**Deadline 12.4**

At Legend’s words, the room erupted in an outburst of replies. Some of it was fearful, some skeptical, some worried, but far, far too much of it was hopeful at the prospect of *killing Leviathan.* None of them knew that doing so would make things *much* worse, and there was nothing I could do to stop them. I could tell them about the precognitive ‘vision’ I’d been given, but the chances they’d believe me where so close to nil as to be zero.

“Through the efforts of Protectorate Thinkers, we have an unprecedented opportunity,” the most heroic of the Triumvirate continued. “In most confrontations with Endbringers we have no time to plan, no time to even warn those who wish to fight of the fact that one in four will usually die in the attempt. This time, however, we have all that and more.”

He looked out over the crowd, expression serious. “Those that fought before where whoever can make it at a moments notice, usually no more than two hundred in number. Gathered here we have over *ten times* that amount, and with ample time to plan, to get civilians to safety, and to prepare for the oncoming storm.”

*That’s the problem*, I couldn’t help but think. If Leviathan attacked like normal, if he hadn’t been holding back this entire time, they’d have a good chance of doing just that. However, if Levi upped his game to meet the challenge, this was going to be *bad.*

“Leviathan is the middle child of the Endbringers, the second of three to arrive. While not possessing Behemoth’s brute strength, nor The Simurgh’s cunningness, he has both in equal measure, making him *more* dangerous, not less. I’m sure you’ve seen the videos on television and on the internet. You know what he is physically capable of. Despite the image that he tries to convey he is *not* stupid, and will display a level of cunning and tactics that can and *will* catch you off guard if you’re not careful.”

“What you *may not know* from the videos is that he feels pain, he *bleeds*, but most attacks do little more than scratch him. He is like his siblings in that respect.” *And there’s the rub,* I thought. *You just praised his cunning, yet are being actively deceived by him.* It wasn’t necessarily a mark against the man, if I hadn’t been from a *different dimension* where I was given incredible insight into what was going on, I’d probably be fooled as well, but the irony was nearly palpable.

“What sets him apart is his focus on *water*,” the man continued, “You’re likely aware of his afterimage, his ‘water echo’. This is no mere splash of water. At the speeds Leviathan can move, surface tension and compressibility make the water he leaves behind harder than concrete. He also has a crude hydrokinesis, the ability to manipulate water, and there *will* be water on the battlefield. We believe that this is what lets him move as fast as he does when he is swimming. Faster than he is on land, far faster than any speedster we have on record.”

I tuned him out, having remembered this part of the speech before, and idly noting all of the things the man was *not* mentioning. Leviathan’s tendency to strike out with his tail, any kind of directed water attack, his ability to force water into the ground, turning it into mud through which to disappear into. It was very big on *large concepts* and almost completely lacking in *actionable intel.* Levi’s major victories were recounted, with no notes on *how* they were accomplished, and how to keep it from happening again. Levi’s end-target, the aquifer underneath the city, was outlined.

“To that end, though, we’ve designed strategies to better handle this confrontation. To those of you who’ve fought before, this won’t be the chaotic, desperate struggle you’re used to. We’ve designated teams depending on your general abilities,” he said, and I perked up. *This is new.*

“Dragon and The Guild have developed communications technology that will allow them to better coordinate our efforts. Given the limited numbers, they have been given to those in command, who have been briefed on the specifics of our plans,” Legend said, and was tossed something by someone in the front row. “These armbands will allow us to communicate and coordinate our efforts. Enough were created to handle those that normally fight, but we have *much* more than normal.”

*Okay, no Armband. It’ll make it harder to track Levi, but I don’t have to worry about Dragon eavesdropping,* I thought. Before I’d just planned on wrapping it in a Sound Bubble, but with my powers on the fritz that was no longer an option. I was *very* glad that I’d insisted on my people getting their own communication network.

Several people had stood up, moving to stand on the dais, and Legend pointed to them in turn, starting with the seven-foot-tall mech suit, which contained no shard at all. These will need to be updated after the monthly chat, as I’m not sure who to include where “If you are confident you can take a hit from Leviathan and get up afterwards, or you can produce expendable combatants, we need you on the front lines! You will be directed by the teams commanded by Alexandria and Dragon!”

Next was a man in gold and silver armor, styled to look medieval, and a X. “If you believe you can hit Leviathan and do damage, but can’t take a hit yourself, we will work to make sure you can deliver your blows! You will be directed by the teams commanded by Chevalier and X!”

I noted a distinct pattern as he pointed to the next pair, a man in plate armor and a X. “If you can create physical impediments, be they forcefields, telekinesis, whatever your power, if you can interrupt Leviathan’s movements or help reduce the impacts of the waves, you’re battlefield control! You’re with Bastion and X!”

The next pair didn’t start with a man in old armor, but fit the medieval leitmotif as it was a man in what were obviously wizard robes and a X. “If you’re a Mover! This means runners, jumpers, fliers, or teleporters, we need you to get injured people to safety and to move the slower fighters in position! You’ll be with Myrddin and X!”

*Not Strider?* I thought, confused before I noticed a *distinct* pattern. *Every single person in charge was in the PRT.* Dragon had thrown me, as she was technically part of a different organization, but this was *definitely* a PRT endeavor. That. . . actually made a lot of sense. Part of me wanted to rail against the seeming favoritism, but if they’d spent the last several hours, while the evacuations were taking place, briefing all of their members on the plan, it followed that the people who’d had time to prepare would lead. I’d normally tell the PRT to go pound sand, and would still if they tried to get me killed, but this? They had a plan, were doing things *intelligently*, and I was wholly in support of it.

They were going to fail, and fail *hard,* but at least they were *trying*.

“Long-ranged attackers! You are all with Eidolon and myself! If you have a support power, be it Thinker, healing, or something else you’re with X and X!” he said motioning to a pair that I’d never seen before. One was X while the other was X. “If you’re unsure, please find a Dragon Mech and tell her your power, and she will direct you to where you can do the most good!”

On the wall behind him, a list of categories and room numbers appeared. “Please go to the room your group is meeting in for further instructions. We still have over an hour before we start, and we all need to do our part if we’re going to succeed this day!”

With that, the Triumvirate left, the team leads following them. Everyone else got to their feet, slowly making their way out. “Eecee,” I said quietly, the word that activated the mic on my communication device. “Okay, Purity, you obviously go with Legend. He’s overconfident, so stick by him and watch his back if you can. Gallant, Glory, Vista, stay together and go to the Mover group.”

“I’ve been told to go with Legend,” Dean replied.

I snorted. “Yeah, *no*, go with the Movers, stay as a group. I don’t care what you were told to do, the three of you are staying together so you *don’t fucking die.* You might be long-range, but you can’t even make Levi flinch, not really. Getting benched for a week or three is better than being *buried.*”

“But we have a plan- No, they,- okay,” Gallant sighed, Vicky likely yelling at him without turning on her own mic. “Okay, Movers it is.”

“Good,” I nodded, the movement automatic as he wouldn’t actually see me. “Raida, you’re with them. Raida?” I asked when I didn’t get a response.

“Forgot the word,” she said after a moment. “Okay, what about Boo?”

“BookJack, attend the Brute meeting, but watch out for her,” I commanded.

Taylor, who was in front of me, glanced back. “Who’s Raida?”

“Eeem,” I said, muting the connection to Eclipse. “It’s Rune, but with a new Identity. Not sure how the E88 would react to me recruiting one of their *active* members.” Taylor nodded, and I felt someone poke me from behind, glancing backwards myself to get a raised eyebrow from Amy. “Later. Eecee, Break, Tyrone, Curtis, you’re with Boojack and myself at the Brute Squad. Mick, sneak into the Mover meeting.”

“Will do.” “You got it dawg.” “*Already there, V.*” “Yes.” Came the chorus of responses.

“Æonic-” I started to say, only for him to cut me off

“Striker, *obviously.* He’s fast, but no-one’s faster than *time.*”

I rolled my eyes, “Sure man, whatever. Just stay safe. Lady Bug, Panacea, you’re support, and just like G, G, and V, *stick together.* While the PRT wants to kill Leviathan, everyone’s job here is just to *survive.*”

Brownie, I’m gonna need help establishing Tyrone’s Voice, since we haven’t figured it out. Also Curtis.

Break and his Replicants were all sitting together in the Brute’s meeting room. Tyrone, the replicant who’d appeared in the last week, waved me over, motioning to a free seat between himself and Herb. The newest replicant, who’d wanted to look What the hell does Tyrone look like gave a wide, closed-mouth smile as I walked towards him, while Herb gave me a nod, Curtis rolled his eyes, and it appeared that BooJack was taking a nap. Sitting down, my partner looked over at me. “What’s up?” he asked, and the attention of the other three was suddenly fixed on me.

“You know the thing with Dean?” I whispered, keeping my expression nonchalant, getting a nod from Tyrone and Herb. Boojack kept staring while Curtis feigned disinterest. “Okay, Zilla, subvocal connection to Break, Boojack, Curtis, & Tyrone,” I commanded our base’s AI, realizing that while I couldn’t make a Sound Bubble, I had other tools available. “I accidentally did it again, but with big green,” I said so quietly it couldn’t be heard in the noisy room, but the communicator still picked it up and broadcast it to those I’d named.

“Doley?” Tyrone prompted sub-vocally as well, and I nodded. “Did you get it?” I nodded again. “Yo dawg, this shit’s gonna be breezy!” he smiled, fading as he glanced at me and Herb.

“Last time it messed you up,” Break pointed out. And I nodded. *“Shit-fuck,*” he swore under his breath. “You’re still. . . *you?*”

I shot him a confused look. “I’m always me. Not sure what the hell it did though, only thing I have right now is Sight, Amy said somethings going on with my Shard.”

“You ain’t even got shields, V?” Curtis asked. “That just won’t do.”

I started to answer, but something niggled in the back of my head. I *needed* shields, more than I needed practically any other power, and I held up a hand as I closed my eyes. Trying to picture my power-sets, I still couldn’t see them, but in that darkness there was a *depth* there wasn’t before. It was like an abyss in the back of my mind, and I reached into it. If I could have *one* power right now it would be Glory Girl’s *Personal Shields*.

A White & Gold Flame burst into being, filling the void, and I could *feel* the power, on a level that I never had before. The shields unfolded across my form, shifting to the previous configuration I had them in before. However, this time I could sense them, almost like they were another part of my body, instead of having to focus on each individual one. Mentally trying to move them, I found the process much easier, able to move several at the same time, though the rate they changed shape didn’t seem any faster.

“And now I’ve got it. Name a different one,” I instructed. At the silence from the replicant he was staring back at me, his own slitted pupils glittering prismatically as he focused on me not, blinking. “Aerokinesis,” he stated, tone suddenly businesslike in a way that it wasn’t before. The other Replicants glanced at him, but he ignored them all, continuing to gaze at my power.

Refocusing back to that mental space, alight with Victoria’s light, I tried to pull Stormtiger’s up. I could feel *something* behind the first power, but I couldn’t bring it up. Trying to push down the shields to bring it up, like I only had one active slot, didn’t work either. The Personal Shields were up, and they refused to go down.

“No, I only have the one and I can’t disengage,” I told him. “Thanks for that though.”

He flinched back as if I’d just struck him, glancing away. “Don’t,” he stated firmly, tone shifting to once again feel oily. “Hunt’s no fun if you can’t play, V. Make sure you don’t lose. I’d *hate* for you to leave Taylor all alone, after all. Who *knows* who might have some fun if you aren’t around to claim her?”

On one hand, *fuck him for saying that,* on the other, that was weirdly nice. He was still a complete monster, but apparently he cared? Rather than deal with *that* I focused back on the current issue. “Shields are back, and maybe stronger. His shard wasn’t ‘any three’ it was *Interface*. He was queuing up things from The Thinker, not using powers himself. I grabbed that, but, if I had to guess, it messed up my *own* ability to interface with my abilities,” I put forward, having *no* real Idea what was going on. “Amy said it messed with the structure of my Shard. Hopefully I’ll get access to more soon, it’s only been half an hour.”

“*Fuuuuuck,*” Boojack swore.

“Can you turn it off?” Herb asked for a moment.

I shook my head slightly, “I already said I couldn’t switch it out.”

He looked confused for a moment, before he shook *his* head for a moment. “No, not switch it out, turn it off. Then try to switch it. Like ejectin’ a flash drive before you unplug it.”

“No one actually ejects a. . .” I started to reply, but that wasn’t the point. Concentrating I *could* turn it off, but I couldn’t ‘eject’ it, only not have it be active. “Okay, toggle it yes, switch is still no.”

“Worth a shot,” he sighed. “So, one right now, more later?”

I nodded, and Boojack snorted, seeming to wake himself up, and took out a blunt, lighting it up. When the person behind him, a woman who became tougher the faster she moved cleared her throat in irritation. He glanced at her, and ignored her. When she said there was no smoking he took a deep puff and blew it in her face. “Bitch, chill. We’re fighting an Endbringer.” The man beside her, with enhanced physiology and the ability to turn to Magma snorted, ignoring the woman as she hit him.

“Don’t go Vejovis,” Boojack sub-vocalized. “The big pussy’s right. Get air next, then anythin’ else that’ll help you fight. Bug and healing won’t do shit.”

“You call me that again we’re gonna have *issues,*” Curtis growled.

BooJack took another puff and just stared at the cat-shifter, letting out the smoke slowly. “Our powers grow, so you’ll either cap at three and get to change ‘em, or get more than that,” he continued, addressing me. “This seems like the first day we got here, where things aren’t workin’ right. Either way, like ya fucking said, survive first, worry later. Or just don’t worry,” he shrugged, “like me.”

I nodded, mentally going over my power list. Which did I go with? If I was keeping my powers, then Aerokinesis, then Momentum Infusion, then Space Warping, then. . . I wasn’t sure. No, I needed Metal Projection for defense first, then the rest. Either way, I wouldn’t slot the next power until I *needed* it, just in case.

Okay, I could work with this. Maybe. Hopefully. *Not like you have any choice?* I told myself. With Glory Girl’s power alone, my costume, and Power Sight I *might* be able to pull it off. Assuming this was the canon fight.

*God I’m screwed.*

Alexandria and Dragon, who had been at the front of the room, conversing with each other and a few people who had walked over to them, straightened up, the meeting obviously about to start. “Thank you for coming,” Alexandria’s voice rang out, the textbook definition of strong and commanding. I wondered if she’d studied how to do so. “Our mission here is to engage Leviathan, to take the fight to him and keep him from his goal. Others might strike at him, or trap him, but only we can meet him force for force.”

“That does not mean you should absorb blows merely because you can,” she warned. “You are seeking to maximize the time he must spend fighting you, and every blow you dodge is a blow he has wasted.” A screen above her turned on, and it showed footage of Leviathan fighting. The first thing that struck me was that I’d been picturing him wrong.

I’d gotten the ‘I always skip leg day’ top heaviness, but I hadn’t pictured his *tail* correctly. I’d mentally attached a lizard tail to him, but that was wrong. It wasn’t tapered, nor that proportionally short, but was instead nearly twice as long as his entire body and uniform except the very end, which sharply tapered to fine point which looked like it could pierce like a spear. It simultaneously gave the impression of a snake as it moved back and forth, and of a scorpion’s tale with how it arced over his head.

“Leviathan’s strength and speed are not to be underestimated, nor the sharpness of his claws. Furthermore, the water he leaves behind hides his movements, and he can, and will, use it to push you off balance, striking you when you can’t defend yourself,” she continued. “Listen to members of the Protectorate around you. If told to break off, *retreat.* Do not hold him still, that is not your job, just keep his attention. If we say to leave, it is because Legend’s forces are about to strike, and you do *not* want to be caught in the crossfire when that happens.”

“As for Chevalier’s teams, you are to keep Leviathan’s attention on *you*, allowing them to strike. If you need to take a hit to keep them safe, do so. You will survive. They won’t,” she finished looking around the room with what I’m sure was a stern gaze behind the plate that covered the top half of her face.

“Wait, that’s it?” I asked incredulously, not even meaning to. My voice carried *far* too well in what I’m sure she meant as a moment of strength. A moment I just ruined.

“Is there something you’d like to add, Vejovis?” the Triumvirate ‘hero’ asked calmly, and half the room turned to look at me. Without meaning to, I was in the spotlight, and I was forced to choose. Did I say no, sit down, and reduce the attention being drawn to myself, or did I do my best to help these people *survive*?

I knew the smart choice, the cold, calculating choice, the choice that would let me continue flying under the radar would be to say something that would be attributed to my inexperience and return focus to Alexandria to continue her briefing. I had the people *I* wanted to save, and *they* knew better. I didn’t know these people, for all I knew they were as bad as Armsmaster and if they were dumb enough to accept what Alexandria said at face value, they deserved what they got for trusting the system. I personally had nothing to gain and could very well make things more difficult for myself by speaking out to try to help this room full of people who I may very well might have to fight someday.

The choice was clear.

“Yeah, yeah I think I do,” I told her as I stood, hating myself for doing this, but I’d hate myself *more* if I didn’t. “Leviathan is so much more than that. To start with, there’s his tail. He strikes with it just as easily as he does with his arms, and does so to greater effect since people see human*oid* and think *human.* Then there’s his control of water. Levi doesn’t have the finesse that Ziz does, thank christ, but he patches it with *power.* He’s more than just *waves,* he can create high pressure streams of water, the kind that can cut through *steel*. If you’re underwater, he can crush you to paste. I mean he did it to *Newfoundland*, why the hell couldn’t he do it to *you?* He can agitate water in the ground and turn it into mud and quicksand, only to dive underground and *disappear.* And you say speed? The asshole can practically *teleport*, but can hit you as he moves like that Kaze chick in the Birdcage. And that’s not even getting into his tactics!” I listed, gathering the attention of those around me.

“Legend said he’s cunning, but that doesn’t really *help,*” I said, trying to impress the importance of what I was saying to those around me. “Levi likes to pretend to be injured to draw you in, only to kill you when you think you have the upper hand. I mean, the guy doesn’t even actually *bleed,* he just fakes it. You know, the asshole who can *control water.*”

Despite having her eyes hidden, I could practically feel Alexandria’s glare. “Those are a great deal of unsubstantiated statements. Why do you think any of that is true?”

“Well, some it’s just *obvious,* but for the rest I’ve access to Thinkers who’ve figured out some of the rest,” I shot back.

“And the reason you haven’t shared this before why?” she demanded, though her tone wasn’t angry, just dismissive.

I opened my arms. “Because it’s fucking *obvious?*” I replied derisively. “I mean, you’ve *seen* the tail thing, just because *you* might not think it’s a big deal doesn’t mean the same is true for us squishier mortals.”

“You aren’t the first to make such claims about Leviathan’s hydrokinetic abilities. I’ve fought him over a dozen times, and I haven’t seen any such uses,” she stated, brushing me off. *Because you haven’t tried to kill him you dumb bitch,* I wanted to say, but she continued. “I’m aware that Endbringers can be frightening, and that fighting one can worry anyone, but do not spread false information. You haven’t fought them. I have. Defer to my expertise.”

I just stared at her for a long moment. *Is she really using the ‘listen to your elders’ argument when* ***superpowers*** *exist?* I’d managed to *severely* underestimate the sheer *depths* of this woman’s arrogance. I wanted to believe she’d prioritize *her own mission*, but then again keeping these people alive wasn’t her mission. Killing Leviathan wasn’t even her mission. Killing *The Warrior* was, and as a Cauldronite she’d stained her soul with the mantra of the ends justifying the means, no matter the cost. I should’ve expected this.

I was about to point out that *yes, I’ve met one,* but mentioning that I’d been close enough to The Simurgh to wave hello was likely *not* to help me here. Looking around, most of those looking at me either had their faces hidden, or seemed dismissive, but a few at least looked contemplative. “Fine, whatever, but is that the end of this ‘briefing’? I asked back.

“If you’ll take your seat, I’ll continue,” she replied, with the air of a teacher talking down to a particularly slow student.

My first instinct was to tell her to go fuck herself, but that wouldn’t be helpful either. Instead I sat down, folding my arms. She let the moment drag, the bitch, before she continued, telling us to arrange ourselves in teams and spread out across the city, in designated zones near the aquifers, so no matter where Leviathan went, we’d be there to intercept.

It was a workable plan, assuming Leviathan went where they assumed and *didn’t* have a beef with Herb, Nicole, Charlie, and me. There was no more discussion of tactics, nothing *substanative,* and when she told us to form teams I got up and walked out of the room, not bothering to deal with this bullshit.

Herb and his Replicants followed me out. “This is so dumb,” I sighed to myself. “She’s going to get them killed. What’s that stupid saying ‘Generals are always fighting the last war?’ It’s the same here, the stupid, time-locked, asshole.”

“What do you mean?” a voice called, and I turned to see that half dozen others had left as well.

I glanced around, then sighed. “Okay, so I’ve looked into Endbringers, what little is available, and *man* is restricting info on them dumb. But the thing is, their powers *don’t make sense.* How could Leviathan sink Newfoundland by *cracking the continental shelf* with water pressure but not be able to crush a person? None of their powers are Manton Limited, so the only explanation is that the Endbringers, who *no one* knows the motives of, only that they seem to coordinate their actions among themselves, are *holding back.*”

That, along with the complete seriousness the Replicants had in the face of my statement, seemed to take those gathered aback. “If it’s business as usual, then *fine,* we’ll be able to fight him off no problem, but what if it *isn’t?* Yes, fight him, keep his attention off of his task, but the way they’re talking about it. . . it’s as if they’ve already won.”

A woman in a sand colored dress stepped forward, all of her covered in fabric except for her eyes. Her Sand-Form power was wrapped tightly around her, its Flames held close as they added an extra dimension to her costume. “Then what do you think we should do?” she asked, half challengingly, half curious.

I considered the issue, and what was *really* bugging me about this entire thing, to the point that it had distracted me from the problems I was having with in my own powers. “It’s the. . . This plan lacks teamwork.”

A person in power armor cocked their head, and when they spoke their voice was modulated, but still female. “They have us teaming up,” she pointed out.

I looked at the flames of the Armor Tinker, and tried to put the difference into words. “Yes, but we’re teams of *Brutes.* Having teams of similar power sets moving like this, it’s like how they normally approach these fights, everyone doing whatever, just with more people, each group acting like how heroes would individually act before. We all have Mover capabilities,” I said, waving to myself, Herb, and the replicants, “but for those who don’t, teaming them up with one would increase *both* heroes effectiveness.”

I *wanted* to say that it was like an adventuring party. A group of all fighters, or all rogues, *could* work but if you grouped the Brutes and Strikers *together* then they’d synergize, covering each other weaknesses, which only improved with a wider team. However, I felt that comparing this to a game would hurt more than help. “Imagine if your football team was composed *solely* of Linemen and *nothing else,* or a band where everyone played the drums, it might *work*, but not *well.*”

I sighed, “And when you have a few minutes of warning, *if that*, I understand why simplistic tactics like that might work but they’ve had *hours* to figure this out. You,” I addressed a larger man standing near the back, an Aura of Retributive Damage glowing around his form, “what are your powers?”

While the top half of the man’s face was covered, his surprise was apparent from his body language. He hesitated, before saying, “I’m tough, and anything that tries to hurt me gets hurt more.”

“Does it scale with armor?” I queried. At his look I added, “If you’re heavily armored, so when you’re hit you don’t get hurt, does the thing hitting you still get hurt like you aren’t armored at all?” He nodded. “Does it work on ranged attacks, like if someone shoots you, do they get hurt like they’ve been shot.”

He hesitated again, before shaking his head. “No, only if something hits me.”

*You mean strikes, not hits,* I mentally corrected. “And lastly, does your toughness extend to what you’re wearing? So does your armor get tougher because *you’re* wearing it?”

He nodded, obviously more comfortable revealing a strength of his power instead of a possible weakness. “Yeah, this stuff’s bulletproof,” he bragged, tapping what looked like converted Anti-riot gear.

I held up a hand. “Eecee. Mick, grab the spear from the base, Zillah will know where it is, and please bring it to me.”

“Will do,” was the clipped response.

“Eeem. Right,” I continued. “So, consider the weapon part of your armor, it might make a difference to your power, might not. See if anyone can get you kitted out with better armor, but nothing energy based, so no shields. I’d pair you with a mover, maybe a striker. At a range you’re only slightly tougher than a regular person, so you need help to get in close. If you want to go with Alexandria’s plan, fine, but talk to the Striker team near wherever you are. Engage him in close combat, and watch out for his fucking tail, but what you *really* need to be worried about are water blasts and being caught underwater. Avoid the last one at all costs.”

He stared at me for a long moment, before nodding slowly. “Never needed a weapon before. Never been in an Endbringer fight before, though.”

The woman in armor added, “I might have something. It won’t be full coverage.”

The Retributive Brute shrugged, “Better ‘en nuthin’ miss. . .”

“Brigandine,” she said, holding a hand out.

He took it, “Name’s Smackdown.”

A blazing trail of Purple and Gold Fire blasted down the hallway with a sound like that of a power saw. Mick, in the form of a hummingbird, pulled himself to a stop for only a second, as those around me jumped at the noise. His form flickered and he was off like a shot back down the hallway, the titanium spear I’d made previously springing into existence, the golden flame-designs glinting in the fluorescent light of the convention center’s hallway.

“Dude, the fuck?” Herb asked as I caught the weapon, a sentiment the others openly shared.

“It was Mick, you know, your cousin,” I replied, handing the weapon to Smackdown. It took a second, but the glow of his power spread down the shaft of the weapon, empowering it. *Bingo.*

“How’d he?” my teammate asked, making a dropping gesture. I shrugged.

“Ask him later,” I said, turning to nod to the Dragon-bot walking up towards us with a box, the robot the same model as the one inside with Alexandria. While humanoid, it was obviously a robot, as the hips were to wide to hold a human’s frame, and like the rest it was draconically themed. “How can I help you Dragon?”

“I’ve been instructed to give each you one of these,” she replied, voice maturely feminine, like a woman in her mid-thirties, and not sounding artificial in the slightest. I accepted the armband she offered, activating it as Herb looked at me inquiringly.

“With how bad I’ve heard these fights getting, it might not survive,” I commented. “Though, with the Endbringer Truce, booby-trapping these would be the *height* of stupidity, so I see reason to say no.”

That got me a few confused looks from the other heroes, and, as expected, Dragon only had the body language she wanted to show, but Herb took the proffered armband, as did Tyrone and Boojack. Curtis waved his away without seeming to care, though he paid close attention to the one he was supposed to receive until the sand-woman took it instead.

An arrow appeared on the armband’s display, which turned into a map of the city, as Dragon said, “You have been assigned to Alexandria’s group. Do you need mover assistance?”

I wanted to tell her that I didn’t want to be anywhere near Alexandria, but having a member of the Triumvirate there when Levi first arrived would likely be helpful. “No, we’re good,” I told her. It seemed obvious, but I double-checked, “So this tells us what building we’ll be meeting on top of?”

When Dragon replied, confusion was evident in her voice, “You are meeting at the intersection of Cypress and Warren, not on top of anything.”

“Doesn’t Leviathan start *every* fight with a tidal wave? Doesn’t having everyone on street level make that. . . kinda dumb?” I had to ask.

“Ensuring mobility was deemed more important, over my objections,” she replied, a bit of frustration in her tone, giving me a slight nod. “Good luck out there.”

I returned in kind before she walked off, “Same.”

Herb and I arrived our designated location, the others having split off. Boojack had left to go track down Raida, Tyrone to go shadow Eidolon, and when asked Curtis just smiled and said, “Wouldn’t *you* like to know?”

Before I could respond that, *yes I would. That’s why I asked,* he was off like a shot, having turned into a pure-black lion, a second pure white one, his Stand, seeming to jump out of a nearby alley and keep pace with him.

Herb and I dropped down at the intersection, cars still parked on the side of the road, and found ourselves the only ones there, the rest likely still in meetings or doing the entire meet-and-greet thing. If we were sticking to Alexandria’s plan, that’s where we should be as well, but that wasn’t what we were doing.

When Leviathan hit the shore, we’d be on him. I’d take his attention, letting the others respond, while Herb acted as support, fast, but not strong or tough. As the fight progressed, he’d take a greater role, but in order for his healing to work he needed to *be* strong enough to hurt Leviathan in the first place. We’d talked it before, and if he was able to use Leviathan’s Hydrokinesis then Herb would only use his version to cancel out Leviathan’s, instead of trying to out-finesse the thing which had been created with the power while keeping Herb’s contributions deniable. The plan was for me to do the same, but that was looking increasingly unlikely to occur. Herb kept watch as I tried to meditate, floating in the air with my legs crossed, turning my gaze inward.

Personal Shields were still there, sitting in the back of my mind, but it wasn’t the same as yesterday. Before It had felt like I’d hold the Flames of my copied powers in a space between spaces, bringing them forward and interweaving my own with it, my own power almost puppeting it, but always separate. Now, it didn’t feel separate, but almost grafted to my own power, the point where my original abilities ended and the one I’d taken from Glory Girl began blurred to the point it seemed indistinguishable. I felt myself start to slip, but with a force of will held myself on the edge of what felt like an a̷̫͉b̜̣̠͙̹͎͍y͔̩͉͞s͏̘̱̬s̯͔̯͎͈͢.

I̺͟ ̞͎l̘o͎̹̹̩̮o̺̖͖̖k̶̼̯e͇d̪̹̞̬͎̮̩ ͖̠̪͎̞̯ͅin̬t̷͙̭o̠̬ ͏͇̲̬a ̬͔̙̝͙S͏͈̬̯̜͓ͅe̩͖̫̩͇͘a͚ O̫̙f̤͕̣͡ ̠̗͔͖̰̥P̝̦̥u̖r̙p̗̯͖̀l̶͍ẹ̙͎̤ ̛̱͍̝̗̮͙&͈̟̼̖̘̩͕͜ ̙̤̱͇̠͖̬͝Ṛ͖̰̫͚̻̞ẹ̸̖̼̪̯̣͕d̨͓̮̼̟̜̭͉ ͚͙̩F̲͙̼̰l̯a̭̫̭m͔̥͚͖̣ẹ͎̜, ̞͙̜͎̰̝f̱͔̞͟l͇͉͙̹͖o̘̘̻̤̻w͏͖̱̬̟͇̝i҉͉̝̫̪̜n̲g,̟͇͍̱̠̠̰ ͔̺͚͚͔ͅb̛̘ú͍r͈͉̫̼̗͈͜n͔̦͈̲̳͓ing̻͎̭͕͕̹͈,̱̼͔͇̰͝ à̦͚n͝d͎̜ ̴s̠̠̱̀p̪͕ͅi̹͈͉͡n҉̳n̡i̷̫͉͚̼̣̗n̨̺̯̥ǵ̙ ͔̫i̡̼̲͇n̢͔̮͇̙̙͖ ͖̞̬͖͕̀w̰̱̲̠͞ͅa̘̞̩͙̮̬̦͘y̖̺̥s̮̯̟̲ͅͅ ț͇͙̤̬h̗͙͕͎͇̼̭a̗̬͉̯͕͍t͉̻ ̤̬͍f͚͎̲i̭̯̬̝̱͕͡r̖̥̰͓̯e͕̮͍ ͞s̺h̷̪̭̩̦o̻̺̥̹̭͈ul̵d͕͍̠ ̹̞̮̲̲̘n̫͖͉̟ͅo̺͖͖̮̤̺ṱ̷͔.̞͟ ̣̟̀I̻n ͙͎͓̀t͟h͢e̷͎ͅ ̼̩͞ò͎͈̜͕͔ͅͅc̲͈̹͙̣e͉a̶n̶͈̳͓̲̪̝̻ ͡o̸f̮͖ ̼̘̹̲̳͚͟ͅi͙͓͍͙̫͙͓n̯͠ç͚͇̯a̷͈͉̞͖͚̬͇n͏̗̥̱̙̪d̦͇͕̻͕̹ę̟̲sc͇eṋ͇̥͎̘̤c͕e̝̮͡, ͇͔̳̫̤a҉̳ ͔̰̹̭͖͠b͏̰͔͇̜o̮̱̥̟n̟̫̜̤̝f̴i͇̳r̲̣̹̭e̖̝̩̮͕̤̳͡ ҉͉̗̟̮̩ͅo͔̼̱f͏̱͖ ̗̼̰̩ͅW̶̙hi͇̬̫̭t̵̬̼e͏͕̱͔̲͚̳ ̪͢&̥͖͉͚̼̙͜ ̷̩G̸̫̯͓͚̬̟o̴̼l͇̝̜͕͇͇̦d̰̱̖͈͡ͅ ̘̭̀b̬̳̭̫̝̗̫͝u̼͞r̗n̮e̟̖͕̣̬d̜͖̹͔̺,̴̺̺̫̬̞̝ ̫͇̫̬̙͘t̸e̟̮͕̤̙n̻̥̬̱̝̦̹ḍ̟̳͙͔͕ͅr̴͖͉̹̼͓̭i̵̠̻l̪͍̥̞̫͇͕̕ş ̩o̖̘̮f͏̦̖ ̟͓̤͚́i͖͍̬̱͟t̢͓ ̞̟s͎͚͔͚p̴̙̖̼̠͓r͍ȩ̲͙͍̰̦a̦̭̬d͔̼i̫͕̰̭͘ng̹͔̪͙̦͔̮ ̨̻̥̹̫͉o̫̤͞u͜ţ̟̦̗̖͕ ̛̭̮̪̲̪̜̲a̯͉̩̳͓͜ͅn̢͈͖̗d͙̗̀ ̡͇̩͇̱m̗̱̖̼̠͡i̛͙͍͔̱͓̱xͅi̗̣͕̞͝ͅn̸̟͇̼͖g ̛̜̰ẃi̺̦̲̜̘̟̣t̪̳̘̖̗̪h͉̝͎̭̦̻ ̸̭̳̗̬̼͕̝t҉̩̫̬̬h̷͉̭̹̺͕̩͈e ̳̹̣̱̖̝͡F͏̜̗̝̘ḽ̥̜̯̫̗̪a͉̪ͅm̴͈e̴̼̼̠̳s̮ ̻̯̝̹͙̺a̮̗̖̫̭l̼͖͔͎̼̖l̯̲ ͇͚͉̟͘a҉̬̳̫̙r̬̰͙̳͔̝o̬̝͓̼̟u͓̘̳̭̫͞ņ̮͍̤̱̗͇d̯͕͝ ̮̞̖̣i͓̣̝̪͉̼t̞̦͇̭,̰̺̦̼͇ ̸͚a͙̻̫͚̣̮̱s̻̦̗̱̫ ̟̤̺̻͔̤t̨̙̠̪͉̭̻̙h̻̻͍̯̖͈o̳s̼̞̘̥͝ͅe҉̼̮̹̪ ̲͙̥͙̥̱̥͞s̝͖͉̜͚̙͔a͔̜̙̲m̘̪̮͞e̢̘͓̪̗͕ ̢͍͚̟̼̱̟̖F̨̺͍̪̝l̵̦̘̘̯ͅḁ̸̼m̜̪̀e̖͖͕͈͖̣͉s̴̱͖̻ͅ m͖̺͖̲̣á͕de͕͓͙͕̜͔͝ ̰̪̥̘͓͞ͅr̝͕͘o̘̺̪̲̜̩̥o̖̤m̰̻̞̮ ̧̖̩͓f͇͙͍̩͓̥ͅo̬͔͖̭̫̼̺r̸ ͚̙͕͇̗͉̮i̳̮̻̮͉̻t͖̣̙͙̯̳ ̞̹̬́tọ̴̥͚͕̜̜ ̜͉̫̜͙ͅs̢͍̗̻̰̳͉͈p̛̺̼̪̣ͅr̪e̢̩̥̬̬̣̻̤ad̡,͖̭̠̠̯͠ ̹̬͉̰to̜̱ ̱̲͔̖̫f̬̞̪͍͜loͅẉ̴͚̪̹,́ ̫̻̩͇͘t̻̞̬̲o̵͚͔͔͍ ̠͙͎̼̳́ͅg̜̥̣̰͉ŕ͉͎͈̖̙o̘͚̘̤̫͍̬w̡͇̩͉̞.̪͎̻͜

A͙̪̣͝ṣ̠̱̹͟ ̠̹͕̟̱I̴͍̥̫͕͎̮ͅ ̠̣s͖͔̟͖̖͢t̜͇͘ar͇͍̖̠͚͞e͇̞͎͜d̙ ͍͈i̘͇͎͠n̖͍͈͙͉̝͡ţ͚̩̤o ͓͇̩͇̗͎̹t͓hơs҉̬é̫̹̮̘͉̪̺ ̵̦͙f̙̮l̩̖̝̱̪͖̖a͕ͅm͔e̵̠̫̲s͔̺̳̯̗͓̞,̡ ̘̗̥̳̣̳ͅa̮̞t̵̺̙t̳̭̯̲͓̭e͇̜̦̙̣m̠̠̲̗p̯t̮̘͈͎̪ḭ̴̺̫͕̖̠n̗g̰͔̦̜ ̖͙͕͇m͖ý ͈̀ow̗̰̥̳n͏̱̙̪͇̗ ̲̭̦͎͚͇͓b҉͎͇̝ṛ̵a̷͓̜̥̼̰n̮̗ḓ̡̱̣̦̠ ̙̜̮̹̝͇͟of͙̹ ̖̬̯̱͝p̢͕y̮͡ró̬̯̖̦m̨̳͓a̢̹̦̥n͉͕̖ç̘̝̪͍̱̱y̫͉͚,͏͙̹̘̥̜̤ I̞̤͓͟ͅ ̘̫̼n̢̯̳͍̜̻o҉̞̹ͅt̹̻̝i͏̙c̖͓̦̩̼̤̰e̛̬̘̣̬̥ḓ̳̼͍̫ ̡͍̳͕͍̼̟s̥̭̲̯͠o̧̤̼̩̲me͖͇t̥̱̳͙͟h̘̝̯i̼͔̳̗͙̲̻n̩͖̻̟͓̝g̛̩̤.͖̼̹̺̣̪̺͡ ̸.̹̼̳̪̺̥ ̦̮̕ͅ.̢͍̝͔ ̡͉̙i̹̻̮̯͉n͎̲̪̯͕͔̰̕ṯ̲̟͙̲̲e̬̱̰̝̞͝r̵e̴̖st͔̳̪͕i͚n͏̙͕̱g̖̹͚.͍̥̞͙͙̺̫ ͡I̛̠͙̤̯̪͓t͍̙̯͖̻͓͎ ̝͔͝w̸̼̙̫̮a͉s ̥̠͔̙̟̞͙̀o̩̗̬̞̹͡n͕̩͕̫l̨̼̱̺y͏̝͉ ̧̭̬̜̲t̵̤̻̜hr̛̯̤̫o̯̞̝̗̯̩u̵̻̥͎͓̖g̲̠̗̖h͏̣̙̝͓̤ ̝̼̼͖̗͠w̨͉̪̬̮à̫̺̯̻̙͚̙t̯̘͚̯̳̩c̸̻͈͎̣̥̠̙h̠̼͠i̛͓̪͙n͏̻̙ͅg͏ ̗͖̯̖̙̰̝t̬̟̙̟̥́h͇ȩ͈m̯̪̳, ̴̟̲̤̜t͙͔͎̱h̶r̸̠͍̘̺̟o͔u̙͍͙̹͟g̶̼̜̼͉͚̜h̤͈̙̣̮̞͉ ̻͈̥̰̭̤̀t̨̯͉̜̰͎̹͔a̟͙̼ͅk͚͉i҉̯͇̦̭̩͉͖n͇̣ͅg̱̲͟ ̜̩͇ͅin͙ ͕̬t̲̼̫̠̩͟ͅh͏̲͎̰e ́e̦̣̫̖̫̠̱t̰e͇̘͉̩̩͕̦r̦͉̝͚n͕̗͚̺̥̻͘a͍̬l̫̦l͖͖̞̟̬̘y̦̺̲̦̘̖͇ ̜ͅș̟̱̤̙͍̩pḭ̞͈͉̮͢ͅr̼͍͙͙a̧̫̼̞̝̰͙͙ĺi͇̘n͎̠ͅg͓̲̝̠̠̤̠ ͈͇͙͇ṯ̪̺̞̗ò̺̭͔̰͖ṇ̨̯̱̬̭g̖͙͈̫͘u̻͉̙͉̗̦̕ę̲̯̖͔̜s͍ ̞́ọ̻̯͙̥̪f̳͓̘̱͙̱ ̙͎̦̙̭ț̥h͎͔͙̲̝͙͔e̹̥̜ ͍̣f̡͖̪͍̯l̤a͉̰̻̖͈̺m̨̯̳̞͈̞͚̫e͡s͍̮̩̞̥͖̠ ̝̝̩̫̮̹̹t̜̖̜̗͙͘ͅͅh͎̻a̹͇̩̦t ̜͈̫͢b̠͍͎̟͚̰̀u̱͈ͅr͔̜̬͚̟͟ne̤̲̹̩d͔ ̨̣̙̻̻̭a̯̦͙͕s͜ ̖̲͠f̵͉̜̮̠̼̬a͕̫̩͎̱̹̠͘r̸͓͕̬̪̗̭ ͘a̬̱̯̼s̸̤̪ ҉͇m̼͙̻̜y̵̹͚̤̳͎̝̯ ̶̞̻̝̤s̶͕͓̦̼̝̘̗i̻̼̺̬̪͉͇͜gh̠̺̞t̟͖̲͎͈̦ a̞͔̼̺̹̗l͕̜l͙̹̬o̼̦̞̙̝̹w̡e̷̘̜̞͕̦̭̗d̹,͏̭ ̫̼̩̦̫̼̱̀ṭ̥͉̦̟̣h͇̙̗̫̱a̼̮͕̳͍͙t̻̙͔͠ ̴̣̟̘͇͍̪͕I̢͙͖̱̥̻͙ ͙͇̯̼n͓̪̫ot̳̳̰̻̮̟i̼̠͇̝c̭͔̙̰̹̳͔e̶̝͍͓̗d҉̼ ̕p̡̤͔͖a̪̜͍̙̞̝̣t͚̫̳̜t̜̠͍̀eŗ̫͇̙̻͈ͅṉ̸̭s̞͙͙̺͠ ͙̩̺͠ͅṣ̱̖͙t̫a̗̟̠̙̺r̪̬̟̞̘̤̀ͅt͙̟̣̝̜̰̺i͎̟̲̠̼̳n͜g̖͖ ̠͝t̤o̮̝̭̩ ͎̣̟e̳̺̥̺͖̪͖m̶̜e͉̩͎̟̤̲͔r̡̻̟̹͙̱̰̻g͇͚̭͓̭ę̗͍̥.̥̻̖͕ ͉͙̭̫W̡͕̖̼̟̙̰͚hi̮̗̠̻͇ļ̖̣̭̳̪̗e̵̘̲̘͉̟̙͉ ̭̲i̷͕̯͈͔͇̗n̵͓͓̠͚̦ ̶̠̻̜̫̘c̗͇͔̦̻̙͍o̰̻̪̺͇̺̕n̳̗͕̖̪͖̜s͏̥̜̭t̷͇a̶̮̳̯n͏͇t̢͙̫͙̦̤̰ ͙̬̳̗̟m̀ọ͚̳̳̱͈̗t̢̹̲̣̤̲̤ͅi̟̹̞̕o̺̲̞n̡̺,̢ ̨s͖̼̝̪̹h͕͟a̼̹͎͚̹̜͍p̙͓̯̼̪e̪̙͕̤s̠͔̞ ̳s͎̪͔͢ta̱̰r҉̱͇̪t͕̹e͖̫ḑ̠̜ ̸͎̺̺̫̫̙̦a̩͙͙̰͚p͈̯͠ͅp͍̖͙̹̮e̻͠a̙̦r̶͕̩͖̫i͍̥̙͈͉n̩̹̼g̜̭̪̥̺̪.̙ ̪̻͠C͕̖͝o͝n͜s͇̮̙̱̀t̫͓̳̦ŕ͈͕̳̪̙̮ù̫͈̰c͕͎͓̼̱͓ͅt͉͖͈̲̦̲͓s͕ ̨̰̰̟͔̝o̡̭͕̯̫̠̣̞f̭̬̻̱̲̣͜ ̮͍̰͍͍͉F͍͘ĺ͓͚̩͓̠̘a̞̪͡m̦̮̪̤͔e̝̣̹͕̖̜̠ ̵͔t͈h̯̥̙̜͉̬͠a̼͔̹̩ͅṯ̗͇̖̥͜ ̛̼̪̲͙͓͍c̰̣̤͍̰r͠e͎͇͍̭̩͙͘a͓̝t̙e̝d͔ ̰̠c̛̝̻͖̘͖a͍̦̲͚͍̟̪v̺̳̙̼̩̬͚͡i͓̝̥̝͕t͔͈̳͍̣̭̱i͎̦͖͖̙͍e͏͈̞̯̩̺̳̲s̠̠ ̟̲͓̞̦̬i̜ń͓̫͙̟̝͕͇ ̵̬̝͙̩̮t̴͕̳he̶ ̱̫͇̟͔̀c̢͕͔e̵̙͓a͇͝s̢̻̰̖̯e̵̠̮̪̙l̯͚͚̜͇ͅḛ͈̺͝ss̡̪͓̤̳͓͓ ̠̟͔̗̹̼͟c͈͚̗̗̭̞o҉̤̯n҉̪̹͔fl̤͟a͏͈̹̣̼͚g̙̫͙r̜̼̤̹̹͍͡ạ͔͕͙͎͠t̖̳̮i͚̲̲̰̘̞o͜n.̢̪̰ͅ

̀M͕ͅo̴̺̣̼̤v̨̱i̤̼͍̗̜̱͝n̩̣̦̬̞͕ͅg̱̞͚͝ͅ ̗̮̟͍̼b̯̫͍a̼̮͎̗͢c̸͓̰k͈̝͎ ̞̮͍̥̳t͖̟̙̯̭͟o̸͈͉ ẁ̥̠̳̤̲h̨̘̺e̖̩͈̪͍̫̳͜r̗e̪͔̮ͅ ̤͉͕͎͞ͅP͉̪̬̟͕͢e̢̘̜̠r̶̜͓̭̼̗̩͚s̟̥͇̤̰o̸n̛̳͍̖̰͕̦a͇͎̩̫̼̱͓̕l̴̺̝̳̹̩ ̩̥Ś̖͉̼h̰͙̤̰͉i̟͕͉̹̼e̼̪̱͇̮͇̳l̺̘̪͖͖̙ḓ͇͉̬̥͙͖i͈̘n͚͚g ͉̭w̻͉̰̠a̰̙̟̗̗͎s̲̣̺̙͙ ̗r̶͖̯͎̲o̶̙̹͚͎o̡͕t̢̲͙̬̰̠e̹d͉͢ ͎̗͍̖͉͕́i̧n͇͈t̶̙o̖̞̬̜͇̟͍ ̗͈͎͠m̼͎̺̫̬͡y ̯͍p̦͕̩̬̤̩o̪̼̜w̰͟ȩ̝̦r̟͍̘̹,̛̼̠ ̡̝I̲ ̫c̜͈o͍̭u͎ḻ͟d̛̗̪̠̣̘ ͙̭ḅ̨̺a͠r͚̦͠e̯l̳͈̣y̯ ̸̦̳̼͓̭̯m̺a̷̲͓̘k̭̩̹͖̜e̶̘͍͓ ̫͔̞̼͝ͅo̗̖͎̺̩͡u̶̖̠t͓̳̥͍̳͖ ̺̻͎̬̖͔͔̕s̮͍̙̫͡i͎̱̳̣͔̱̗m̼͇̘͍̗i̱̱̦̝̯lar̙̩̰ ̹C̵̼͎̘o̠̫͈̯̱n͕̦̖̺̗̳s̢̰țr̟̺̟̘ͅu̶̬̱c͈̯̜͕̦͉͝t̛̩̞͉͔̖s͙̻̦̮̩͖͡,̱ ͉̠̜h̫o̯̦͚͝ͅl̸̮̭̠̪̯̪di̢̯͖͉͚̗̮̹ǹ̦̦g̬͚̰̘̘ ̫̝͓̲͉̳̳͜i̮̗t̶͚͕̼ ̛̭̖̹̬͙̝į̲n̤̘͇͜ ̘͈p̢̣̱l̛̯̥̖͍̩à̳͍͈̩̙͍ͅc̥̥͙̞̯̦e̴̻̯ ̢͇̭̤̰̯̻͓a̼̻̰̲̗̯͇͞n͉͙̯͙͍̞̕d̙ ̨g̥̫̯i̙̯̯̳͘v̬̩̬̣̮͚i̛̪͇n͎̺͓͖͎͔g̦͕͙̗͎̱ ̕i̡̬͖͙̟̲͚t̢͖̞̝͖̩ ̡͓̜̥̫̮a̡̩̪̣ ̡̗̬̠̥̖f̷r͕̙̘͓͔̯a͔͞m̺̩̹̙̲̟e͚̬͈͙wo͏r͏͕͓̟͍̙̙k̰͕̱̮ f̗͓r̲͔o͎̟̫͢m̱̜ ̢͕w̤̞͚̥̯̣̤h͏̩̭̺̗͉̘̘i͘c̨͖̱͍̰̮h͍̠ͅ ͏͇̖̞̳̬͔t҉̮̪͉͈ͅo̟̬̺̮ ̴g̴͈̝r̗̹̥̣̦̠͝o̥̮͍̻w̵̠̗̮͔̖̲. ̥̖̯̩͕̯̜͟I̵̳͉̦̹̗͍̳ ̙̥̺̱̪̜͚p̨̙̫̱̟̱u̢̩̙̫̙l̡͙̫̻͎̞ͅͅl̵̖͍͖̬̞̳e̴d̺͚͈͜ ̥͙b̪̗͎̣̖̱a̰̣͉͓͇̰̱̕c̳̥̻̜̝ͅk̴̘̰ ̴̤͉̰̘̰͓͎t͖̤̲̩̻́r̯̠͖y̭̬̳̬ͅì͕̳̯̞̣̪n̢̖g̬͓̩̺ͅ ̴͙̟t̷͓̦̻̭͔o͙̭̹͞ ̠̪t͚͚̼̦͔̞̺a͏̖̗̣̞̤͚k̭͈͎̕e̖̳̰̠͇̘͕ ҉a̡͇͓ ̨̻͔̠̟̲̩̰w̸̠id͉̤e̪͓̥͔r̫̫̣̞͞ ̛͕̪̰̮̘͖̜v̝͉̺̭̝́i͉e͏̜̯w̬̠̗̲͖͎̦͢ ̥͈̙̝͍̖͝o̼̳͠f͔͙̳̩ͅ ̲̭͈͢w̳̟͖̻̪̘ͅh͎a̶t̪͓̥̭̳̟ ̷͖̬̰͙̫̮s̞̹̗̘͍e̡͔͕̟̥e̡̳͓̱m̜̹͙̲e̳̞̠̟͉̩͓d͕̦̣̖̙ͅ ̲̤̫̰̀ḻ̥i̥̰̞͙̻̯̼k̻̯̳͇̲̲͠e̞̰̟̰̪͚̻ ̸͔͉͓̟a̝͔̱͙͍̣̪̕n̢̪̜̭ ̙̙i̳͙n̲̞̰̣f҉̙̖̱̗̯̠i͈̖n͕͘i̫̹̦̥̤̪ͅt͎̩e͈ i̫ń̪f͔̟͕̦̳̀e͈̗̲ŕ̺n̠̼̙o̷̪̰̞,̛̦̗ ͜t̤̭͢ryi̘ṉ̟̟g̷͓̲ ͉t̫͍o̖̠̘ p̶̜̠͉͕̥ͅi̜̪̪̤͎͈c̞̖̱͕̼͜k͙ ̤̬̠̘̟o̬̬͉̟͇͟u͚̬̤̖̫̕t̸̩̜̬̖̖ ̼̫̙̭̘t̬̮̣̙̙̤h̗̪̮̪̦̤e҉̙̬̦̙̟̹ͅ ̻̹̭͈̻C͈̲̙͓̤o͡ṇ͎͕̳ș̡t̥̯r̥̫̗͚̣͙u͎̖͈̰͇͘c̻͢t̷̲̬̰̣͎̟s̝̜̼̜̯ ̺̘̲̻̣f͖͉̰̪o̟͎͎̰͕̞r̶̝̱m͈͝i̟̲͕͈̭n̻̥̘͙̙̺͎g͓͈͚̭̬͇ͅ ͚̼̯̞̳̗i̡̭̬͕n̢̺̯ ̤t̤͕h̵̰̯͈͈̙e̴̲̯͖̖̳̞ ͇͇̙͉c̫͙͙̻̟h̝͙͉u̸̼͓r̳̩̼̗n̙̺̪̕i̸̳͉̫͎̜n̮͈͖̘̹̕g͏̬̜̗̳ ̥͇̳̟̤e̖̲̰̩̙̲x͈̟͔̞̤̦́p̧͍͔̞̺̝̗e̵̼̤̩͎͙n̼̥̹̤̕ṣ̛̦̦̖͍̱͈e̢͉̦̮̣͚ ̞of̮ ̭̲͕̘̯̠̤F̟̰̗̺͙ḭ̹̮͖͎͖r̩e̙̤̝̺̣̲ ̛͚̲Ị̝͔͉̬͎̬ ̸͙̪̩͖w̝͇a̗s̖̪̜̝ ̢̹̠̙̥̮ͅͅa̯̼̗̯͙̜bo̗̞̟͘v҉͈̺̙̫͕e,͏ ̡̝̜̰̬w͖̱̬͕ͅͅi͇̘̣̺̩̖t̜̣̹̺͍͍͔h̭̗̠͕̳͜iņ,̷̺͔͚ ͇͉͘a̪̪̼͈̱̤ͅn͎̤̗̘d͏̭͕͖̲̱̣ ͈͕̩̭͍̖͠ͅc̙̤o̮̗̫̲̻̜͢n̨̝ṯ͕a̺̠̣̦̼͓i̢͈̜̟̞ͅn͖̝̰̳͓e̡d̺͍͝ ͜a̹͙l̹̦̼̥̤͓͞l͇̼̹̱̀ ̟̺̻͚̼͍a̷̰t͓̱͟ͅ ͝o͝n͕̜̤̣̥̟ͅc̘͢e̯̲̗̣̞̬̬.̧

͕T͚̲̕h͓̰̰̼o̶̭̪͇̤͉s̨̗̗̱e̮͍͖͘ ̨a̙̳͠r͕̬̥͎o̥̤͍͍̺͠u̹̦n͍̦̞̲͇̖ͅd̢͕̘ ͔̲t̜͟he͖͕̲̮̯ ͍̯͖̪͟W̴͔͙̙̹h͓̥̞̘̰i̟̫̱̱̙̯͍͡ṯe̦ ͇̱̭̞̘͈́&ͅ ̝͉͕ͅG͔͖̞̫̳ó͈͕̞̰͎ͅl̹̦͖̘̱͔d̩̤͇̜͚ ̸͕͔̯̪̱̗F͉̼̥̩͖l͍̳̭̪͝a̷m̘̬̮̘̮͚e͙͇̯̥͝ͅs̞̞͖̖̬̗ ̴͎̰̱̱̱̦w̺͚͍̞͕e͞r͎̹͓͓e̴͉̟͎̠͕̻ t̥̳͚̰̬̞͝ͅh̰̘e͖̝͕̩ ̦̗̹̱̟̥͡ͅm̺̰o̯̖͡s̱̬̙ţ͎ ̞̮̳͖f̛͉͖̲o҉̺r̜̣̜̘̝̥̙͟m̮̮̮e̫̣̮͎d҉̱̝̪͖,̻̱͉͙͇̞ ̞̩͢o͍̖̼̭̱̞͕n͘e̶ ̻͟a̛̠̞̰̹̣͕l͍̣͍̝̫m͖̟̗ò͓͍̤͉̦̯s̡͚̳͖̠͕͇t͉͇̭̳ ̞̥̪̦c͉̮͖̼̻̗͞o̸̠̲͕͚̲̣̟m̳̮̟̰̜͟p̗͈̝le͇̭̺t̩e̫͎̝̘̗̕ͅ, ̜̲b̟̞̗̘̪u̗̱͕̹̣̦ͅt̼̀ͅ a̘͓̤̫̰s̡̯͓̖ ̕I̵̠ ̜̣̪̱͟c̹͢a͚͎̙̞s̰̯̫͈͞t̳̖͢ ҉͓̖̠͍m̪͝y̠̥̮̘͎̪͠ ̟̱̺̥͜g͈̥a̵z̥͇e̯̝͎ ̷̬̤̱͓f͎͘u̻͍̰̹̻̘̥r̳͔̣̺̹t̶ḫ͓̦̳͉̙̞e̯͇͖̟̞̟͝r̸̼̬,̝̗̰̠͟ ̹͕I̧̜̺̣̘ ̹̟͖̜̤s̟͉͡a̳͞w̞̟̠̝͈̥̥ ͉͜d̹͈̟o̤z̤ͅe̯̰̤n͕̦̬͢ș͕̼͓̪̫ ̴̣̮m̫̯̠̣̮̭̀ͅo̹̪r͏͕e̫̱̹̤̩͘ͅ,̡̟̺̤̭͖ ̩͔͇̀t͚͉͖̼͠h͔̰e̠̺̞͚̠͙̻n̪͎̙̦̝͉̦ ̳͖̳͖͢ͅh̸̟u̢͎̝̫͚n͉̩̳̝̲̕d̖͕̻r̲͎̤̫̻e͓̠̗̠̱͈͚͢d̸͙̫͙͔s̶̮̖̟̬̳̖,̡̣ *ţ̨̯͔̫͎̳h͏̡̰̯̭̳̣̯̕o̵͎͍̹̝͇̞̩̲͠ư͈͚̺̗̕ş̗a̸͚̩͎͓̯n̴͖̥͟d̵҉̰̭s̙̯̙̰,̙̥̩͙* ***m̴̧̺̙̼̺̲͍̗̱̯̱͡ͅi̶̧̢̧̙̟͉̥̜̹̩̜̗̫̹̳̞̫̯̩͡ͅͅl̶̞̦̭͕̮̠̞̙̠͚͓͍͙͎͓͇̲̫̗̕͢͞l̛̜͇̲͎̮͍̖̝̖̝͟i̴̺͇̲̫̬̞̖͕̞̗͙̱̕͜o̴̴̡̖̥̼̖̰͍̘̬͎͓̭̜̦͟͢n̴̵̩̦̝̗͓̪̖͇͚͟͝s̴̫͎͈̘̪̰̲̲̤̘̹͜͟ͅ.̶̨̨̛͚̝̖̺̼̀ͅ***

͈A̺̕t͓̲̙͈͉ ̼t̜̹́h͙̬͈̜̗̣̻e͖̜͝ ̤͖͎̱e̷̗̯̘̗̫̯d̗g̜̣͙̜̼͓e͕̤̖̫ o̥͈̖̯̯̖̲͘f̝̭̺̳ͅ ͓̫̺̪̖m͎̱͕̳͔̹y͎̣͠ ̲͉̘͙s̬̠̖̕i̜̝͠g͕̜ht̖͇̯̹̘̱̕ ̘͙̬͚̪͕I͏̠̬̤ ̖͉̩̘͘s̴̤̮͉͎p̤͖o̷̦̯̘t̨̥t̺̜̥͓̟̣e̼̱̗͇̖͓d̨̘̫̥͕̘̫ͅ ̸̝a͟ ̞̘w̮̰̱̦͇ḥ͉̘̫͕̥̕a͔̩̦t̤̤͉̗̝͙ ̻̗̥̥͙͓̮̀s̥͈̳̪̭e͎̠e̢̬͔͇̣̫m͚̰̞̟è̱͉̝̘̼̙͕d͚̘̞̖̟͘ ͇̳̘ͅli̻k͖̟̳̱̥̞e̡ ͇̱̝̥̠̯̠a̧̪͍͈ͅ ҉̩bl͉̟̩̼͕̜̝ac̀k͇̦ v̼͉̼̦̺̠a͎̪̫̮͚̺c̯̻̘̗̜͉͜ụu̶͓̜͇͉m̬̣̣ ̧̩̤̞̦͔̬o̯̹̤f̦̟̱ ̝V̺̜̲̺̭͟o̥͎͚̪̦͙̠ì̤̟̘d̶ ͇̻̳̻̰t̲͖̣̟̗̭͉h̲̳̤at̢̘̠̳̲̹̞͕ ́s͙̘tr̖̖̰u̞c̬̝k̴̗̲̖͉̗ ̕m̵̱̝̤̯̟̝e̵ ̲̯͈̝̰̦a̟͕̩̹s w̴̖͖̭̱̱r͙̜̲̮̰̤o͎̭̞̙͕̭ng̣̹͓̬̩̣͚.̥̭ ̝͖͈̠̬̭I̛̺ ͙m͙̮̼̱ọ̭͎͕v̜̹e̶̟̭̪͔̻͖d̪ ̸͔̟̱͉t͙̜͈̦̣̻͠o̧̭ ̪͚̲̪̪͝i͓t͠,̸͍̝̠̤̯̬ ͠oṟ̳̯̪ ̣͙͚̥̲̰i̞͓̟̭̤͈̻͘t͏̦͔ ̺̰̙͓͕͙̀m̬͙̺̠͞o̟v̻̼̲̯́ḛ̴̦̖̙̳d̸̰͙͚ ͔̠t̶̙͎̲̜̩͉ͅo̵ ͖̰͖̩̘͍̺m̻̩̳e̴,̶͉̣͈͔̫̬̯ a̛͍̣n̜d͡ ̦͈̪̱I̟̺̥͇͞ ̛͇g̻͇ạ͖͔͕̝̲̩z̛e̛͎̦d̷͈̤ ̡̗̩i͏̮n͚̤͕̘͘t҉͙̫̻o̗̜̪̝̲͜ ̖̟t͉h̡̫̞̙̮̹̳̙e͏ ̜̜̰̕b҉͚͇̬͓͚l͇̠̮̠̤̺̯a̞̱̞͟ͅc̲̟̖͚͎k͚̗͎̥̟̦̮n͕̫̩̙͖̠̜e͘s̬̲̭̪̘̪̻s̘͡.͈ ̠̱̖̪O̵̫̭̯͖n͇͈͔̤̬ļ̘͈ỵ ̡͙̗i̘̳̟͖̮͠t̼ ̠̠͇͇͠wá̝̮͔͉̬s̨ṋ’̷͈̫̫̞̖̮t̞̬̙̘̬ ̩̳̟̪͉̳͘b̰̜̮l̩̭̦̝̘a̻͖̬͙̝̤c̙̘k̡͇̺ͅ,̟̺͡ ͕͕̘̠̜ͅͅṱ͚͎h̘̲̩̀ͅḛ̟̟͖͈̕r͓̖̥͈e͖̟̖̪͕̬͕͝ ͓̺̤̮̖ẉ̗h͚̫̰͉̤̕e̗̦͝r͏͔̦e̸̥̹̪͉ ̝̭͚̺͕͉̭b̤͕̰ar̺̗ͅs̖̦ ̨̠̠̣͉̹̠o͖̙̤̲͖̗͘f̖ ̦̮̼̗̳̠P̺͈̦ù̻̰̘̰̟̗̣r͚ͅp̗͈̣̳l̼̱̣̲̠̗͎e̫͚ ̱̳͔͙͞&̤̭͟ ͓̖̼̦̝̥́R̦̻̝̩̮͜e͖̮͜d̵ ̨̮͎̣͈̙̙F̭̠͎̼̪͎̗l͚̜̼a̵̫̼͉̦̰m̫͚̥̱͙̰̪ȩ̝̖̖͔͕ͅ,̺̥͔̥̘̗̞͠ ͈̭̜̮͡f̴̗o̪͙r̸͈̼̠̹̻̝g̀e̪d ̩̱̰̪̕s̭͈̯͍̳̤͖o͔̗̱̝ͅ ̯͈̳̯͢ț̙̻̕i̡̥g̩h͈t̰͕͚͚̪̰ly͕̱͚̦ ̸t̯͖͉̦h͎̀é̟̬y͏̩ ͓̬͠Ģͅl͇̗̤͟ó̤͍͍w̶̖̥͍̮͔͚e̜̥͚̮͓̘͘d̷̤̳̜̭ ̫͍̮̟͠m҉̮̣o̧̦̯̭r̴̗̤͈̠̣̬̩e͏ ͓̦͉̪̫̫t͇̻ḥ̟͇̦͓a͖͚n͍͓̖̤̕ ̷̥B̮̹͉̰͙̤͞ur̳͓̲̼̫̙̖n͟e̻̦d̼̲͢,̭ ́m͚̕a͓̫̩͉ķ̰̫̲̞ͅi̲̮͈n̜̳͉̤̳̘͟g̴̬̞ ̧̩̥̦̮̘̰a͙n̘͠ en̮̥o͓̝͓̗͢r͔̳̪̙m̨o͓u̵͈̜̣̗̭̥̥s ̳́C͔͓̼̯̺o̫n͏s̪̦̭͡t̴̞̟̫̯̤̗ŕ͙u͏c̷̼̣͙̝̳t̹̟̩̱͚̦̕,̸̞̼̹͎ ͈̼̬̙͝e͇̮̗̜̠͇̮a̪s̮i̟̺̱͖̹̬̟͟l͔͍͉y̜ ̛͔̺͖̤a͉̪̪͝ ̥͟h͇̳̻̠͔̻u̩̣̩n͉͍͓͓̣d̜͚͎r̛e҉̠̹̳d̩̲͖ ̣̹͖ti̫̪me̴̪̼͙͔̮ͅs̲ ͉̘̪̗ͅt̪̪̦̺̪̞̙h҉͎e ͏s̗̹͖̖͞i͚̠̥̭̞ẕ̵͍̥͎ͅe̟̼ ̱͍̟̯̤o̫f̡̞̫͍̯͚̝̣ ̬̜̜̺̠̬͡t̢͔̲h̭̰͈̦͕̖͓͟e͚̻̭͚̻͔͡ ̻̙̗͔̕o̠̖̱̫̙̱̟t̬h̝͕ͅè̲r͚̪̗̘s̬̺̩͓͈͖͇͡.̺͖̥ ̵͕̩̖̖̯I̫̫̗̠̹͔͘t̥̩ ̧̯̳ͅt͎̬o̜̕ó̺̺̻̙,͍̟̗̩͔͈ ̶͓͔̖̹w̧a̜̫͚͍̯̗̕s͚͔̭͈̮̘͓ ̛͚͕͈á͖̺͕l̲̺̳͖͚̼͈m̰̥͎o̵͔͇̳̗̺s̵̖̩͙t̠̳̹͚͓ ͉͔̪͉̭̩̟͝c̳̱͉͇o̤̹̜̬mp̬͉͙͓̙͔͝l͓͚̹̱̩̦͠e͏͕̻͍t̷̰̮̜͉̲͚̹e̷̤̰͉͖̭̳,͔̮͈ ̞̟̖̖̀t̹̣͖͙͟h̭͖̱̣̘̳̤e̙͜ ̵F̞̖̘̮͔̝ͅl̷̜̜a̭̙͈͈͍͠ͅͅm͇̯̺͙̙̺ȩ̱s͚͓̬̺͎̹ ̩͎̥̪̥̙̗a̭͕̞̪̩̤͝t̰̞ ̬̺͍͖̳̣͕ṯ̥͕h͇͖̩̪̩̹͠e̘͎̜̬̙̭͍ ̻e̝͚̙͉͔̩͓d̷͎̻̤̖̙̹g̡̻͇͕͚͎̺e̷̙͎̠̳ ̩̟͎͙͍̜c̸̞̩o̡n͜d̻͍̙̖͎e͈̗̜̭n̬͡s̵̫̲̥͎i̦͜n̥͕̠̹͈͢ͅg̪̯ ̤̼͚͠i̹͔̤̤̝n͈͔̻̲̺͙͖t͙̟̺͇̠o͔̖ ̙̖̙̮̼͍̭t͏͓͇͎͓͙h̼̜̹̖e̴͍̹ ̜̩̰̟f̡̟̟͙̪̺̤ͅi̜n҉̪͚̗a͎͈̬̳͞l͉̦̫̀ ͎̻̝͍͡p̠̘͍̼̤i̪̟̤e̳͇̭͓̭ç̭͓̹̗̖̺͍e̬͓̭ͅs.͍͙̮̘ A̝̺̫͢s̪̣̤͙͖͇̕ͅ ̡͖̺̗I͏ ̰͉͈͓͉̣l̖oo̧̘̘̠͖͕̼k͉͚͚͙̺̕e̜̱͉͔̹̥̯͠ḑ ̘̭̜͈̻͘fur̙͕̰̮͎͙t̠̰̩̬͖hè̲̖̭r͈͎͕̠̼͢ͅ ̫̙̺̫a̳̯f̩͎̣̰̩̲i̩̦̭͖͚͟e҉̟͚̼̗̫̺̦l̹̗͕̰̪̞̱d̷̬̙̦̹, I̩͙̭ ̗̲̦s͓͕̖̗̩͓͠a̵̳̟w̡ ̧th̺͕̗̳̞̲ḁ̺̰̫̹̙͍t̡,͇ ̲͢w̵͎̖̠͓̯͖h͏i̲̞̰͙̙͙͉l̫̲͉̣̮e̫̳͉̞͎̻͘ ̧͍i̦̥͠t̢̫̠͍ ͏w̱̠͖̩̯̩̳͢á̪̥̘ͅs̻̳͞ ̗̞̖̭͇̭̲͘t͎̝̯̪͘h̺̭̹̜e̷̠͙̳ ͕m̱͔̰̻ͅo̟͉̮̞̟͟s͚̤̱t͎̼̮̬̼ ̳̖̻̯̘̫̲͘c̗̦̫͉͘o̢m̡̞̘͍̞̠̪p̖̻̰̺̳̘ḷ̜͉̯͙̤e̖̦̞͍̜͢t̘̞̦̣e̯̮͈̳͉,͇̥͙ ̺̗̥̩̹͘i̲̤̱͖̭t͎ ̲̥̖̭̖͈̕w̻a̦̦̞̥̰̰̝s̹͚̙ͅn̞̠̭͉̯͍̺’͔̠̩ṱ ̞̖̬͖̥̖͞t̩̩̰̞̫̝̮ḥ̢ͅe̺̳͕̫ ͕̱̭͓o͕͉͓n̡l͟ỵ̼͚̮͖ͅ ͇̠͔͓̩̞on̵̫͕͓̤̫͚e̞̮̼͉̼.͏̗̺ ̫̬͉N̘̙̦̺͍̱o̩̼̹̞͕t̳ ͉̩b҉̱͇̦̪y͉̲̜̤͍͙ ͉͓̭̠͢a̖͙ ̷̤̦̹̻l̦͉̯̱̥̟on̶͈̺g̸̙̖̗̖̙̹͉ ̵̹̘s̢̖͔̤̹̣̳h̨̤̼̪̣̮̪͈o̤̖̜t̪̰̜͝.̛̥̼̰͕͔͕

I looked into a Sea Of Purple & Red Flame, flowing, burning, and spinning in ways that fire should not. In the ocean of incandescence, a bonfire of White & Gold burned, tendrils of it spreading out and mixing with the Flames all around it, as those same Flames made room for it to spread, to flow, to *grow*.

As I stared into those flames, attempting my own brand of pyromancy, I noticed something. . . *interesting.* It was only through watching them, through taking in the eternally spiraling tongues of the flames that burned as far as my sight allowed, that I noticed patterns starting to emerge. While in constant motion, shapes started appearing. Constructs of Flame that created cavities in the ceaseless conflagration.

Moving back to where Personal Shielding was rooted into my power, I could barely make out similar Constructs, holding it in place and giving it a framework from which to grow. I pulled back trying to take a wider view of what seemed like an infinite inferno, trying to pick out the Constructs forming in the churning expense of Fire I was above, within, and contained all at once.

Those around the White & Gold Flames were the most formed, one almost complete, but as I cast my gaze further, I saw dozens more, then hundreds, *thousands*, ***millions.***

At the edge of my sight I spotted a what seemed like a black vacuum of Void that struck me as *wrong.* I moved to it, or it moved to me, and I gazed into the blackness. Only it wasn’t black, there where bars of Purple & Red Flame, forged so tightly they Glowed more than Burned, making an enormous Construct, easily a hundred times the size of the others. It too, was almost complete, the Flames at the edge condensing into the final pieces. As I looked further afield, I saw that, while it was the most complete, it wasn’t the only one. Not by a long shot.

*They’re sockets*, I thought, letting out a deep breath as I pulled out of myself to look around. It was raining slightly, to the point that it could be brushes off as a summer shower, if one didn’t know better. Other Hos-*parahumans,* I corrected myself, shaking off the last of the last of what I felt, putting both feet firmly on the ground, metaphorically *and* literally. Other parahumans had arrived, easily two dozen, some glancing over to me as I stretched. Stretching and standing, I felt better. I’d get my powers back, it was just a matter of *time.* I’d spent. . . I checked my armband, which had a timer. *Nearly an hour? Fuck.* Regardless, I had twenty minutes before the fight started.

“You done?” Herb asked, nervousness and excitement vying for dominance across his face.

I nodded, “I think so. It’s just a matter of time.”

He snorted, looking around. “That’s not something ya got a ton of.”

I gave a shrug, “Better than not at all. I should have enough.” Even as I talked, another construct finished, forming another slot. Mentally reaching and trying to slot in Aerokinesis, just like I had Personal Shields, it wouldn’t fit. The sensation was similar to trying to walk through the doorway of a dollhouse, while technically it *was* a door, and you could theoretically fit a few fingers in, it wasn’t going to happen.

Without gazing inward, I couldn’t feel my copied powers, but I could get a sense of *weight* to them. Personal shielding was light, its limited nature resting lightly upon my power, as was Anthropod Control and Lightform. Aerokinesis was *heavy*, dense, and full of possibilities, as was Biokinesis and *Absolute Territory*.

“Eecee, final check in,” I said subvocally as I Saw the powers around me. They varied wildly, from Tectonic Aggregation to Paperform. “Things are good on my end. The issue’s been solved Panacea, will correct itself fully with time. Once we start unless you need assistance, spot Levi, or have vital intel, keep off the line. This is gonna get hectic, *fast*, and clogged comms help no one.”

They chimed in, one after another, including Herb. “Are you sure you’re okay?” Amy asked.

“Just installing new updates. Takes a while, but some functionality is still accessible after the first bit is done,” I replied, trying to obfuscate if someone was still able to listen in. Acoustokinesis was a denser power, though given it’s limited subtle combat uses, I likely wouldn’t have slotted it anyways. “Everyone focus on their tasks. Break’s cousin’s are out and about if you need help, as are Break and I. You all can handle this, and with any luck we’ll all come out of this with nothing that Pancea or I can’t heal. Eeem”

The others agreed, and the comms went silent, the rain starting to pick up. Break elbowed me and pointed as Alexandria dropped down into the intersection, a bus-sized quadrupedal Dragon-bot carefully landing on a rooftop.

The Cauldronite didn’t land, moving over to hover near the two of us. “We need to talk, come with me,” she commanded, turning and flying back upwards. I wanted to stay right where I was, but shot Herb a questioning look instead.

“Couldn’t hurt,” he shrugged, turning to a pterodactyl and following her.

I joined them on a nearby rooftop, several buildings away from Dragon but still in eyeshot of the team gathered at the intersection. Joining the other two, she asked without preamble, “How do you know what you know about the Endbringers?”

“I thought I shouldn’t say anything, and defer to my *betters?*” I riposted blandly, crossing my arms as the rain increased to a steady drumbeat.

She looked me over, body language loosening slightly. “There is a great deal of difference between informing those in charge of vital information and undermining a briefing. Tensions are already high, what you did didn’t help. If you have intel that can help, however, I would be grateful,” she stated, sounding sincere but firm.

I glanced over to Dragon, “Aren’t you worried about her overhearing us?”

Alexandria gave me a flat stare, or what I assumed was a flat stare, as the metallic half-visor that covered the top half of her face made confirmation difficult. “I doubt there is anything you could say that would require that amount of privacy.”

I knew I shouldn’t, but I couldn’t help myself. I was nervous, had dealt with one crisis already, and was about to fight a fucking *Kaiju*. My patience for this cloak-and-dagger bullshit was nearly non-existent. “If you say so, Becky.”

Alexandria, real name Rebecca Costa-Brown, blurred into motion. In an instant, hand flashed down to her belt, manipulating something, and a barely audible buzz joined the slowly intensifying rainfall. I waited, as if she *really* tried to kill me, I could slot Shadowform and be gone in an instant. “What do you know,” she demanded, a command far more than a question.

Herb glanced at me in concern, but I already had a story ready for this, on the off chance that Alexandria wanted to talk because she worked with my teammate. “I received an incredibly complex, incredibly focused accounting of what was going to happen in this city from a month ago until two months from now, with spotty information after. Things have already changed and improved to the point that only things that were true *before* the Thinker’s account are still reliable. You got outed, though the method of doing so will likely not re-occur. No, I can’t get another, the means to do so are beyond the capabilities of anyone I’m aware of. Maybe Ciara, but likely not, and getting to her in the Birdcage makes it a moot point.”

She went perfectly still, considering this new information as thunder cracked over the bay. When she spoke, her voice was void of anything other than commanding authority. “What else do you know?”

“A lot, though I’m not sure what you already do,” I shrugged. Technically it was even correct. As a Cauldronite, she was privy to a good deal of the secrets that would make me dangerous, even if that wasn’t what she was asking. “I know Endbringers don’t lose functionality when injured. They’re crystalline, made of layers, and the closer you get to their core, the tougher they get. You guys managed to skeletonize Behemoth in August, when he attacks India, and it wasn’t enough to even slow him down. When he *was* killed, he would’ve nuked half of India if The Warrior hadn’t thrown his ass into space. It’s why I know this is going to *suck*, because they’ve been holding back, and near the end Behemoth *wasn’t.*”

“You knew Leviathan was coming for a month and only told us today?” Alexandria challenged, cold accusation wrapped around the question like a viper as the rain thundered around us.

“If I did *nothing* and The Simurgh, who coordinates them, didn’t notice anything that we did? Probably? Think of all the things *you* did when we told you, which could’ve changed the result. It’s why we waited for independent confirmation, from a resource the PRT didn’t originally have access to, before telling you,” I stated, Herb nodding seriously.

“They can be killed?” she demanded urgently, the rain having increased to the point where it was becoming hard to hear her. Lightning started flashing faster over the bay, the peals of thunder coming with unnatural regularity.

“And if you can’t get them into Low Earth Orbit, they’ll wreck everything in a fifty-mile radius, or at least Behemoth would’ve,” I argued back.

“They can be killed. That’s all that’s important,” stated, flying down to those in the intersection who had started to move uneasily, many of them activating their powers. I quickly copied the ones I could, grabbing them almost automatically. I’d need to find some way to go over them later, but now wasn’t the time. Short of something amazing, like Sting, it would be better to stick with what I knew then try for the next ‘best’ thing.

I felt something finish, deep inside my mind, and I had a second slot open for powers. *Speaking of the next best thing.* I could slot in Legend’s power, *Absolute Territory.* However, if it was anything like Aero and Biokinesis, it would be *incredibly* skill dependent, and unlike those two appeared to be *incredibly* flashy. If I had had an extra day to prepare, or even a few hours to train, I might’ve, but I needed something I could use *now* and *wouldn’t* light me up like a Shard-powered rave.

As the White & Black Flames of Aerokinesis locked in place, it was like opening a pair of eyes I didn’t realize I’d closed. I could *feel* the air all around me. Almost automatically, I stopped being rained on, the drops diverted all around me. I mentally repressed that function, not wanting to stand out as Herb looked over at me and laughed.

“Air?” he asked.

“Air,” I agreed. “With room for one smaller power. Keeping it open, just in case.”

He gave me a searching look before shrugging, smiling broadly. “As long as you’re gettin’ ‘em back.”

I’d considered keeping it open for Leviathan’s Hydrokinesis, but while more subtle than Legend’s lasers, the issue of skill was still a relevant one. Mentally creating a dozen blades on the rooftop, out of sight of Dragon, they gave away their presence as rain splashed across them, creating small rain explosions as I unmade them. I hadn’t considered how the precipitation would reveal them, but fuck it, I still had far more skill with them then I would’ve with anything else.

“Vejovis?” Theo asked over the comms, breaking me out of my train of thought. “Um, You might want to see this.”

“Eecee, what is it?”

“Um. . . the shore’s kind of. . . gone,” he replied.

I lifted up to get a better look. Alexandria had taken the position in the center of the city, only a dozen blocks away from the Boardwalk and on a straight line from the bay to the edge of the underground aquifers. The monsoon that had arrived mad it harder to see, but Theo was right. The shoreline had retreated nearly a mile, leaving a wide open expanse of sand, rocks, and flopping fish almost hallway to the Rig.

I knew *just* enough science to realize what that meant.

“Fuck!” I swore over the comms. “Everyone, get airborne. Leviathan’s coming in hot!”

“Right on *time,*” my brother quipped, and I immediately regretted giving him an earpiece. He was correct though; it was one seventeen in the afternoon. That wasn’t the problem, however.

“Glory, get high enough you can see the shore. Vista, I’m probably going to need a power construct,” I commanded.

I strained my senses, trying to spot Leviathan coming like a hunting shark, hidden among the rain and the waves. I shouldn’t have bothered.

The sea on the edge of the horizon looked. . . *off.* It looked like it was higher than it should be, but only out over the bay. Even the ocean to the south, stormy as it was, seemed normal, but the horizon seemed to slant upwards, continue in a generally straight line, then back down. On it’s own, it would’ve been interesting, but with the *insane* amounts of drawback the shore had, it meant one thing.

Scanning the top, my eyes *burned,* and I could *See* him. An enormous geyser of Black & Green water flowed up over him like a gigantic liquid tree. The branches extended up into the clouds, gathering, filling, and agitating them to create the storm. The roots spread throughout the water below him, controlling the wall of water upon which he stood, urging it forward.

Leviathan was not going to send a small tidal wave into the city first, to soften up the opposition, playing the game with the ‘timer’ of ever increasing waves of water. He wasn’t going to sneak around stealthily, trying to achieve his goal while playing a game of cat and mouse with the parahumans trying to defend the city.

No, Leviathan was proudly riding a twenty-five-story tall tsunami, the kind that would destroy the city in its entirety. Leviathan was telling us that openly that, while the parahumans were preparing, so was he. Leviathan saw the defenses that had been raised against him, and decided to match the pot.

This was going to suck.