**Consolidation 17.4**

It was times like this that I wondered if I could go a week without something happening.

I knew I’d picked, what felt like years ago, the ‘plot relevant’ perk from that stupid CYOA, that’d let me be in a position to help, a position to make a difference, and now I knew exactly what kind of trap that’d been.

“I’m sorry, come again?” I asked Quinn, as the team had been called in for another meeting. After the Spy debacle, I made sure that the teams showed up in person, if only to let me Check them to see if they were really themselves, but it also helped drag everyone out of their respective hidey-holes.

Vicky, who had been avoiding me, was sitting off to the side, Dean between us. She hadn’t talked to me since the meeting with New Wave, but she hadn’t tried to talk me out of my declaration either. If she wanted to avoid the issue, I was alright with that.

I was still going to kill her mother if we crossed paths again.

Amelia, ironically, had, when I’d made sure to warn her so she didn’t hear it from someone else, had just frowned, deep in thought. “Do you want my help?” she’d finally asked, obviously dreading my answer, but having had the spine to ask nonetheless.

I’d shaken my head. “No. I’m not seeking her out. I’m just not giving her another chance, and there can no longer be peace between us.”

“. . . okay,” the biokinetic had nodded sighing. “Just. . . make it quick.”

“I will,” I’d promised. “I’m not doing this to punish her, I’m removing a threat if it presents itself.”

She’d accepted that, and, if the others had had a problem with it, they hadn’t talked to me. Or they hadn’t heard, though, given that Quinn was there, that was doubtful.

As for my lawyer, he’d only asked me if I was firm in this, and reminded me that pre-meditated murder was a crime under US law. I’d told him I was sure, and he’d accepted it.

And now, three days later, something else had happened. “I believe I was clear,” Overwatch informed me. “Fallen, in large numbers, have started to move into the southern section of the city. Mostly the areas the Merchants once held, before they were. . . forcefully removed.”

“Plants hate hoovers,” Herb nodded sagely.

“Okay, first of all, it’s ‘Nature hates a vacuum’,” I corrected, which, from his smile, Herb knew that, but *the others might not.* “Second of all, that’s *so* not applicable here it isn’t even funny. Yes, *eventually,* if we didn’t take that area over someone else would move in, but it’s, first of all, been a *less than a fortnight,* second of all, *still covered in anomalies*, third of all, it’s *been less than two weeks,* and *fourth*, some of those places are *covered in bloodstains and bit of rotting bodies.*” I’d done the first pass, grabbing and burning the corpses, but a deep cleaning would take time, and a lot of insects, some of whom *preferred* their food to. . . age, so I’d put it off until later.

“Um,” Mouse started to point out.

I rolled my eyes, “Yes, I know I said the week thing twice, because *that’s my point.* So, we’ve got cultists. Because of course we do. Please go on.”

Quinn did so, detailing the likely locations of their main bases, the approximate numbers, as well as the known members that had been spotted. There were at least a dozen, the only one I remembered being Valefor, but I didn’t have the best memory of any of the others, that plot line picked up and moved so quickly that, like the composition of the Teeth, or Accord’s Ambassador’s, it didn’t really stick, as character were rapidly introduced, only to be killed/leave never to be seen again.

“And they see the various anomalies as miracles, wrought by the Endbringers themselves. At least, according to their newsletter,” he finished.

“But, they’re powers,” Taylor argued, looking to me for confirmation.

I nodded, “And Tinkertech, but mostly powers.”

“Clearly, neither of you have had to deal with religious fundamentalists,” the lawyer observed dryly.

“What do we do?” Herb asked, after a moment, when no one said anything.

I raised an eyebrow, as the answer was obvious. “Why don’t we just kill them all?”

The room erupted into objections, everyone talking over each other, about how that was extreme and we should try something else first, about how they didn’t deserve it, about how doing so was too risky, and others. It was telling, however, that all the objections were blanket statements, bereft of reasoning, and even more telling as to whom had what complaints.

Mouse said it was extreme, and how doing so was dangerous. She didn’t say they didn’t deserve it. She likely knew exactly what the Fallen had done.

Panacea said they didn’t deserve it, and that it was extreme, but not that it was too risky. Her faith in me was rather nice, and, given that I was done holding back, not misplaced. Vejovis wouldn’t be killing them, after all, *I* would be, and there would be no survivors to give away what had happened. At least, none that saw enough to make a meaningful report.

Kayden said it was too risky, and they didn’t deserve it. Not that we should do something else first. She didn’t even offer a single suggestion. Just *‘not that’*. Once again, I was reminded that she was only here because my friend had a crush on her.

Herb said all three. He either didn’t know better, or was just throwing everything he could to stop me. Neither of which were good.

Taylor remained silent.

Looking to her, I grabbed a scribe swarm, and spelled ~No objections?~ as the others talked over each other.

She, gently taking control of them spelled, ~I trust you.~ then ~Need help?~

I considered that, before shaking my head, which she accepted.

“Well?” Kayden demanded, when it became clear I wasn’t paying attention, the others quieting.

“Well what? I asked mildly.

“Were you even listening?” she demanded in turn.

I looked around, “Oh, you mean to this?” Tapping my gauntlet, I used Acoustokinesis to play back the furor from a moment ago, only faster, so it all ran together, dampening it around Taylor as the others all flinched. “Because all I heard was a lot of *emotion*, and a lot of *dictating,* and very little *arguments.*”

“That’s not fair,” Victoria objected. “We have reasons!”

“Then *present them,*” I replied, opening my arms to indicate the wide field of their positions, completely unpopulated by facts. “And maybe, someone *other than me,* can say why you’re *wrong.* *For once.*”

Finding herself on the spot, she did rally, and while her Aura did fluctuate for a moment, she got it under control so I didn’t comment on it. “Um, well, they haven’t done anything to us yet.”

I waved a hand around, indicating that I wasn’t the only one here who could talk, “Anyone want to field this one?”

Surprisingly, it was Kayden who picked up the metaphorical gauntlet. “They’re in our,” she paused, looking at me, “territory.” I nodded, not objecting to the term, and she continued. “We’ve been here since Leviathan attacked. We’ve defended it. They might not think we claim it because Vejovis is a hero, but Bell Tolls might. And someone or something, cleared out the Merchants.”

Sherrel, who had remained quiet, winced at that, but didn’t say anything. She’d been happy I’d made it quick, but, as people that leave gangs, cults, and other similar organizations, had made a hard break of it, at times almost angry at those who still were part of the group she’d left. Would she have preferred that I helped the others? Yes. Had she understood that part of the reason I’d freely offered her help was because she, herself, had taken the first steps to get better on her own? Also yes. Did she blame me for not doing so for the others that wouldn’t even take the first step? As far as I could tell, *no.*

The fact that she’d been able to walk away had, in many ways, reinforced my own reasons. That she hated who she’d been when she was addicted had been another point in my favor. That I’d been willing to work *with* them, trying to help take down a greater threat, instead of hating them merely for existing, had been a third. That it was only after they tried to force me to kill everyone, including her, that I finally moved, had clinched it.

“The Fallen believe it was ‘the servants of the servants of the end’,” Quinn chimed in. “That the anomalies serve the Endbringers, and cleared out the ‘unclean’.”

Mouse chuckled, though she looked pained. “That’s a pretty good way to describe that gang. And it’s easier to believe that one of the monsters did it, ‘stead of Vejovis. ‘Less you actually know how hardcore he can get.”

“Yo, can we get that Newsletter?” Herb asked, and Overwatch nodded, sending it to everyone’s computers.

There were a few minutes of silence as everyone looked them over. It was. . . an odd mix of church functions, apocalyptic ravings, and top-down directions. “What does it mean to ‘capture the blessed led astray if possible, to bring them to the light’?” Taylor questioned.

Dean answered. “We were briefed on them when they were spotted around here. They think parahumans are blessed with the powers of the Endbringers, but most are heretics. They want to ‘spread the blessing’, by making anyone with power have kids. Even if they don’t want to. We were warned not to let Vista, Stalker, or Flow out alone.”

“Vista’s *twelve,*” I had to point out.

Dean just nodded, correcting, “Thirteen, actually.”

Herb, grimacing, nodded. “Yeah, nevermind. We shouldn’t kill ‘em, but we should get ‘em out of our city.”

“They also say they’re going to kill us all,” Taylor noted. “Page four, halfway down. They talk about ‘reclaiming’ the ‘site of the Leviathan’s greatness’, but on page six they refer to the whole city as that. They’re kinda clear on how only ‘believers’ should be allowed to visit the ‘sacred ground’.”

“Oh,” I nodded, understanding. “They’re trying to turn it into Fallen Mecca.” Herb nodded, but the others just looked at me, confused. *Right,* I thought. *Superpowers means no 9/11, America’s Middle-Eastern involvement went bad when Desert Storm hit superpowered Iraqi Soldiers.*

Officially, Superpowers were banned from warfare. Realistically, everyone still used them, but pretended they didn’t, and proving they did would lead to mostly meaningless sanctions from the UN. While most Capes could still be shot, blown up, etc, the nature of Powers meant that any kind of fortified position didn’t last long without superpowered support themselves. But, without that culture-shifting event, and with several of others that happened within America’s (and Canada’s) borders, most people barely knew about the third major Abrahamic religion, only familiar with Christianity and Judaism.

“A holy city that only they are allowed to visit,” I explained, “Only you won’t get whipped and deported, you’ll likely be killed or enslaved if they catch you. So, Victoria, still think they’ve done nothing?”

“Well, they haven’t done anything to *us,*” she tried to argue.

I folded my arms. “Then if you think they’re so harmless, why don’t you go talk to them?” I asked rhetorically. She didn’t say anything else. “So, next objection?”

“It’s too dangerous,” Karen stated. “You might’ve been able to turn your nose up at the Merchant Master’s parmesan, but Valefor just has to see you.”

“Vejovis won’t be the one that does it, will he?” Panacea asked in turn, looking to me.

Shaking my head, I agreed, “No, it’d be Boardwalk. Or one of his friends. They won’t see it coming, and they won’t escape.” I’d take out the Capes, but some of the lower level members I could put aside, and get the location of their nearest base from. The ones outside of Brockton Bay. *Vejovis* couldn’t leave, but no one said Boardwalk couldn’t sneak in, save the slaves, and then momentarily turn night into day as I let out all the Light I had out in one long, continuous blast that’d leave nothing but pulverized dust behind.

“We should do something else,” Kayden insisted. “Something other than killing them. The PRT will-”

“The PRT will do *nothing,* Purity,” I interrupted, anger suddenly flaring. Even having been attacked by them, having them prove to be nothing more than another honorless bunch of bastards, they were still being used to try to bind my actions. “They abandoned this city, as did almost everyone else. Did you miss the memo? And if I’m not expecting ‘we’ to do anything, I’m expecting *I* need to, along with the ones willing to do more than play defense. But go ahead, what should ‘we’ do, knowing that, if you make a suggestion, I expect *you* to be a part of it.”

With that declaration, suddenly the ‘we should do something else’ argument lost its appeal. However, I knew that coming up with a plan took *time* if one wanted to do it well, even my own ‘kill them all’ plan just being the start, and requiring more effort. The difference is I *knew* I was willing to put in the effort.

“Maybe we could fight them?” Vicky put forward. “Show them if they stay here, we’re not going to let them?”

It was Dean who shot that down. “And when Valefor Masters one of us? If Vejovis is correct, I won’t be, and I can remove Mastering-”

“You can!?” Mouse sat up straight, looking to me for confirmation.

Seeing his power to confirm it, I nodded. “Not all of them, but any that requires an ongoing effect. Ones that permanently alter someone’s physiology wouldn’t be undone, but I might be able to fix. That’s a big if on my part though, as I don’t know if it’ll revert things to where they were, or just set it to. . . not the state that the person had been forced into.”

“That’s. . .” she trailed off, shaking her head. “Vej. I. You. Do you know how *big* that is?” I shook my head. It was a useful tool, but by means a certainty. Karen looked over to Dean, “And the PRT let you *go?*”

“I didn’t tell them I could,” the teen said simply. “It happened when I was working with Vejovis on possible new powers. They put me in Master/Stranger when I showed them something I came up with myself.” He waved a hand, releasing a blue mist, and several of the others stiffened, looking to me, but relaxing a little when I just rolled my eyes.

It spread out, disappearing, and I felt a fraction more calm, and also a fraction more annoyed with the Master. “Dean, what’ve I said about *Mastering my people*?”

He winced, “Sorry. I thought it would be good to show, and, maybe a bit better if everyone calmed down a little.” I stared at him. “Sorry.” he apologized again, waving his hand and releasing a different mist, blacker than black, to the point it was almost a new color itself, which also dissipated, the artificial calmness dissipating, though my annoyance only increased. “But, yeah, I can. And yeah, I didn’t”

Karen turned back to me. “Vejovis, *Lee*, this is. . . I know it won’t work on Ziz-bombs, but-”

“Why wouldn’t it?” I asked. “She works through Precog, which I’m immune to.”

There was silence. “What?” It was Kayden who asked.

“Yeah. Otherwise I’d be using Deja’s power constantly. She’s a precog over at Bell Tolls. She can let someone experience the next twenty-four hours as a precognitive vision. But when she does so, she instead gives the person a vision where myself, and the other Blindspots that are out there, don’t exist. It’s also why Theo can’t account for me. Oh, do you have a Cape name yet, by the way?” I asked.

His power flickered, as he gave himself time to think, before suggesting. “Ballistic?”

I shook my head, “He’s one of the Travellers. Villain, and a less known one, but one we might end up fighting. Any others?”

“Boresight?” he threw out, after another flicker.

“If you want to give away you’re a precog, sure, if you want to keep that a secret, making a ‘foresight’ pun is not what you want,” I pointed out.

Again, he used his power to think. He finally suggested, “Gauge?”

I nodded. “Obviously gun related, but with references to your precog in a way you can explain it away. Is it taken?”

“It isn’t,” he assured me. “Overwatch checked. There was a hero who used it, but he was an independent that died in the nineties after less than a year.”

“He’s correct,” Quinn confirmed.

“Welcome aboard, Gauge,” I smiled. “Now, what were we talking about.”

*“Defusing Ziz-bombs*,” Karen insisted.

“Oh, right, that,” I nodded. “Yes. Yes we can. Probably. It depends on the specifics of how she works, but, as far as she’s aware, I don’t exist, so any plan she makes I can disrupt. Depends how tight they are, and how far my reach extends.” Thinking about it, I chuckled, “I’ve probably upset the apple-cart pretty badly. I’m alright with that.”

Quinn sighed, “And you didn’t think to inform me of this?”

“But I did,” I replied. “I know I did.”

“There is a great deal of difference between being immune to the Simurgh’s sight, and being able to negate her power on others,” he pointed out.

Frowning, I said, “But they’re the same thing. I mean, sort of. She implants triggers, that, at points in the future she sees, activate. If you aren’t at the right place at the right time, they don’t. I can’t get rid of the triggers, but Gallant might.”

“That is one theory,” Victoria agreed, “But no one knows how it works.”

“He’s probably right,” Taylor spoke up, knowing of my full ability set.

“How could he?” Glory Girl shot back. “Unless, is this one of those future things?”

I nodded, “Yes and no, but, yeah. If she’s *really* smart with her power, we might not be able to fully defuse them, but we can knock them off their main path, so whatever blowup they have will be smaller.”

“I’ll put the word out,” Quinn nodded.

That made me pause. “Is that wise?”

“You do not understand the amount of good will this will gain us,” he stated. “There have been others that have claimed to be able to remove Mastering, but they have been shown to just be Mastering their ‘patients’. To have a true way to remove it. . .”

“There *must* have been,” I started to argue, then paused, as I remembered the twin Tyrants of Simurgh and Contessa, both pulling on the strings of the world to shape it in their desired vision, both able to snipe any possible threat, sighting in on them with precognition long before they reached public prominence. “Ah. Right. That. . . makes sense. Ziz would probably go out of her way to kill them, but,” I nodded to Dean, “Living as you are by several active Blindspots, she can’t target you. And I’d laugh if she tried to come here herself.”

Victoria spoke up, “Wait, if you could cure Mastering, then the Merchants-”

“A, *wanted* to be there. B, would’ve fought us every step of the way. C, would only have my power to help, as Gallant wasn’t with us, and *D*, weren’t worth my time to save,” I rattled off. Sherrel nodded in sad agreement, taking the wind out of Glory Girl’s sails. “If we can rescue any of the Fallen’s ‘Breeding Stock’, it’d be worth it to save *them,* but the rank and file that’ve invaded our territory are almost certainly not puppetted, mind-controlled minions. Valefor might be leading them, but unless he’s *far* more powerful than I’ve been led to believe, they aren’t all dancing to his precise tune.”

I stood. “But, you know what, I know I’m not perfect. I’ll wait three days, checking with Aeonic every morning to see if they will make a move. If they do, I’ll pre-empt their attack like I should’ve with the Merchants, and clear them from the board. If they stay calm, we’ll convene in three days to see if anyone can convince me of a better option. Thank you, as always, Overwatch for the work you do reporting on this, but I don’t believe there’s anything else to say today. I believe I’ll go assist Dryad in constructing another building.”

<AB>

It was that evening, as I sat on a rooftop, a Dryad body below adding all of the finicky bits to a two story restaurant, above which was office space. The artistic designs, this one a flowing, water like pattern, were fairly easy to make, if repetitive. From the distance, insects spotted something humanoid quickly moving through the city at close to forty miles per hour, but coming through the Green Zone. Before I could do more than form a protective air-shell, heart starting to pick up as I got ready to fight, Taylor entered my range, revealing herself to be the interloper

She, noticing me, bounced off a wall, cratering it slightly and landing on a roof, cracking the concrete. Both buildings on the ‘to be demolished’ list, so the damage was inconsequential. Running along, I could tell she was still getting used to the speed, her foot catching on a ledge. The ledge exploded outwards under the force, but sent her tumbling.

Armored as she was, I let her fall, too see what she’d do. I could sense the moment of *surprise-panic-embarrassment* she felt, before she twisted, mid air, clawed gauntlets out as she fell into an alley, dragging across the building and digging it, slowing her until she hung onto it, a bit like a spider.

Climbing her way up, movements still insectile, she reached the next roof, and, more carefully, made her way over to me. However, as she closed, I realized I could feel a second presence merged with hers, and under her tight control. It was only when she landed next to me, and I connected the odd insects movements, and structure, with her appearance and realized what it was.

*It was her armor.*

“Hey,” she greeted, carefully coming over and moving to take a seat on the ledge next to me.

“Hey yourself,” I replied, smiling, forcing myself to calm down. Seeing her, she *was* Taylor, and, letting her in, I maintained the shell around us. Focusing on her, I commanded the Dryad Golem to walk inside and ‘inspect’ the building, to be doing something while I talked. A couple of the Dockworkers always showed up to these things, and, while I didn’t mind, I needed to sell the ‘not a puppet’ aspect. Something that Golem Creation really helped with.

They weren’t exactly *intelligent*, but they were *aware.* I knew it was my Shard puppetting them, and I *could* kind of ‘Assume Direct Control’, minus the lightshow, but they could respond to others. I had no idea what they were *saying*, mind you, the power unfortunately nothing close to the cheat that were Shadow Clones, and anything important they all had orders to have the other person pass along, as they couldn’t.

“So, I was thinking. . .” Taylor trailed off, and I looked over at her, or rather the featureless, chitinous helmet that covered her face. I could feel her tweak it, as the helmet seemed to fracture and blossom, in some ways like a mouth opening, revealing her face.

*Note to self, work with Panacea to make that less disturbing,* I thought. Having it open was a good idea, but a halfway stage would be good, as would making it less like, well, a flesh flower, would also be a good idea.

“It might be better not to kill them all,” my teammate suggested. “The capes, yes, but the others. If they know they’ll be killed, they won’t send more.”

“Or they might, seeing us kill them, decide to attack us directly before moving in again,” I countered. “We’re fighting a large organization here. If they just disappear, they might blame it on the anomalies.”

She shot me a skeptical look. “Would they?”

That. . . was a good point. “They *might*. That’s why I want to grab a couple, find there base, and send ‘Boardwalk’ over to pay them a visit at *their* home.”

“If they’re fanatics, they probably won’t talk,” she disagreed. “And we *could* use Canary to make them talk, but I know you wouldn’t want that. However, if you remove their heavy hitters, and bug them, you could follow them to their bosses.”

“LB, even if we get Panacea’s range extenders up, which she’s still iffy about making the last time I talked to her, they’re probably going to end up going out of *state,*” I pointed out. “It’s a sensor grid issue, where they can, and probably will, go in a straight line while we have to be prepared for them going in *any* direction. I mean, probably not east, ‘cause *ocean*, but it’ll-”

“No,” she disagreed, shaking her head. “I didn’t mean we use actual bugs. I mean, I was thinking we could use bugs to get the bugs in place, I meant we could plant trackers on them. I talked to Overwatch, and he already has some, though he can make a hundred in about an hour, though they’ll only last for a couple weeks.”

“That. . . could work. And he can make them that fast?” I asked incredulously.

She nodded, smiling. “He can tinker through robots he takes over, so he can mass produce them, but he can’t do it automatically. He still needs to be actively doing it, and not focusing on anything else, though.”

“Secondary Tinker powers,” I nodded. “The transmutational effects probably don’t kick in if he’s not ‘there’ mentally.”

“Speaking of not there,” she said, looking at the building. She went silent, and, reaching for her mentally, I could feel her *worry-concern-hope*. “When’s the last time you did something for fun?” she finally asked, and I shot her a questioning look, not understanding, and waved towards the building I was making.

“I rather enjoy building these things,” I felt compelled to point out.

“I know,” she agreed, “Not like that. Or exploring the Zones. Just. . . it’s you haven’t come to the last five to a movie nights,” she observed.

I blinked, having put them off while I’d been working on other things. “I’ve been busy,” I shrugged.

“Well, you don’t need to be,” she asserted. “Did Deja warn you something was coming before tomorrow?” I shook my head. “Is there anything else coming?”

“Not that I know of. The next Endbringer attack isn’t for another month, at least, and while the Slaughterhouse Nine *will* come for Herb and I, they should’ve been here by now, and while it’s a certainty, it could be tomorrow, it could be next year,” I stated. “Hell, my saving Mouse might’ve counted, if only for me. I don’t know the mechanics of it all.”

She digested that. “Is there anything you could do to prepare that you haven’t already?” she questioned.

I thought about it. Overwatch was setting up a sensor net, as was Taylor, in her own way. The city, broken and destroyed as it was, would deny them the kind of cover they used to sneak around. I had powers to train, but, in a straight fight, I’d likely kill them all, which meant it *wasn’t* going to be a straight fight, if Jack Slash’s secondary power could help him ‘hear’ me, which I was pretty sure it could, given how he’d run from me.

“No,” I said. “When the city gets more populated, when there’s enough people around that they can hide in the masses, they’ll probably come, but that’s weeks away, and other than get better, I don’t see what I can do. All right, I’ll make sure to come to the next movie night. Um, when is that?” I asked, having lost track.

“Tuesdays and Fridays,” she said, and I nodded, trying not to be obvious as I reached for my phone. “Did you forget what day it is?”

“. . . yes.”

“It’s Sunday,” she informed me, leaning over and bumping me with an armored shoulder as we both looked at the newly formed shell. “So, how ‘bout we do our own movie night?”

I hesitated, but her feeling of *hope-worry-concern* was so blatant, I just sighed. “Fine. But no Rom-coms. And nothing with Torture.”

“How about regular Horror?” she asked, not suppressing the *happiness-excitement-victory* she felt in the slightest, though there was a moment of *sadness-concern-determination* at my second stipulation.

“Only if you’re okay with me making fun of the idiot protagonists,” I warned. She was right, I had been focused on hero-related tasks. And, unable to hide her feelings from me as she was, I, at least, could trust *her* to, if not be completely honest, be honest with her emotions, in a way that almost no one else I knew was.

She just laughed, “What do you think *I’ll* be doing?”