**Reconstruction 15.9**

“Are they all gonna be like that?” Vista asked, trying to sound calm, but her eyes firmly rooted on the corpse of the flower monster behind me.

I shook my head, “No, something that active isn’t usually out here in the Green Zone. Though, given the fact it could apparently walk, it might’ve come from the Yellow. Actually it was pretty harmless, all things considered.”

“Harmless?” Miss Militia echoed, giving the mass of tendrils and teeth a significant look.

“Harmless,” I reiterated. “It didn’t attack until we messed with it, didn’t have any special powers, and was easy enough to kill just by hitting it a lot. No special rules, it was just the one, and it didn’t even bother us until we ripped off it’s metaphorical rock.”

At their continued disbelieving looks, I realized my mistake. “Look, the goo guy is *literally* the safest one I’ve come across that still reacted to people. That,” I jerked a thumb behind me, to the giant flower, “is more like what you’ll find, though, again, usually that’s more of a Yellow Zone thing. Safe if you know what you’re doing, moderately dangerous if you start messing around blindly.”

I floated up to the ‘console’ of the Skiff as Hannah shot Karen a questioning glance, and received a nod in return, confirming my claims yet again. As we took off, Kid Win, who’d put himself near the ‘driver’s seat’, asked. “How are you controlling this? The screen’s just a piece of metal.”

“It is to *you,*” I countered, tapping my domino mask with my left hand while the right tapped the ‘controls’, which wasn’t *exactly* a lie.

He considered it, before nodding, grinning behind his visor. “A two-step interface. That’s brilliant!”

“I didn’t come up with it,” I shrugged, having ‘borrowed’ the idea from Taylor when she’d suggested I use that as my excuse.

Battery spoke next. “What are you going to do with the samples?”

I shrugged again, “Have Panacea take a look at them. She can figure out how it worked, even if she can’t do anything else to it. That might tell us more about what it was, how it warped space, and, if there’s more, how to deal with them easier.”

“There might be more?” Clockblocker asked, a little nervously. I shrugged a third time. “Stop shrugging! I thought you were supposed to be the expert!”

I looked over to him. “You have more experience with your power than anyone else,” I countered. “Do you know how it works?”

“Yeah, I touch stuff and it stops moving, what’s your point?” he asked.

I shook my head, “Not what you do, but *how* it works? Do you stop things in time, like you named yourself, or are they put in stasis, and that was a distraction? Are they popped to another dimension, and the after-image is left as a place-holder? Why is the duration variable? Can you control it? I’ve been handling something with *hundreds* of powers, and I’d never seen another one of *those* things, so it *might* be the only one, or it *might* be one of a dozen, or there *might* be something deeper in that’s creating them, I already dealt with two of those kinds of things, which means there might be more. I *don’t know,* which is the point of this entire thing, as *neither do you.”* I gave those gathered a look to impress the fact that I wasn’t just talking to Dennis. “But, we’re at the next one, I’ll descend, however *don’t* go inside until I tell you to.”

We’d been in what had once been the South Imperial district, but were now in the Industrial area, the southeastern end of which was firmly in the Yellow Zone. Putting down in a small, partially destroyed factory’s parking area, a few dozen feet away from wrecked semis, the area was quiet and still. That said, from the broken windows of the nearby building, a light cyan glow could be spotted.

Tapping into the bugs I’d set to rest within out, I examined them through my power, trying to see if they were any different. Taylor’s ability to intrinsically understand the state and capabilities of the insects she controlled was *very* useful here, allowing me perfect, subtle, and most of all, *disposable* test subjects. It wouldn’t test for things that were mammal, or even person specific, but those were likely to be few and far between, other than Master/Stranger effects.

It was one area in which Charlie’s method of exploration lacked, as anything that had a long-term effect would be overlooked, those exposed not *having* a long-term in which to be affected. However, between my own limited regenerative abilities, and Panacea’s ability to just fix things with a touch, that wasn’t an issue. But *that* meant that, unless there was a *damn* good reason, I was never going to take Panacea in the field to clear new anomalies, as with her down all we’d have left is for me to try to loan out my Peak Condition and hope for the best.

It was a thorny issue, and one for which the thorns, invisible as they were, might not even exist for, but, as I’d said before, *I didn’t know if they didn’t*. However, the bugs seemed exactly as I’d left them. A few were missing, but there wasn’t a pattern to them, like the ones closest or the ones on one side of the anomaly, so they were probably just eaten by something, unable to run with the orders to stay in place still present in their tiny, tiny brains.

Regardless, *this* anomaly had been checked, and was most likely safe, so I floated off the Skiff, the others already having spread out a little, and headed for the shipping door. Breaking the lock with a flick of my wrist, the crack of metal got everyone’s attention, and they watched as I lifted it, revealing the open space, and the anomaly within.

A crystal spire, the color of a clear sky, grew inside, up from, and partially encasing, the pile of rubble that used to be the far wall. With the ceiling collapsed, it had been easy to miss, but with Æonic’s people walking a patrol they’d spotted it easily.

From the main crystal, smaller ones grew, and then even smaller ones had started to sprout, seemingly from nowhere. It was *this* part that had caused me to worry, but there was nothing inside the insects, nor did the Crystal’s anomalous effects either affect them outside of its range, nor did they suddenly become immune to it.

Using the chalk, I sketched out a line a good ten feet away from even the small crystals. “Come on, just don’t go past there,” I called, watching as the others approached. It was within the first layer of effect, but the effects were subtle, and I looked to see who would notice.

Mouse had been warned, so her blase attitude to it was expected. Dean and Missy noticed, which I expected, as did Assault, Velocity, and Miss Militia, but other than the Flame Sculptor, who I still didn’t have a name for, No one else seemed to. The speedster waved his hand back and forth, blurring slightly as he sped up his own personal time, before returning to normal, dropping to his knees, and gasping for air.

That I *hadn’t* expected, but I knew moving to him right now might not be taken that well, so I just raised an eyebrow. “*Couldn’t breathe,”* he coughed, and I understood. *That* effect didn’t happen until you got *right* next to the main crystal, but, with his sped up time, which came with it a limited ability to effect the world, it’d interacted badly with the anomaly.

“That makes sense,” I observed, with a not entirely faked grimace. “Sorry, I didn’t think Super Speed would result in that. It must work differently than I first thought. But, say you’re patrolling the Green Zone, or being sent to investigate, and you come across this thing. What do you do?” I asked the group.

“Leave it alone?” Missy instantly suggested, looking at the crystal like it might pop up to be a really elaborate hermit crab, or something. Then again, given what just happened, that wasn’t exactly irrational.

I hesitated, before nodding, “Okay, *yes.* It’s not apparently active, it’s not seeming to move, and unless you have a reason to look closer without backup, you shouldn’t poke it alone. I tend to, but that’s because I’m a Brute with low level, but fairly useful, Mover and Master powers.” I called the dozen insects I’d used as test dummies over, and there wasn’t anything visually off them as well, which was good, and made them all swirl over my outstretched palm for emphasis. “But if you were doing more than that, what would you do?”

“Shoot it? Hey!” Kid Win yelled as he pointed a laser pistol towards the crystal, only to get it snatched out of his hand by Mouse.

“Not teachin’ basic gun safety, Millie?” my partner tut-tutted.

Miss Militia gave the Ward a disappointed look, before replying to Mouse Protector while waving in my direction, “He’s giving out swords to kids that don’t know how to use them. You don’t have room to talk.”

“I know how to use a sword,” Clockblocker objected, one hand closing protectively over the blade at his hip. “What’s there to understand about swish, swish, stab? It’s a sword, dude, it’s not a fighter jet.”

“There’s a *lot* to understand,” I objected, before Mouse could, as the boy’d just belittled her skill. “However, swords don’t randomly go off and hit things on the other side of the room.” I paused. “Well, *those* swords don’t. Probably. Like, ninety-nine percent sure. If it starts to glow, drop it and run, but they would’ve done that by now,” I offered, causing everyone to glance at their weapons.

Mouse, however, just laughed. “Don’t worry, timey-tot. He’s just messin’ with you.”

“Ninety-nine percent messing with you,” I admitted. “But, seriously, if they glow, drop them. It might not be *them* that’s causing the glow, and better safe than sorry around here. However, you’ve presented with an anomaly, which is quite *obviously* an anomaly, so there’s a basic checklist. First of all, do your thoughts make sense? Conversely, does this seem normal to you?”

Assault crossed his arms, “There’s nothing normal about this,” he pointed out, obviously referring to something other than the glowing crystal spire.

However, I just smiled. “Exactly! If at any time everything seems normal, like you’re home, or just on any other street, fucking run, because there’s a Master/Stranger effect at work. For instance, there’s a building in the Yellow Zone, close to the Red, which is *perfectly normal* and *doesn’t exist.*”

“Wait,” Clockblocker objected. “How can it be normal? And how can it not exist?”

I shrugged, getting an aggravated growl from the teen. “Well, it doesn’t exist, but if it did I could describe the walls riddled with holes, the broken glass, the white mist that fills every window, the vague shadows gathered around one that peers at you with sightless eyes as it invites you inside, you know, *perfectly normal* stuff, not out of place in any other city, if it existed, which *it doesn’t*.”

“And what’s in this normal building that doesn’t exist?” Dauntless asked.

“Oh, you know,” I dismissed, “something tall, thin, and that killed everything I sent in to investigate. You know, something *perfectly normal* that *doesn’t exist*.”

Miss Militia shot a glance to Mouse Protector, who shrugged, not having been with me for that run. Herb had wanted to nuke it, but we’d just boxed in the building and moved on, though we’d put in a door, latched from the outside, and labelled it. “Stranger effect?” she inquired.

I had to shake my head, “Of course not. Stranger effects are both things that exist, and nor normal, so the building has neither, because it’s *perfectly normal* and *doesn’t exist.* However, *hypothetically* speaking, if a *different* building both wasn’t normal and did exist, I’d suggest a Master/Stranger power instead, maybe two separate ones, as either would be a good defense, but both, together, would get in each other’s way and become *glaringly obvious.* You know, if you had the mental wherewithal to notice that something *can’t* be both *perfectly normal* and *not exist*, except for that building of course. It’s been sealed off and labelled *Perfectly Normal* slash *Empty* because it is.”

“I think I’ve gone cross-eyed,” Clockblocker complained. “And this is like that?” I shrugged. *“Stop that!”*

“*Search your feelings*, *and see if they’re true,*” I intoned taking a raspy breath, before laughing. “If everything seems normal? *Stranger.* If you suddenly want to to touch something, or go somewhere, or *not* go anywhere, or eat something, or really do *anything* other than what you were planning on doing, then stop, pull back, and check. Of the twelve Master effects I’ve stumbled across, all of them go away when you pull away. Half of them are deadly, two-thirds if you count a long-term lotus eater trap as deadly, but they’re all manageable.”

“Counting the building that’s *perfectly normal* and *doesn’t exist?”* Velocity, who’d caught his breath, asked. I frowned and that silly question, shaking my head no. “Because it’s *perfectly normal* and *doesn’t exist?*” he questioned, and I nodded. “I think I’m getting this,” he said. “So, no Master effect here, what’s next?”

I smiled, glad they were getting it. “Number two, check your body. How you are, how you feel. Proprioception is very important here, how your body is in the space it takes up, but also how you just generally feel. Move your arm, does it feel like it normally does to move your arm? Too fast, too slow, something might be messing with time, the air, your strength, and so on. Take a deep breath, see if that’s normal. Go ahead.”

They did, and the differences were obvious, but not for all of them. “Okay, that’s a bust, what’s next?”

“Um, Clock? The air’s thicker,” Missy argued.

“What, no it isn’t,” he argued, looking around. “Is it? But, my suit doesn’t have an air supply.”

“Okay, next step,” I continued. “There’s something here, but a third of you are affected. It’s not based on gender, age, or any other obvious division. Next step? Throw a rock at it.” That got me stares. “Okay, throw a rock *near* it, and get ready to run. This is safe, but they won’t always be.”

Turning my back on them, I grabbed a ball bearing from my belt pouch and threw it so that it’d miss the crystal. It shot off like a fastball at first, slowing as it got closer and closer, finally hanging in the air. Slowly, *very* slowly, it started to fall, maybe an inch per minute. “So, we have established the effect gets stronger the closer you get. Now, I’ve checked this out, so *don’t* do this, but it’s for instructional purposes.”

Stepping forward, carefully moving around the small, brussel-sprout sized crystals, I got to the point where things started to feel *wrong,* backed up a foot, and drew another chalk outline. Turning back, I called, “Okay, second line’s the danger zone. And don’t get within an inch of the crystals unless you want me to have to heal you.” They approached, carefully, Missy having to push her way through the air halfway through. I could feel her power start to flicker, but she suppressed it, glancing over to me worriedly. I gave her a nod, and she smiled a little, Continuing to force her way the last dozen feet.

Those that were affected were having to breathe with effort, my direction of, “If you’re having trouble turn around. Vista, go ahead, it’s fine,” getting them to do so, finding it easier. “Now, we’ve got an Anomaly up close. Any thoughts on what it does?”

“It feels like the air’s thicker,” Dauntless pointed out, having to take deep breaths. “It’s like breathing into a balloon, but both ways.”

“It’s fine for me,” Gallant, observed, “And for everyone else that has their mouth covered.”

I nodded, smiling at him, impressed he’d noticed. “Anyone else?”

“The light,” Assault, the Kinetic Energy Redirector, noted. “It leeches movement.”

“I thought you’d be the one to get it. Now, these things *aren’t* Manton limited,” I noted, reaching down and picking one of the can-sized crystals. My hand stung a little as I did so, but tossing it up into the air caused it to slow and I grabbed my sword and sheath from my belt, pulling the first out the second, and used it to catch the cyan stone. “That stung, but too long and you might get an embolism. Now, Mouse, go grab the container.”

She disappeared with a muted crack, and I just waited, my partner jogging back through the door a minute later with a steel box. “Why didn’t she. . . don’t use powers if you don’t know,” Clockblocker realized. “What’d happen if I froze one? And don’t shrug!” he commanded.

I just stared at me, not moving. “Fuck if I know,” I stated flatly.”

Missy laughed as Karen approached, opening the box, and I dropped the crystal within. “Okay, back to the skiff!” I commanded, walking past them, Mouse having had time to drop off the ‘test’. The others turned around and made their way back towards our vehicle, carefully picking their way through the smaller crystals, moving faster the further they got away from the main spire.

Watching them, Velocity, who’d been in a bit of a rush to get away from the effect which shut down his power, tripped it first, glancing off to the side, but shaking his head and continuing for the metal vehicle. The others, however, didn’t handle it nearly as well. Surprisingly it was Battery who broke off first, heading to the side, but stopped, staring at the wrecked remains of the semi that Mouse had hidden the powered object inside.

Assault followed his wife, starting to ask, “What is it. . .” before trailing off, staring in its direction as well, before glancing in my direction, as I looked back inquisitively, pretending I didn’t understand what he was asking about. Miss Militia, Mouse, Triumph, Clockblocker, and Missy were all just out of it’s range, and while Dean would’ve been effected by it, his own power, which I desperately wished I could copy, let him no-sell it completely. Kid Win however, got hit the hardest, glancing nervously at the others before trying to sneak over to the wrecked truck. Given that he was wearing gold and red power armor, clicked when he walked, and had quite obviously never trained for stealth in his life, he was spotted instantly. “Kid,” Assault called, tension clear in his voice. “Don’t.”

“What?” the Ward asked. “Don’t what? I’m just. . . seeing if there’s something here I can use. Just had an idea, and maybe I could use a part from this to build something,” he lied, badly.

“It’s not real,” the ex-Villain warned, shooting me another look. “Did you know about this?”

“Know about what?” I asked, continuing to walk to the skiff, even as the stupid object whispered that I could kill Scion and save everyone, if only I possessed it. “Come on, we’ve got one stop left.”

The others, however, stopped, staring at Assault and Kid Win, several of them walking closer. Miss Milita started to, before seeing that Mouse hadn’t moved, and shot me a questioning look. Kid Win took another few steps, “Not real? Like that building thing he described? No, there’s something here I can use,” he argued. “Just gimme a sec.”

“Win, come back here,” Miss Militia ordered, even as the Ward took a few more steps. “That’s an order.”

“Why?” he asked, taking a few more steps. “He said we were fine as long as we stayed here, I’m not leaving the parking lot, just-” was as far as he got before he broke into a run, dashing for the truck, but Dennis had been sneaking up behind him, and tagged him in the back of the head, freezing him in place.

However, as soon as Clockblocker did, and his focus shifted, he himself froze, head swiveling over to stare at the Semi. He muttered, too low for anyone else to hear, “Cure Dad?”

“Clockblocker, get back here,” Miss Milita ordered, worry creeping into her tone. I also noticed that Triump, who’d entered the range, had started to sneak to the other side. While he was wearing white and gold, his footsteps were soundless, as he was using his Personal Sound Manipulation to do on a small scale what my Acuostokinesis did on a large scale.

I had to give Clockblocker credit, the Anomaly was offering to cure his father’s cancer, the very condition that caused him to Trigger, but he shook his head, spooling out wire from his costume to wrap around Kid Win’s arms and waist, fighting with himself to walk away and come back to Dauntless, who’d only given the truck a glance before looking at me, not saying a word. “When he unfreezes, drag him back,” the teen instructed.

However, with everyone’s attention on the Ward, the Protectorate ‘hero’ had made it around the other side of the Truck and slipped in the back. From the insects inside I watched him grab the Anomaly and put it on, which testing done through Deja’s power told me caused the effects to turn inwards.

I sighed, having expected this, but still disappointed, as the Master effect seemed to disappear, causing those gathered to all flinch. “And, if this wasn’t a controlled environment, you would’ve just lost Triumph,” I stated.

To their credit, several of my current students groaned, immediately realizing what’d just happened, even as most of them just looked around in confusion, only now realizing they were missing someone. “What’d you do to him?” Assault demanded, even as the ‘hero’ snuck back around silentlently, pulling his glove back on.

“Ask him yourself,” I offered, as everyone else stared at the Mayor’s son.

The man in question froze, looking at the others, “What?” he asked. “Come one, let’s go.”

“Clockblocker, you can freeze a person but *not* their clothes, right?” I questioned in turn. The teen looked over to me, not saying anything, likely weighing his options, then nodded. “Be a dear and freeze him, would you? We need to get the Master Anomaly off him, and he’s *going* to fight us over it, but I’d rather not hurt him.”

“What?” Triumph asked, even as Dennis, looked to Miss Militia, who nodded, gun changing to a taser, and started to approach the Protectorate member. “What are you doing?”

Clockblocker didn’t stop, “Don’t make this hard, dude, I already had to stop Win. If he’s wrong, we’ll kick his ass, but if he’s right, you need help.”

Triumph, however, was backing up. “He, he must’ve Mastered you. You wouldn’t do this, come on, I’m not acting like I’m Mastered.”

Mouse coughed “Projection,” then smiled from beneath her Balaclava when I shot her a look. Triumph however, was, as I thought, not going down without a fight. The effect was magnified as you got closer, but increased tenfold once you put it on. I shot a glance to the nearby rooftop and she nodded, silently popping away, reappearing near the wall and scrambling up the wall like a spider.

I watched the other heroes spread out a bit, but only Clockblocker approached, holding his hands up. “Dude, he controls bugs, and while Vista might be a pest-”

“Hey!” she complained, but the humor was strained. She relaxed a little as she looked to me, and saw how unconcerned I was, though.

“But unless he did something like put bugs in our brains, he can’t Master us.” Dennis paused, looking back at me. “You can’t do that, right?”

I shook my head, “I haven’t found any neural parasites, and if I did I’d kill them on principle. I *hate* human Master powers. Hell, I barely tolerate Gallant.”

“Thanks,” the Human Master in question remarked blandly.

Clockblocker continued advancing on Triumph, while the adults stood by and did nothing. “So, you’ve been Mastered dude. Dick probably set it up, after warning us about them.”

“Guilty,” I agreed. “But in a non-permanent, non-harmful way. He’ll be fine as soon as you get it off.”

Triumph tried a different track. “You don’t understand. I can bring it back, I can bring it all back!” he insisted. “I can fix the city, I just need some time!”

Once again, Dennis stopped to look back at me. “He can’t,” I reassured the teen. “He just thinks he can so he doesn’t give it up. Hell of a distraction device, but I’m not sure if it’s Tinkertech or an empowered item, like Dauntless uses.”

“He just wants it for himself,” the man argued, glancing for the street he was approaching. “Who knows what he can do with it; he can’t have it!”

Clockblocker lunged forward, but Triumph yelled, his shout taking on physical force that was pure power fuckery, throwing the teen backwards. The other heroes started to move forward, Triumph turning and running for the street, but Mouse was already in motion.

Throwing two knives, one clattered to the ground next to Clockblocker, who flinched backwards, while the other was thrown at Triumph, who flinched to the side, the steel blade bouncing off his golden vambrace.

However, that was what Mouse wanted, as she flashed next to the knife with a pop, grabbing Triumph’s arm as he swung out at her. Vanishing with another pop, she appeared right next to Clockblocker, yelling “Catch!” as she threw the larger man like he was a ragdall at the Ward, who was scrabbling to his feet.

Dennis’ arm shot forward in an obviously practiced motion, catching Triumph as he paused him mid-air, freezing his costume as he struck the man’s back. The Mayor’s son tried to say something, but Clockblocker used the man’s frozen costume as leverage to swing himself up and touched the man’s face, freezing him as well.

Everyone was quiet for a moment before Kid Win suddenly unfroze, saying, “gimme a sec-Aaaah!” as Dauntless reflexively yanked on the wire sending the Tinker sprawling. “What, Clock, you froze me!” he accused as he got up. “I was. . . *fuck,* I got Mastered, didn’t I? And he *just* told us about it too!”

“Language!” Missy chided. “And, yeah, but Triumph got hit too. Vejovis set it up.”

“He had help,” Miss Militia noted, glaring at Mouse, who just grinned and gave a merry wave. Turning her attention on me, she demanded, “How do we undo this?”

“Take off his right glove,” I instructed, and Clock did, only to find it held fast. I *might* be able to do it, but there was *no* way I was showing off that Trump card. “Okay, keep him frozen, and when his costume unfreezes, take it off then.”

We waited, Triumph unfreezing first, inhaling slightly more before he was frozen in time once again, and staring at Dennis’ power that’s *exactly* what was happening, despite my suggestions to the contrary. With the costume no longer in stasis, the Ward was able to remove the man’s glove, revealing the golden ring, which had a paper tag on it. Craning his head, he read “Congratulations, you failed!” He took a second to think about it, before looking at me. “You’re a dick.”

“What’s more of a dick move?” I asked, grabbing the Anomaly’s case from the skiff. “Testing to see who here can be easily Mastered, or letting you find out on something that kills you if you touch it?” Walking over to the frozen man, I instructed, “Let me. It’s a bit proximity based, and you’d be a bit harder to neutralize than Shouty McHealsalot over here.

Reaching carefully so I didn’t touch the time-frozen man, I half-watched him, half-watched my own power, careful to keep it from auto-activating. Grasping the ring, which had re-sized itself, I carefully slid it off, my Anti-Time-Power power flaring just a little to let me pull it off, twisting it around his half-closed hand.

As soon as it was off, it assaulted my senses, promising me power, and safety, and friends if I just put it on, and I resisted the urge to use my enhanced strength to crush it into powder, pulling my arm away from Dennis’ own grasping hand and placing it on the box, a rod grown up through the center that started thin and thickened out as it reached the bottom. With the Anomaly on the rod and ‘worn’, the effect vanished once again.

Clockblocker froze, before dropping his head. “Fuck, sorry,” he aplogized. “I thought, but it can’t heal-” he caught himself, freezing once again as his head snapped up, realizing what he’d just sad.

“It can’t, but I can,” I reminded him. “Ask Gallant for my number.” In a louder voice I said, “Don’t feel bad, you shook off the effects at medium strength, and Triumph got taken in almost instantly.”

The others approached, and I made no motion to close the box. “A ring that makes you want it?” Dauntless asked. “Someone’s a Tolkein fan.”

“As far as we can tell that’s all it does. No ‘rule them all’ powers, except telling you that with it you can, if you’re into that sort of thing. Too much paperwork for my tastes,” I joked, closing and latching the box.

Triumph jolted into motion, falling back, the impact driving the air out of him before he could shout again. “What. . . what happened?” he asked, suddenly noticing his bare hand. “The ring, I, it. . . what?”

“Congratulations, Triumph,” I informed him. “You failed the final. I’d suggest sticking to the outskirts or travelling with someone who can neutralize you, and *don’t* go into the Yellow Zone, where this little doohickey came from. Not if you want to survive.”

Closing the box, and latching it, I tossed it over to Mouse who disappeared, dropping it back at the base so that the others wouldn’t be tempted to try to. . . *confiscate* it. She reappeared, holding a whole, dead pig.

Dauntless started to ask a question, as Velocity blurred, dropping out with a “Oh.” I shot the speedster a look. “We’re going someone dangerous, aren’t we?”

“Yep. I said it before, but I’m going to stress this: do *not* get off the Skiff, do not shoot at anything unless I tell you to, do not use your powers unless I tell you to, do not stare at anything if you start to feel weird. Kid Win, Triumph, you are to sit in the middle and *not* look down, as we’ve established that you’re weak to Master effects.” I looked at them all seriously. “We’re going to the Red, bordering on the Yellow, to show you *just* how dangerous this place can be. If we go high we’ll avoid most of it, but *everyone’s* going to be putting on a harness in case you pull a Odysseus. Even Mouse. Even me.” The fact that it’d let me keep the Skiff flying even if I got knocked off my feet was for their safety, but it still impressed upon them the seriousness.

Mouse Protector held up the dead pig. “Does Napoleon need a harness?”

“Um. . . sure?” I answered. “Any reason you got it now? And named it?” she shook her head. “Okay. If anyone wants out we can leave you here. The Anomalies are spread out here, and pretty inoffensive, so you’ll be fine.”

Miss Militia pinned me with her stare, or at least tried to. “And it’ll be safe?”

“Safer than wandering around the Green Zone,” I answered.

She took a moment, to think about it, looking to Mouse, who just shrugged, before sighing. “We haven’t gotten a single person that far. If you say it’s safe, then I’ll trust you,” announced the woman who shot me in the back with a rocket launcher.

Taking that as a ‘we’ll go’, I headed back to the skiff, taking out the harnesses, a suggestion of Herb’s. I was pretty sure that heroes wouldn’t be that dumb, but I also thought they wouldn’t *put on the ring.*

With everyone secured, we lifted off, and I took us on a high, *high* path over the city, my ability to sense the air letting me navigate around whatever the hell was invisible floating in my path. It didn’t follow me, so I made a mental note to check it later, and continued onwards. Careful to get over my target, or close enough, I started to descend from two thousand feet up. “Do you have to go this high to be safe?” Dauntless asked.

“No,” I said, motioning towards the large, irregularly shaped *something* I’d moved around. “There’s something right there, but I don’t know what it is, so I’m not going to check it out now. You should be fine lower, just *not* over the red zone.

I could hear the others talking as I piloted downwards, but I focused on making sure my path was clear. Stopping at two hundred and fifty feet, I set it to ‘stable’, maintaining the link through the harness and a single foot at a time, and walked over to the side, pointing things out. “See that empty lot?” I stated, pointing out a gap in the buildings. “It’s not, whatever is there is just invisible. “That one over there,” I shifted over. “Radioactive.” I pointed in the general direction of another area. “That building is *perfectly normal and doesn’t exist.*”

“Um, yeah it does,” Clockblocker argued.

“Hypothetically, can you see the windows, if they existed, which they don’t?” I inquired. He shook his head. “That’s what triggers the effect, if it existed, which it doesn’t.Vista, anything living below us?”

She hesitated, before she nodded. Walking back, I set us down, twenty feet away from the warning sign. She looked at the warped space, backing up slowly, likely seeing it in *far* greater detail and with *far* better comprehension that I could with my own copy of her power.

Slipping off my harness, I commanded, “Mouse, keep an eye out on our flank. Militia, Auto-shotgun. Dauntless, spear and shield out. Vista, if anything gets within a hundred feet, tell me. This place is populated by things that’d *eat* that flower, but most of it can’t fly, and it won’t follow us straight up. We’ll only be here for a few minutes, so we should be fine.”

Grabbing the pig, I unharnessed it as well, easily hefting it, and flew off the skiff, not setting foot on the ground. Approaching the fence, I called out “Seems like a normal street, right?” Only waiting a moment, I tossed the pig inside, which came apart in red rivers of gore, twisting this way and that in a beautiful, horrifying, visceral display.

Flying back, I took a position at the console and lifted off, quickly moving us to the other side and setting down once again, at a four-way intersection. The streams of flowing flesh wound their way towards us, splitting and recombining in complex patterns. It took a few, tense, minutes before it finally came together, running together into a solid lump, which, once the last was together, dropped to the ground and rolled forward, coming to rest against the fence, which was a good five feet from the danger zone.

Leaning over the fence, I grabbed the pig body, an illogical amalgamation of bone, organs, and muscles, likely only missing any blood because it’d already been drained. Either way, my gloves were auto-cleaning, so I had no issues carrying it over, and back to the others, who stared at it in horror. “So, same mass, same component parts, but rearranged. Fun fact, sending bugs through? They don’t *actually* die until they’re reassembled. And this kind of thing is *common* around here. So-”

“Vejvois,” Missy warned, and I dropped the corpse and was already flying for the skiff before she could say, “Something’s coming.”

“One or many,” I asked quickly, tapping the console once, already enveloping it with a Lift Field as I hurriedly shrugged on the harness.

“Uh, both?” she replied, and I wanted to pause and ask, but just started to lift us up, getting the answer as I did so. From one direction, came snakes, or worms, or something else entirely, either way there were a *lot* of them. From the other lumbered an oddly familiar shape, though it took a second to place. It was a hellhound, like Herb’s Replicant had been, but *wrong.*

While the original one had been a twenty foot tall shaggy beast that was so hot it steamed, but this one was gaunt, with bone showing through ragged flesh, and *actually* burned with blue-green flames, expelling them as it slowly approached, though each step covered several feet. It’s back half was mostly skeletal, flames hanging tightly to it in the illusion of flesh.

It spotted us and howled, a deep, piercing sound that had the oily feeling of *power* to it, and I felt my joints lock up in fear, but I didn’t *need* joints to fly.

From the other direction the tide of silvery, shimmering worms, almost like liquid, froze, then broke apart, fleeing into the nearby buildings, a few burying down into he ground.

Flying upwards, but turning the craft slightly and moving it sideways as well, I kept eyes on the giant hound as it lumbered forward, feasting on the recombined pig, bits of flesh regrowing as it did so, before it turned around and started to head back the way it’d came.

Pulling us higher and higher, until we were once again a couple of thousand feet up, I flew us north towards the Yellow Zone, then through that to the Green, before taking the long way around the city back to we first started.

“Fuck,” Mouse said, after I announced we were in the Yellow. “I. . . Fuck.”

“Yeah, hadn’t seen either of those before,” I agreed. “But, hey, *Red Zone*,” I shrugged. Even Æonics people hadn’t gotten into the Red, and I had a feeling that, as we retook the city, we’d have to wall it off at first, making a note to add that to the plans.

Several of the heroes had sat down, some practically slumping in the center couches. “That, that was as big as an Endbringer,” Battery said, with the kind of calm one usually only gets when they’ve freaked out so hard they’ve circled back around to tranquility.

“Yeah, and the person it used to be got killed by Leviathan,” I agreed, thinking about it. If it was some sort of Zombie Replicant, it should’ve shifted forms, but it didn’t. I’d have to test if it retained the powerset, and if it did I’d have to hit it with an Alpha Strike before ST Vamprisim started to make it stronger and tougher, though that’d fade when I ran, giving me time to test. “Flames were new though, the original just ran so hot he steamed.”

That just got me stares, for some reason, and everyone was fairly quiet, the heroes murmuring things to each other at times. Setting down back where I’d first landed, near the PRT vans, I announced: “Thank you for flying Penumbral Air. I hope this class has proved informative, and a good lesson on the dangers found in The Zones. Please enjoy your complimentary swords, and know that, if you’re in trouble, you can call for help. We might not answer if we can’t, and don’t abuse it, but most of you are good people, and shouldn’t die because your bosses are idiots.”

The others stared at me, before looking around and seeming to realize they were back where we started, moving to take off their harnesses. “Millie,” I called, and Miss Militia paused, looking at me expectantly. “Door prize, for you boss. I half expected her to show up for this herself.” I tossed the box containing the crystal to her, and she jerked her hands to catch it, as I threw it fairly hard, the container starting off fast but slowed as it got close, giving her time to easily grab it out of the air.

“There’s about a dozen semi-deadly anomalies between here and there,” I warned, “So going to try to harvest it’ll probably result in some pretty hefty losses.”

She accepted my warning, and my suggestion not to abuse what I’d given them, with a nod, before turning to the others, shepherding the Wards off. Waving to those assembled, I called, “Have a good rest of your day,” lifting the skiff up and piloting it back south. Once we were *well* out of sight, I concentrated on the launching point we’d selected, in rural Montana.

Using the Mark to guide me and wrestling with Strider’s power to encompass the thing, we disappeared from the streets in a small vortex, reappearing back under the artificial lights. Quinn appeared, several somethings in the skiff shorting out with an electric *zap* the moment before his arrival*.* “Listening devices, GPS trackers, and a camera.”

I sighed, having expected something like that. Okay, no I didn’t, *Herb* had, and Mouse had backed him. They’d said, if they were right, not to be mad at the heroes, Karen insisting this kind of thing was just normal between rival groups, one of the reasons she left, but I still didn’t like it. “Want a lift back?” I asked, and he disappeared. “Fair enough.”

Concentrating once again, I took it back to the workshop in Eclipse where I’d ‘built’ the skiff, and we’d loaded it up with all the gear we’d need for this little demonstration. Looking to Mouse, I commented, “Well, I think that went well.”

The other woman just looked at me incredulously, before pausing and nodding in a side to side manner that was very ‘I mean, *kinda’*. “Coulda gone worse,” she admitted. “You sure they ain’t gonna lock this place down? Because, well. . .” she waved in the general direction of the Red Zone. “*That.*”

“Nah, the Cape-inati wants it to keep going, so it will,” I disagreed. “Besides, it’s certainly interesting.”

“Yeah, interesting,” she nodded sarcastically. “You do take me on the oddest dates, Lee.”

Before I could object she’d already teleported away, so I just shook my head, and moved onto the next thing on my list.