

Pendulum 0.

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

But no matter how much I focused or how hard I punched, the pile of rubble that was my target did not move and was not blown apart. It didn't even shiver, which would be a sign of at least *some* progress, however small.

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

Over the past several weeks, I'd slowly and steadily improved in the Ancient Celtic Martial Arts. I'd already gotten about halfway through it — I'd hit three of the seven “checkpoints” that marked my progress — and had gotten the hang of, if not mastered, half of the skills, the “Feats,” that were a part of it. As I'd thought when first starting out, the more my physical fitness improved, the faster and easier it was to get the hang of these martial arts.

Some of them would require a shield and a sword, or at least some makeshift piece of scrap that was close enough to count, but I'd deal with that problem when I came to it. Even if I had to salvage scrap from the scrapyards, I'd make do, somehow.

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

Most of the twenty-one Feats came pretty easily. They were more about increasing dexterity, developing strength, or training hand-eye coordination than mastering specific techniques, the way it seemed with other martial arts styles. It was about a way of moving rather than specific motions. Whether that made it superior or inferior wasn't something I could say — I'd have to go against someone on my level from one of those Eastern styles to really make any judgement on that.

However, there was one Feat that was giving me some difficulty.

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

The Thunder Feat was an army killer. A master could use it to kill hundreds of people in one blow, as Cúchulainn did in *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*. From what I understood of it, you could either use your own fist to deal the blow, like I was trying to learn, or you could use a thrown weapon, like a rock fired from the same kind of sling David had used against Goliath. It was hard to describe exactly how it worked, because the best way I could think of was to say that you focused your strength and your energy into your fist and released it at the end of the punch, but even that was a simplified way of saying it. In case it wasn't obvious, the name came from the sound it made when you used it.

Cúchulainn had killed...if I remembered it right, over a thousand warriors, just using this single technique. The first time had killed one-hundred. The second had killed two-hundred. The third, three-hundred, and the fourth, four-hundred. That easily, he'd killed a thousand people.

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

Of course, that wasn't why *I* wanted to master it. I didn't want to kill anyone, although in my darkest moments, I might have amended that to, “anyone except Emma, Sophia, and Madison.” On a

normal day, though, the thought of actually killing someone when I realized the potential power behind this skill turned my stomach. I never intended to use the Thunder Feat on another human being.

However, just a few days ago, the Simurgh had attacked Canberra. Heroes had gone over there to fight her, and some hadn't returned. I couldn't say I recognized all of the names of the fallen that were being memorialized in the aftermath, but that didn't matter; they'd all died, and they'd all died facing the scariest of the Endbringers.

And in the wake of the attack, Canberra had been quarantined. Even now, a wall was being put up to keep the people of Canberra inside, if it hadn't been finished already, so that what had happened in Switzerland didn't happen again. Thousands, probably hundreds of thousands, of people were stuck behind the wall and would never see the world outside it again.

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

Hearing about something like that, how could you not feel helpless? What if she came to Brockton Bay, next? Why would she? How the hell would I know? Nobody understood the Endbringers, what they were doing, or why. So what if she did come to Brockton Bay, next? Would Dad and I be stuck inside the city as a giant wall was put up to keep us in, if she wasn't driven away fast enough to stop her from turning everyone into a time bomb?

I had no idea what I could do to prevent that. The only thing that came to mind was to practice, pray, and hope that I could master these martial arts in enough time, that this Thunder Feat would do enough damage to force her away, and that if it didn't, one of the heroes in my repertoire had the power to drive her off. Maybe that was a fool's dream, maybe it was a vain hope, but if I didn't have at least an idea, then that would be the same as giving up and admitting defeat.

And as long as I could do something, I *refused* to let what had happened to Canberra happen to Brockton Bay.

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

As long as there was breath in my body, I would keep getting better and master these martial arts. Even if it took me until the next Endbringer attack, I couldn't just give up on it without even trying.

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

I punched the air.

“Ha!”

After one last punch, I stopped and let my aching muscles rest. My hands quivered and my arms shook, because I'd been training this for almost all of the past three days, and I'd had about as much success as I was having now. I'd been pushing against the instinct that told me this was currently above my skill level, just to prove that I *could* do it, no matter what Aífe's Noble Phantasm told me. According to Aite Láechrad, however, I needed to reach the next proficiency benchmark before I could learn the Thunder Feat in earnest, and it seemed, now, that no amount of determination was going to change that.

“Damn it.”

I breathed out and forced myself to calm down.

“Release.”

Aite Láechrad disappeared, and I was back down to my normal Breaker form. The pile of rubble I'd set up to train the Thunder Feat remained as unmoved now as it had been Friday afternoon. Despite my best efforts, I *did* have limitations, and pushing past them, at least in this regard, wasn't something I was physically capable of.

“Fuck,” I said quietly.

None of the heroes I'd touched so far seemed like they'd be enough to take on the Endbringers. They just didn't have enough firepower. In the first place, how could guys like Lancelot and Diarmuid hope to do what heroes like Eidolon and Alexandria couldn't? The Triumvirate *struggled* against Endbringers, and even with the combined might of them and dozens of other heroes, it took them too long and too much effort to drive off the Simurgh or Behemoth.

When Eidolon could switch powers on the fly, Alexandria was *the* namesake for the flying brick power type, and Legend could shoot lasers that did things lasers shouldn't be able to do, how could an awesome sword or a spear that inflicted wounds that couldn't be healed match up against that?

How could Herakles, with his Shooting Hundred Heads, compare to that? Sure, he could probably get in real close and do tons of damage with his sword, and the Shooting Hundred Heads could probably inflict several serious wounds, but at best, it would just inflict similar levels of damage as the Triumvirate would.

It wasn't that that was *bad*, it just wasn't *good enough*. I didn't need a hero who could *damage* an Endbringer, because almost all of them could, with varying degrees of severity. I needed a hero who could drive them off or *kill* them in *one blow*, a hero with the power to either obliterate them outright or do enough damage all at once that they *had* to retreat.

"Damn it, isn't there are hero like that?" I cursed. "Isn't there a hero who can kill an Endbringer outright?"

Immediately, my power rose up in the back of my head and reached out; only two heroes came back.

King Arthur and his *Excalibur* was the first.

For a moment, I sat there, stunned. *King Arthur* could *kill an Endbringer*. *King Arthur*. It felt like that should make more sense than it did, but I had trouble wrapping my head around it. After all, yes, King Arthur was a very famous legend and the mythology was strong; Excalibur was usually hyped up as "the best sword ever made," and from that perspective, I would have to admit that it might make a degree of sense that it would be *that* powerful.

But *powerful enough to kill an Endbringer*? It seemed almost...nonsensical.

I reached out. Could it really be...?

Then, as I realized what I was about to do, I stopped and drew away.

I'd been about to Install.

My heart started to pound and I swallowed around my suddenly dry mouth.

I'd been about to Install, for the first time since the Locker.

The past few weeks, I'd been Including Aífe's Aite Láechrad to learn Ancient Celtic Martial Arts. It was safe and effective and it didn't involve accepting all of Aífe into my head. Because there wasn't another person's ego sharing headspace with my own mind and memories, there wasn't any chance that I'd become anybody or anything else other than myself. It let me improve my body, and I didn't have to worry that my mind would be forced into someone else's shape.

But Installing was different. When I Installed a hero, I was opening myself up to that hero's mind and personality, I was letting that hero into myself. The one and only time I had ever Installed was in the Locker, and even then on accident. I could still remember, no matter how hard I tried not to, the feeling of someone else invading everything that made me who I was, trying to force me into her shape and trying to make me think like her.

I didn't have any trouble admitting that it frightened me. What if I Installed and didn't come back as Taylor? What if I Installed, and what came out the other end when it was all said and done was someone else who didn't even *resemble* me? If I Installed, would I be me at all, or would I be whatever hero I called upon stuck in Taylor Hebert's body?

If the idea that your entire existence could be subsumed that easily didn't frighten you, there was something wrong with you.

But...even though it frightened me, there was an unavoidable truth that I had to face: if I refused to use Installs, I was purposefully crippling myself. Sure, Includes were powerful on their own, but they were only a fraction of the full might of the heroes they belonged to. Against an Endbringer that destroyed cities and mowed down heroes like they were a field of wheat before the scythe, could I afford to sacrifice that much power over a fear like that?

No, I decided. I really couldn't.

“Set. Install.”

Power rushed through me. I felt my body morph and change, shrinking down nearly an entire foot in height. My muscles compacted, streamlining into a body that had been trained almost from birth to fight. Something hot and powerful raged inside my chest, pumping liquid fire through my limbs.

My clothing changed, too. Unlike with Including, my costume didn't remain as it was; it, too, was morphing, elongating and shifting until I wore what I could only describe as a blue combat dress, trimmed in gold. My legs were clad in sturdy pants, with padding to supplement the armor that now covered me. Greaves and...sabotons, came the knowledge, protected my lower legs and feet, and tassets hung from my waist to protect the outside of my thighs. A pair of gauntlets wrapped around my hands and forearms, and the ensemble was completed with a curved breastplate that protected my chest and stomach.

King Arthur was a woman, was the first thing I realized. No, not even a woman, a sixteen or seventeen-year-old girl. She'd stopped aging once she pulled the sword from the stone, and once that had broken, the sheath she'd received with Excalibur had halted it once more. Though I couldn't imagine she'd ever have grown up to be a buxom beauty, she'd never actually grown up all the way. She was pushing thirty, if not older, chronologically, but physically, she'd never even reached twenty.

I didn't know how to feel about that, and at that moment, it wasn't really important, but some part of me wanted to laugh at the realization that I, as normal Taylor Hebert, was taller and almost better endowed than the most famous king in the world, who was also a woman hiding her sex.

“Ah.”

I examined my new body, the arms and legs that were hidden beneath the combat dress. I felt that if I exerted myself, I could easily blow apart one of the walls of this warehouse with a single swing.

I looked down at my invisible sword, at Excalibur, and I knew its length and its weight and its reach like I knew my own arm. I knew that it was so recognizable that Merlin had crafted this spell, Invisible Air, to hide it from view, once the sheath had been lost. I knew that I had to take care

when using Excalibur itself, because everything in the path of the swing would be vaporized. If I wasn't careful, the entire city would be razed to the ground, and all the people along with it.

I knew there were other armaments in my arsenal. My lance, my horse, my cloak of invisibility, which had never truly been mine but which I had because it had been associated with my legend after the fact. My sheath, which had been lost, was now mine to wield as though it had never been, and as long as I had it, I could not be killed.

There was even available to me the ability to summon my Knights to my side and charge into battle. It required quite a bit of effort and quite the setup to manage, but it was possible to call them all to my aid.

Most importantly, I knew I was still myself. There was enough of Arthur...of *Artoria* inside me that everything she was felt like it was mine, too, but aside her experiences and the influence of her personality that I could feel pressing against mine, I was still Taylor Hebert. I was just also Artoria Pendragon, too.

"Release."

I let the power go and returned back to my base Breaker form. With it left the influence of Artoria Pendragon, and I felt her presence and her personality disappear back to wherever it was my heroes came from. I looked down at my hands, and there was no sense of *wrongness*, like they were too big to belong to me.

I was still myself.

Nothing about me had changed. I was the same Taylor Hebert now as I had been five minutes ago, and using an Install hadn't changed that. I could use all of that power and still remain me.

In the wake of that relief came a delayed realization: I could kill Endbringers.

I stilled, and for a moment, I didn't breathe as the full weight of that sunk in. It sounded impossible. It sounded ludicrous.

I could kill Endbringers.

And yet, it was true. Excalibur was normally a weapon meant for wiping away enemy fortifications, erasing forts and castles from the map like the hand of God, but in special circumstances, where the threat was of a large enough scale, its power increased even further and it became a weapon for protecting the Earth.

I couldn't say I'd ever heard of that in the myths I'd read, but it was hard to argue with the knowledge Artoria herself took as fact.

I could kill Endbringers.

I could feel my lips pull into a grin and excitement welled up inside of me. I wanted to yell and scream and shout, because *I could kill Endbringers*, and that meant that I could do so much good on those merits alone. I wanted to climb up the tallest building in the Bay and declare it for all the

world to hear, that *I could kill Endbringers*. It was all I could do to force it down to a few, scant giggles and a big, broad grin.

“Celebrate later,” I scolded myself, still smiling. “For now, there are other things to focus on.”

Like what was one step below that. I could kill them with King Arthur and...Gilgamesh? With King Arthur and Gilgamesh, although I'd have to examine Gilgamesh later, but what about damaging them?

“Alright,” I said. “Let's try it a bit differently, this time. Heroes that can send an Endbringer packing with one attack, but maybe not kill them?”

More came than last time, several more.

Karna with his *Vasavi Shakti*. An Indian hero — like actually Indian from India, not Native American — with, now that I could see it, quite an impressive myth. I...still wasn't quite sure he had the strength to pull off a killing blow, but if his spear hit, it would definitely do massive amounts of damage. It would require sacrificing his nearly perfect defense, though, so if it didn't work and the Endbringer focused on me afterwards, I was as good as done for.

He was *really* powerful, though. I could see him being incredibly useful, at some point, although aside the Endbringers, I couldn't imagine a situation that would require someone as strong as him.

Sir Gawain with his *Galatine*. I got the feeling that this one was situational, though. It might be enough on its own, but if I used it at the right time of day, it was almost guaranteed to do massive amounts of damage. Like, I wasn't sure there'd be a city left afterwards, that kind of damage. If that didn't drive an Endbringer off, then that was...actually incredibly frightening.

I'd have to be really careful about using Gawain's Noble Phantasm. No, not even just his. A lot of my options for fighting against Endbringers were massively destructive, the sort of thing that could kill entire cities at once. Using that sort of thing should absolutely be handled with care and caution.

There were several more heroes. Several, several more that could deal massive amounts of damage to an Endbringer and maybe even do enough to kill one outright, although there was a large enough degree of uncertainty that I couldn't say so with any confidence. They had a lot of similarities, when I skimmed over them — god-killers, city-killers, monster-killers. A few that might work by virtue of ignoring defense or armor and striking the target directly.

The one thing they all had in common was that they dealt massive amounts of damage in one go.

Looking at each of them individually might be a good idea, going over how each of them worked and what made them so special. Definitely for later, though, because there was a big enough list of them that it would probably take hours to examine them in any detail.

For now, let's take a look at what made Gilgamesh so incredible.

I reached out and through myself and took ahold of the King of Heroes, the one other hero my powers told me could kill an Endbringer outright. Squaring my shoulders and taking a deep breath, I prepared myself and squashed any uncertainties.

No going back. I had nothing to fear from Install.

“Set. Inst —”

Ho? An insignificant speck means to sully my august self with her unworthy hands?

I gasped, stumbling backwards, and *shoved* Gilgamesh away with everything I had, before I could even do more than touch him. My knees gave out underneath me and I fell onto my butt, heart beating a mile a minute, as every instinct in my body screamed at me to *run*.

What... What was that?

Holy fuck. Holy *fuck*.

I swallowed thickly, panting. I felt as though I'd just barely escaped death, the way a rabbit might feel as it dove into its den as a fox snapped at its heels. A second slower, an inch behind, and I might've...

My throat was tight as I swallowed again.

That... *That* was Gilgamesh?

No wonder. No wonder he could kill an Endbringer. I hadn't even Installed him, hadn't done more than reach out for him, and I'd almost been smothered under his sheer presence, his *raw power*. If... If I'd actually gotten all the way through an Install, would he have...

Right. Right, I decided as I shakily climbed to my feet. Avoid Gilgamesh. Avoid him at all costs. He was my very last resort, the sort of hero I would and could only use if there were no other options left, because it would almost certainly mean the end of me if I actually *did* use him.

I took a deep breath, tried to calm my racing heart.

Right. Okay. Forget Gilgamesh. Forget him entirely. For now, I just had to focus on looking through some of the other guys on the list. Karna, for instance.

Yeah. Okay.

I took another deep breath. It didn't help much to calm me down, but it gave me enough space to focus past the fear and the certainty that I'd just barely escaped doom.

Karna. Let's start with him.