Vicky could argue.

I shook my head, “No, the only ones I’d be taking with me are Break and his cousins.”

“And where are they?” Taylor asked, looking around. “If he can help, get him!”

Shrugging, I said helplessly, “Not answering my calls.” I paused, remembering I had another avenue, “Overwatch? Can you get him?”

The man reached a hand out, frowning, before shaking his head. “No. Not sure if he’s resisting, or I can’t make the connection.”

“At least take a Mark,” Mouse Protector suggested, tossing me a knife emblazoned with her power. I nodded, opening up part of my armor and slotting it in. Thinking about it, I shifted from my Vejovis setup to a full set of pure white armor, almost completely sealed except for a grill wide enough to breathe through in front of my mouth.

“This won’t be a public mission, so I don’t need to hold back,” I told them. “But if I fail, I need you all to lock down Eclipse and ride this out. Reach out to others, get them ready, but these things either kill you than convert your corpse, or mutate you as you are. We don’t know which, and I can’t risk losing you to this. Trust me, if I wasn’t protected, I’d be doing something else entirely. If we had more warning, I’d be doing something else entirely,” I promised, wondering how long Charlie had known something was wrong without saying anything. If he’d contacted me, I could’ve reached out to Medhu and tracked down Herb just in case, but if they hit the *edge* of the city in about an hour, they’d likely be leaving their origin point in half an hour, at most.

I looked around the room, “With any luck, we’ll have a while before another threat of this magnitude rears its head. Some things were supposed to happen, but nothing *this bad.* The Slaughterhouse Nine were supposed to come in a month or so, and then something else a month or two after that, but this?” I shook my head, sighing, “This *wasn’t supposed to happen.*”

“That doesn’t make it your fault,” Taylor stated seriously, and I winced, as I was pretty sure it absolutely was, but there was no way I could argue that in the time I had left.

“It might not be my fault,” I told her, “but it is my responsibility.”

Descending down on the location from above, to avoid the other anomalies of the Red zone, I hoped I wasn’t too late. I’d called Herb again, along with Kayden, only to get no response from either. Calling the PRT had been equally as useless, Piggot stating that she’d take my warnings ‘under advisement’, and that if there was an issue, *they* would handle it.

Amelia had tried to give my system a ‘tuneup’ she’d stated she’d undo once I was back safe, implementing some ideas she had to help protect me, like a carbon nanoweave mesh around my vital organs, only for my own powers to fight her every step of the way, undoing what little she’d been able to accomplish in minutes. While it aggravated her, it helped confirm my belief that I’d be able to resist whatever mutagenic effects these monsters had.

Overwatch had given me back the eyepiece he’d loaned me before, which had been ‘hardened’ against temperature extremes, along with an earpiece that had been similarly improved. They’d be watching, though I’d given strict orders not to jump in to grab me unless there was any other choice, and then it was straight to quarantine if they did so. Quinn had gotten enough practice with his summoning that he could drop me into another room, as long as the destination was withing three meters of himself.

Now, coming down, I could see red, fleshy shapes starting to gather below me, one after another coming up out of a tunnel hidden by fallen rubble hidden in the bottom of a crater. Prepping orichalcum darts, my orichalcum sword sheathed across my back, I infused them with momentum. There were only a couple dozen of them, but I’d arrived just it time. It’d apparently taken them longer to get through the city and attack the PRT complex at the edge than I’d thought, or the ‘hour’ my father had told me had been closer to forty-five minutes.

Either way, it was time to start.

Fully charged, the ‘mold’ idea working better for standardized shots, I let loose the barrage on the edges of the group of bloody-looking quadrupeds. Half of them died under my shelling, but the others formed up, a blue haze starting to form around them, as other, different ones looked upwards, firing in response.

A hail of exploding quills, and colored rays shot up at me. The former were deflected, the latter I tried to dodge, though a blue one caught my side, coldness stabbing into me like a knife, but one made of rubber that had no threat other than the force of the impact, immune to temperature as I was.

Responding in kind, I formed blades of air around their location as I fired a Light blast, which was deflected, bouncing off the mist. The swords of compressed air, however, were not, and I set them to spinning, blending several of the creatures below me, though several survived, the blades braking on their flesh.

One of them leapt for me as I descended, a hulking, brutish thing with exposed musculature and bone claws. I met it, claws breaking on my armored fist as my punch countered it’s own, a Crystalline shield expended to blast it back downwards into one of it’s peers, both splattering to red and purple mush, not the colors of my own powers, but the shades of organs and veins. Around them the blue haze started to fade, the effect dispersing.

Another, identical monster jumped, but rather than spend another shield I spun up darts of star, blasting into it. The bits of shaped sun burned it, but not nearly as much as they should’ve, but they let me slam it down, holding it down while they burned their way through it, the ones at the bottom waiting for me. One that looked like a skinless feline with a long tail, a glowing lime green blade at the end of it’s tail, leapt at me, it’s claws glowing a similar color.

This one wasn’t so resistant to my darts, piercing through it in an instant, but that very piercing was a problem, as it kept moving towards me, sword-tail stabbing forward further than should be possible, the tail itself extending outwards.

The blade skidded off my armor uselessly, and I slammed the creature down without using a shield as several others leapt for me. Calling upon the Light, I released it in every direction, creating a small shockwave which my Acoustokinesis enhanced, blasting those around me back. One Brute survived, starting to get up, but another set of sun darts held it down as they burned through its head, killing it.

A flicker of movement came from the tunnel entrance, but whatever was there darted back inside. With nothing coming, I manifested a series of suns over every body, burning them to nothing. Whatever the Brute monsters had didn’t extend past their death, and they burned to nothing just as easily as the rest.

With the air shimmering, the ground below me red-hot and slightly melted from the heat, I let it cool down naturally, hopefully killing off any remaining infectious agents. Moving to the tunnel entrance, it looked like rough rubble for the first dozen or so feet before smoothing out into smooth flooring, an obviously manufactured tunnel.

“Overwatch,” I said, looking it over. “You know what this is?”

“Negative,” came his response immediately. “Though, from the construction, it looks like the entrance to an Endbringer Shelter. There’s no record of one being located at your position, however.”

I flew forward, not bothering to walk, and tried to figure out what an Endbringer Shelter that wasn’t was doing here, and why it seemed familiar. “Coil.” I stated after a moment.

“Who?” he asked.

It was Taylor who responded, “Villain. Was bankrolling the Undersiders. Has a precog power. You think he set this off?”

I shook my head, “No, I can’t see him getting anything from this. It’s not his style, either, he likes short one-off operations that he can use his power to control. Whatever it is might’ve just found a nice, deep hole in the ground to retreat to.” I looked upwards, it wasn’t even noon yet. “Any word from Herb, or Æonic, or anyone?”

Quinn responded with a single word. “No.”

“Then it’s me,” I sighed, starting to move forward again. The temple angled downwards, deeper underground, and reaching out with Mineral Manipulation I could feel the void in the earth where Coil’s base was, though the lower levels seemed less defined. *Did it dig out the bottom?* I wondered. I’d find out soon enough.

Behind me I grew a foot-thick wall of steel. Then another. Then another. Anchored to the walls, they’d stop anything coming out, or at least slow them down. I was only able to do so as there was nothing under these tunnels, the rock it was built on taking the weight of the multi-ton barriers. My power felt. . . tired after the fifth, though it was starting to recover. In place of more, I created a Sun, large enough to block the tunnel in its entirety, but thin enough to keep from melting everything around it.

Blocked in, I continued downwards, adding a thin, three inch thick wall when my Metal Creation was up to it, and letting it rest once more. Reaching the actual doors, which had been torn open, I took a moment to examine them. I wasn’t an expert, but it looked like they were torn open from the inside, not from something trying to get in. That would’ve been ominous, if I hadn’t killed things able to do so on my way in already.

Entering the first real room, however, I paused, as instead of monsters, laying in wait, there was. . . *snow?* Not quite snow, it was tinted blue, and was laid in hip-high drifts, though a path had been tamped down through the center, heading towards the torn open door, the others still intact.

Using air control, I forced open one of the closed doors, the ‘snow’ being kicked up and slowly drifting down to settle once more. It was filled with more piles of the substance, the door on the far side ripped away.

“Lee, the corners,” Taylor said over the comms, a muttured ‘the fuck?’ coming from the others obviously listening in.

Following her direction, I cast my eyes to the corners of the room, in which hid a fleshy looking mass, the same color as the wall. Closing in on it, I saw bits of the ‘snow’ dripping down from it, the flickers of a power coming from it, too faint for me to get a read on. The more I stared at it, the more the opening the snow was coming from resembled a warped human face, bits dribbling from it’s mouth. There was only one in the room, but moving to the next and looking around careful revealed another in that one, and another in the room after that.

This time, I caught a hint of what the power was, but it was hard to make out.

**S̷̴̴̴̴̷̷̵̶̶̶̶̷̶̷̷̵̴̵̷̷̴̶̶̨̺̳̥̫̪̠̙̰̠̜̰̻̰̰̜̲̖ͤͦ̽ͣ̆͊̅̊ͮ̇ͧ͆̚͜p̴̴̴̷̷̶̵̵̷̴̵̴̴̵̴̴̴̵̶̶̶̶̴̵̴̡̧̧̧̨̦̬̤̙͚̪̩̣̬̙̝̖̻͚͕̩̔̆ͫ̾̂́ͤ̇ͦͅǫ̵̴̵̷̵̴̷̴̴̷̴̶̵̶̶̷̴̶̶̵̵̵̷̴̴̨̢̢̧̢̮̮̯̦̘̫̺͔̱̤̈́̋̍̈̓̍ͣͦ̇ͦ̄ͤ͜ͅͅṙ̵̵̴̶̴̴̵̷̶̴̴̴̴̴̴̵̵̶̵̶̵̴̷̶̶̶̨̛̛̺̼̤̱̘̪̰͔̭̪̻̫̤̥̘͇̌ͤ͛̌ͦ͆̚͜͠͝é̵̷̵̵̷̶̶̶̴̶̴̶̵̶̴̶̷̴̵̵̷̵̴̵̢̳̮̟̺͕̗̟͙͙̠̺̯̘̲̠͛̀͌͂̑͐̾̋ͥ̎͛͘͢͡ͅ P̴̷̶̶̴̴̴̵̷̴̵̴̶̵̵̶̵̶̴̵̷̶̵̶̨̧̢̼̩̲̙̮̱̟̺̻̟̹̝̙͑͐͐̓̂͊̎̏ͫ̇̈́͆͢͢͞ͅŗ̵̴̴̵̵̴̷̴̴̵̶̷̶̶̶̵̴̶̶̵̵̷̶̶̷̢̡̢̡̱̣̦̺͓̬̲̫͔̗͎͕̻͓̤͑̌̒̀ͤ͛͛̽͞͞ͅo̷̵̶̴̷̶̵̴̷̷̶̵̶̷̴̷̵̷̵̴̷̴̴̷̷̴̧̧̪̦̝̜̯̬̦̰̟̗̱̩̠̺̟͇̟͙̤̐ͤͦͬ̃̒́͛ͅd̷̴̴̵̵̷̶̵̶̴̷̵̵̴̷̶̵̴̷̴̷̴̵̶̢̡̝̭̜̹̩̻͎̺̹̗͈̹̲̫̦̮̻̥̜͗͛́̀ͤͦ̈́͋̚͜͝ű̵̷̷̵̵̶̷̶̶̶̴̵̵̴̶̷̷̵̶̴̴̶̴̶̵̜̹̼̤̼̠͇̺̭̖̠͓̦̹̞̮͚̮̇̊͊̏̋̆̀͋͜͞͝ͅc̴̴̵̵̷̶̶̵̵̷̷̴̵̴̴̴̵̴̶̶̵̷̶̷̢̥̳̩̱̩̪̙̠̦͎̠̟̗̲̹̯̹̝̺̫ͫ̅̅͑̓ͫ͗̒ͮ͡͞ț̴̶̷̴̶̶̵̵̵̶̴̶̴̵̶̴̶̶̶̶̵̶̶̷̢̪̹̫̺̰̼̮͔̩̮̘̗̟̦̟̖̝̠̭̺̈̀̇̾̑̊ͮ́͜͞i̶̸̶̴̵̶̵̶̴̵̶̷̵̷̷̷̷̷̶̶̴̵̶̷̷̷̴̡̡̡̻̺̳̻̱̺̹̬̤̟̖̜̘͚͎̩̎̀ͮ͒̍̓͜͜ͅͅo̶̶̴̷̴̶̷̶̵̷̴̵̶̵̴̴̶̵̶̴̷̴̶̶̢̧̨̧̺̦̠̳̪̫̪̱̩̜͔̣̦̤̪͓ͫͥͦ͑̔̇͐̋̒͆͛͝n̵̢̹̲̣̹̤̩̘̙͚̰̤͕̲͙̯̜ͨͮ̋͗ͨ̂ͮ͝͞͝ͅ**̴̷̶̶̴̵̴̴̷̵̶̶̷̵̵̶̶̷̷̷̶̷̷̷̱̖͇

With each one, the flicker of power I Saw started to make more sense.

**S̶̶̶̶̶̴̶̴̷̴̴̴̴̷̷̵̶̶̶̶̨̺̳̥̙̫̪̠̙̰̠̜ͤͦ̽ͣ̆͊̅̊̚͢͜͜p̷̶̴̷̴̵̷̵̵̵̵̴̴̴̵̶̷̵̷̵̢̨̹̭̜̻̩̬̰̦̙̩̻̗̖ͫ͗̌ͮͦ̐̓͠͞ơ̶̶̴̴̴̴̴̷̷̵̴̵̷̵̴̷̵̵̴̶̢̯̪̖̜̗̭̺̻̱̟̮̜̐̇ͫ͗͊ͨ̉̉̂ͅr̷̶̶̷̴̶̶̵̵̵̷̴̴̶̵̴̴̷̵̵̶̢̧̪̻̥̝̜̮͚̫̜͕̞̗̙̰ͨ͛̀̓̓̔͞ě̵̵̴̶̴̴̵̷̶̴̴̴̴̴̴̵̵̶̵̶̵̴̼̤̩̰͔̭̪̻̫̤̥̘͇ͤ͛̌ͦ̅ͩ͆͜ P̷̷̴̷̶̶̴̴̷̶̶̴̵̷̵̵̷̶̶̶̳̮͎̻͙̝̥̟͔̺͕̗̟ͤ̈́͌͊́͛̀͌͂̑͛ṟ̸̴̴̷̵̴̶̵̶̷̴̴̵̶̷̶̷̴̶̶̶̨̢̜̟̬͔̫̘͎͍͍̗̺̪͈̒̓̏̈́̐ͦ̃ǫ̷̶̵̶̷̵̷̴̴̷̶̷̷̵̵̷̵̶̶̶̧̺̺̤͎̙̙͍̮̭͈̮̻̝̎̋̇̋̽́̈̐͝ḓ̷̵̶̷̶̶̶̵̴̶̶̵̵̷̶̶̷̵̵̶̵̨̪̻͓̤̠̜̦̖͔̜̖̔̒̔̃͑̒͘͝͞ͅu̵̴̶̷̵̶̴̷̶̵̴̷̷̶̵̶̷̴̷̵̷̧̧̜̯̬̦̰̟̗̱̩̠̺̟͇̐ͤͦͬ̃̒́͛c̶̴̷̶̶̴̶̶̶̷̵̵̵̶̵̴̷̴̴̵̢̧̥̝̬̖͚͇̤̹͈̫̅̊̃ͤͧ̊͗͛͛͘͝ͅţ̸̶̴̶̶̶̵̶̴̴̶̷̶̴̶̶̵̴̴̷̷̡̳̥̯̯̭͎̠͎̝̦̺̞̙̤̝̈́̔ͤ̇ͬ͡í̵̶̴̴̶̴̶̵̷̵̴̴̷̶̶̷̷̷̵̵̡̧̺̱̰̞̥̻͕̻͍̲̠̤̘̹͙͓̍ͪͤͭ͌o̷̶̶̵̵̷̷̴̵̴̴̴̵̴̶̶̵̷̶̷̡̱̩̩̗̲̹̯̹̝̺̫̙̙̭̬̒ͮ̆ͬ̐͒̏̍n̴̵̴̴̴̢̦̪̹̫̺̮̺̭͔̩̮̘̗̈̀̇̾̑̊ͮ͜͞ͅ**̴̵̶̴̶̷̴̶̶̵̵̵̶̴̶

Then.

**S̶̴̴̴̷̴̷̵̵̷̵̴̨̹̙̯ͤͦ̽ͣṗ̴̶̴̶̴̷̴̴̴̴̷̷̵̰̻̰̏̉͆o̵̴̵̷̷̴̶̶̵̴̵̵̱̳͙̹͓̽͝ͅr̴̷̶̴̷̴̵̷̵̵̵̵̴̡̩̻̗̖̆ͫę̴̴̷̷̶̵̵̷̴̵̴̴̣͚͕̩̊́̽ Ṕ̶̴̵̴̶̶̴̴̴̴̴̷̨̭̺̻̱̈̃r̵̵̴̶̷̵̶̷̵̶̴̴̮̮̭̘͚ͦ̇͛o̷̴̷̴̴̷̴̶̵̶̶̷̴̢̝̜̮͚̫̔d̷̶̵̴̴̷̵̵̶̴̶̷̷̫̭̮͎̗̞͋ṳ̵̶̶̷̵̵̷̶̵̵̵̴̶̱̘̪̌ͦ͝c̴̴̴̴̴̵̵̶̵̶̵̴̢̫͙͈̀̍̎ͅt̶̶̴̵̷̶̷̴̵̷̴̷͔̯̖ͤ̈́͌͊ͅi̶̶̴̴̷̶̶̴̵̷̵̵͙͙̠̽̂̏͛͞o̶̶̵̶̴̶̷̴̵̵̷̵̴̵̡̻̟̯͆͘n̴̴̷̵̴̶̵̶̷̴̴̵̗̺̪͈͑͐͐̓**

Then.

**S̶̴̴̴̨̹̙̯ͤͦ̽ͣp̴̶̴̴̨̫̪̠ͮ̇ͧ͜o̵̴̷̴̴̴̰̜̲̖͂̾r̷̶̷̷̰̯̰̻͇̒ͦ͝ḙ̵̴̵̵̜̠̺̌ͮ͛͆ P̴̷̶̴̷̡̩̻̗̖̆ͫr̴̴̵̶̢̨̩̣̬̙̆ͣọ̶̵̵̷̧̠̜͓ͤ͠͞d̵̶̶̶̛̪̖̜̗̉̉̂ú̴̴̴̷̱̱͇̝̞̏̈c̵̵̴̶̮̮̭̘͚ͦ̇͛t̵̴̶̵̨̢̢̪̻ͨ͛ͅï̷̴̶̵̯̫̜͕̞̗ͤo̸̵̷̴̴̲͍̬̭͂͘̚ṅ̵̴̶̷̷̛͙̪̣̹̚**

Before finally, I could understand it, to my horror.

**Spore Production**

“*Zilla. Initiate Biohazard Protocols!*” I snapped, understanding what I was flying over. This wasn’t snow, it was *spores.* Room upon room upon room of them. *This* was why nuking had made people start to mutate. Whatever was here had pulled a Nilbog, a ‘fuck you’ move if it were attacked that would result in Mutually Assured Destruction. A trap they hadn’t even known existed.

I suddenly became *very* aware of the integrity of the structure I was in. If I collapsed it, like I had with the Deep Ones, then I’d be spreading these things across Brockton Bay, possibly further, depending on the wind patterns. Focusing upwards, coordinating with the insects above me to get a sense of distance, I activated Metal Creation, which had only just replenished itself, and tapped it to make a metallic cover, rooted to the bedrock, over this entire place, rising up out of the streets to try to protect everyone if the worst happened.

I could do so, barely, the limitations of the power meaning it was riddled with weak-points, as it couldn’t grow *through* things unless I wanted to break them apart first, which would send skyscrapers tumbling down on top of me, the exact *opposite* of what I wanted.

“-at is it, Lee?” I heard Taylor ask, and I sighed.

“Spores. These are all spores, and those thing might’ve once been people.” The fact that they were all identical suggested they might’ve just been shaped biomass, but whatever this was could transform people without killing them, so. “This might’ve been the reason the Red Zone was so dangerous. One of them,” I amended, thinking of the spatially warped street.

I paused, as something was tickling my Arthropod Control, something from deep below me. A *lot* of things. Focusing downwards, there were enormous insects, all identical, my power giving me a null error when it tried to tell me what they were, listing capabilities instead.

*Five feet tall, flight capable, electricity generation, what the fuck?* I thought, settling deeper into one of them. Nothing had attacked me up here, likely waiting for the Spores to take me down, and I’d sealed the entrance, so I could take my time. Assuming direct control of one of them, I was in a large room a hundred and twenty feet down, in which waited a large variety of monsters, the dim light given off by the creatures themselves more than enough to see by, the compound eyes giving me the odd types of detail and field of view they always did.

The walls down here were fleshy, pulsing slightly, as if in time to an enormous heartbeat, as creatures of all different types milled about. Brutes and Blade-Cats, like I’d seen before were present, but a vast array of others. A thin looking humanoid, it’s arms alight with flames, floated by, small jets from each limb and it’s back keeping it aloft. A squat shape with eight thick legs shifted in the corner, the same quills that’d been shot at me earlier arranged on its back. Something that seemed to be blurred, it’s humanoid shape indistinct, waited, before turning to look at the insect I was controlling.

Movement in the room stopped, as the others looked at me, or the lightning-bug I controlled. I stared back, trying to see as much as I could, electricity arcing from my back and shoulders, down my long, chitinous arms to better highlight them.

A metallic bird-man, feathers like blades, with long talons that glowed neon yellow.

A small fleshy scorpion, camouflaged against the walls and the bodies of the others, its stinger translucent and full of dark-grey sludge.

A woman with blue skin but no mouth, hands black with frostbite, fingertips glowing the same blue as the beam that had hit me.

And many, many more. One of them, a fat man covered in eyes stepped forward, staring into my own compound orbs with every on his. A thought entered the mind that wasn’t mine, before reaching across the connection.

***Submit. Unify. Join.***

Part of me wanted to do so, my insectile body starting to walk forward, but the rest of me, the me that was me, rebelled. *I had* ***not*** *worked so* ***fucking hard****, gone through so* ***fucking much*** *to stop now!*

The me that was it wanted to give in, but it wasn’t in control, *I was.* My power let me know everything it could do, including Its holdout move. One that would kill it, but neutralize an enemy for the good of the *Hive-Collective-Unity.*

It went against everything I/it believed, but doing so would protect *my* people, and it could go fuck itself. Starting the power up, the bloated mound of eyes redoubled its attention, but that just pissed me off more.

Reaching out to the other Lightning-Bugs in range, I ordered them to start powering up as well, but they resisted, they rebelled. *Oh, so* ***I*** *need to submit but* ***you*** *don’t?* part of me raged, and I assumed direct control of them as well. I couldn’t do so for all of them, or even half, but over several dozen buckled to my will, starting the process.

My second self, the one being Mastered, was almost ready, and the Eye Tyrant stepped closer, opening its arms wide to full my vision with its controlling orbs. *Cute.* I made the bug buzz in amusement, and opened my own arms wide in return. *How ‘bout a hug?*

The Master monster tried to step back, but I latched onto it, just like this creature was designed to, and set itself off. Unlike lightning, which was high voltage, but low amperage, this was the opposite, meant to do the maximum amount of damage with the little energy it had available to itself. While I couldn’t see the results, that me dying as I did so, the ground shuddered slightly.

Every other me that existed down on those lower levels buzzed with amusement, even as the others around those me’s froze, before rushing me all at once. One of those me’s died, a flame-blast to the head, combined with a cold blast to my thorax, breaking something important. The others though?

I buzzed with dark amusement as I exploded over and over again, taking out dozens, hundreds of monsters with me. As I reached for the others in range, assuming direct control, starting the process once again, they were rushed en-masse. A few survived long enough to detonate, but most of those me’s died before they could, detonating prematurely and only taking out a few with them.

As I reached out for a third set, they died before a connection could be made, the monsters below me turning on their insectile brethren before I could co-opt them.

“-ou okay?” asked Karen, as I pulled out of that power, letting it return to the back of my mind.

“Sorry, focusing,” I said, smiling. “Some of the monsters down there are insectile. *Were* insectile,” I corrected. “I made enough of them suicide killing the others that there’s a purge now. Unfortunately, it was just the one type, as the scorpions didn’t count, for some reason.”

“Scorpions?” Taylor asked, and I described what I saw. “Are you sure you have to do this?”

My good mood faded as I realized that I’d need to go down there myself, having seen dozens upon dozens of identical copies of those monsters through the Lighting-bugs’ eyes before they’d died. Some of them, like the Fire-Wraith, and the Yuki-Onna I could likely ignore, mentally pegging the things I’d seen down there. The others? They would not be so easily dispatched.

I flew on, following the tamped-down path of spores to a set of stairs leading downwards. With what I’d seen down there, the PD wasn’t ready for this. *No one* was. That meant it was up to me, as every ally that I could call upon had here had left me on my own, and those that wanted to help would only be a liability. Powers were odd, and there was a good chance that, diverse as my set was, there was something that’d counter my own. With any luck, I’d be able to adapt, just like the Entities wanted, and overcome. If not. . . then at least I’d try.

I laughed a little, bitterly. I’d expected my meddling to have killed everyone on Golden Mourning, not a month and a half after I showed up. That was good intentions for you. “I still do,” I told Taylor, and likely the rest of the PD. “Because no one else can, or will, do what’s necessary.”