**Termination 21.1**

**4 months later**

“**Alright,**” I smiled, looking out across the flickering expanse of Flames and Waves. “**Everyone ready to see an Endbringer *die?***”

The roar of approval I got in return would’ve been near deafening for an UnSharded, but just made me smile. Looking over to the guests of honor, Herbert nodded back to me, half of his Replicants standing ready behind him. Boojack, Nick, Smith, Tyrone, Truth, and Rock had come when we put out the call, the others refusing for various reasons, or we hadn’t able to reach them, but who we had would be *more* than enough.

I’d passed along the information I’d gotten from Ziz, the pseudo-angel willing to inform me when her brother would next arrive, as long as I did not announce his presence more than a day in advance, as he would get. . . *irritated*, and choose a different target if I did, so, even now, the Protectorate, under Cauldron’s guiding hand, were setting up shop in Panama. My favorite Endbringer had revealed that Behemoth was going to go to the canal, and create a volcano in the middle of it, bringing up molten rock in such amounts that it could *never* be repaired, and it would be less work just to dig a new one.

And, if someone attempted to, *Leviathan* would then kill everyone using the same waterway they’d just built.

I had to admit, it had a bit of irony to it that we, who were getting screwed on trade, were now defending it, but international trade was going just a little *too* well, and this was the next step in the Endbringer’s constant balancing act of keeping the world on a slow boil. Doubly ironic was the fact that Cauldron and the Endbringers had the *exact same plan,* but couldn’t agree on the exact degree of ‘so terrible that people Trigger, and then use them, but are still around *to* use their Shards.’

Cauldron wanted to maximize Triggers, looking for a golden bullet against the Warrior, while the Endbrigers wanted to maximize *use,* and thus data generated, in a kind of Darwinian, Lamarckian, struggle to the death, where it didn’t matter how many possible Hosts perished if it served their ends.

Because, after all, *no one* was going to survive the end of the Cycle anyways.

Or they wouldn’t, if Taylor hadn’t gotten *eyebrow-raisingly* *lucky*.

But that was no longer an option, so instead I needed to get *pants-shittingly* ***powerful****.*

And, despite what Cauldron might think, despite what my own people might think, I was nowhere *close.*

***Yet.***

But we weren’t here for me to view the length of the road still left to walk, we were here to take a *very* significant step down it.

“**Okay, everyone remember your battle-buddy,**” I only half joked. After the absolute *Hell* I’d rained down on The Adepts when they’d tried to grab one of our members from a traveling team, to sacrifice them in an ‘empowerment ritual’, I’d insisted my people move in pairs when outside of the safety of my territory, and while the Endbringer Truce *should* protect them, it was worth the paper it wasn’t written on when the chips were down.

I would have thought, after *literally crucifying the fuckers*, including the member of the Protectorate that’d been helping them, we’d get a ‘Civis Romanus Sum’ of our own, but one of the defining traits of Villains seemed to be that they all thought themselves *special*, and that *they* would somehow escape punishment for their crimes, successfully pinning it on their enemies.

But while Legend had come and whined for a bit, and I’d fed his Dead Shard enough information and **Essence** to help it resist the Triumviteer’s next mind-wipe, my people suddenly got treated better, so it was worth it.

Which just proved that I’d been right to treat the world as it *was,* instead of as I wished it *would be.*

That would come after **The Warrior** was dead.

Reaching out with Strider’s power, connecting with the Bug Tag that every one of my people had implanted, I was able to grasp all two-hundred and forty-seven presences, and, with a single simple-yet-complex twist, bring us *exactly* to the Mark I’d left earlier that day.

Our arrival was heralded with a purple flash of specifically delineated **Anarchic Structure Inducement** on what *should’ve* been the cleared landing zone, and I could hear the faint hiss and pop of *several* somethings comung apart through my control over sound. I shook my head, as it looked like I’d have some more people to kill this coming week.

“**Scouters. *There,***” I commanded, marking each disabled device with an arrow of purple **Pyrokinetic Weaponry**, one of the powers that my. . . *alternate* had slotted, not that I blamed the created presence. It’d *had* done exactly what I’d created it for, just as Vejovis, Prowler, Boardwalk, and the others had. “**See if you can trace them, or at least figure out what they were. Builders, set up a perimeter. Break, you and your cousins start getting ready as soon as an arena’s set up. Everyone else? *Enjoy the show!****”* I grinned, one full of teeth, and many returned in kind.

Break, his cousins, and I could theoretically have handled this ourselves, but this was a show of strength in *many* ways, and the PR victory we were going to reap here was almost as important as the one against Behemoth. Now, our people would mingle, would show our strength, and *not even be needed.*

*If only it had been anyone other than Leviathan, that first time,* I mused, the speedster a truly *abysmal* matchup for us back then, though I was looking forward to a rematch. *Last* time, I was indisputably the loser, and while *that* fight would not turn out as well as *this* one, it would be a good barometer of my progress down the path of power.

Around Taylor and I, the Penumbral Defenders exploded with activity, gaters setting up to bring support staff from Eclipse, while most spread out to the shocked looking heroes, villains, and other Hosts that had gathered for the coming fight.

My partner’s power thrummed, and I fed her a stream of **Essence**, her capabilities spiking as, with a ground shaking tremor, blood red gem-like tendrils of lumber, the eight iteration of Panacea’s Crimson Oak, sprouted in every direction, forming structures, a perimeter wall, and more, the others adding their *own* powers as fabric, plastic, metal, foam, coral, ice, stone, and more built themselves up off her framework, the device duplicator and technokinetics implementing their Shards to set up comms, detection networks, a basic shield system, and more. *That* equipment would break down in a few days, the duplicator’s ability not permanent, but we didn’t need it to be.

Creating a platform of Force under us, I lifted Taylor and myself up, overlooking the battlefield. The Canal was behind us, and Behemoth’s entrance point, twenty-six miles away, was already marked by a waiting group of Parahumans, who were. . . *foolishly ambitious*, at best.

I could feel the displaced air as Alexandria approached, Legend’s laser-form giving him a much smaller profile as opposed to the temporal bulldozer that was his teammate. I didn’t move, or acknowledge them, though Taylor tensed inside her armor. While our people hadn’t been able to replicate my anti-time power, against most things Taylor could now go toe-to-toe, and even outside of her armor my constant overhealing, and thus bringing of her up to my level, meant that she was now a brute/mover three from that alone, her armor pushing her up to six in both.

However, against Alexandria she’d lose in a straight fight, near instantly, and she both knew it, and it made her a little antsy. Meanwhile, from the insect-cameras my partner set up, I could read the repressed agitation in Costa-Brown’s lower face as she approached, as *she* was in the same boat when it came to *me*, as Taylor was to her. *The rock paper scissors game continues,* I couldn’t help but think to myself, though when one got several *dozen* options, the game became a little unfair.

Not that I cared much about fair anymore.

“Vejovis!” the time-locked bitch demanded, floating behind me, “Explain yourself!”

Taking a moment to make sure I was speaking English, I glanced back towards her contemptuously. “No.” Then I looked back towards Behemoth’s arrival point. Physically, at least, my attention was split a dozen different ways, tracking a dozen different issues, Taylor working around me in several dozen *hundred* ways herself.

The angry silence was amusing, Alexandria swooping around, yet, I noticed, keeping out of arm’s reach, the wind of her passage sliding past us as she put herself between me and my destination. “That is not sufficient,” she declared.

“Is there a reason you deserve more, Becky?” I needled her slightly, as our pastry-creator worked with food services. I’d nearly lost my hold on *that* Vial when I’d pathed it, trying something different, having made time to work with Flamel enough to get a handle on *her* power’s mechanics, and implemented its general structures on another. He *could* use them to low-key Master people, but here he was using that ability to instill confidence and ready calmness in those that ate what he’d worked his ‘magic’ on. He had to have a hand in *making* it, with more involved uses requiring more involved preparation, but merely sprinkling a little powdered sugar was enough to give them a little bit of ‘pick me up’ power, increasing natural healing, radiation resistance, and mental wellness to empower everyone that showed up to our camp.

It was amazing what you could do when you *really* started getting into the nuts and bolts of Shards.

“The Endbringer Truce-” Becky started to accuse, but Legend cut her off.

“Is fine, and nothing you’re doing will endanger it, right?” the Hero asked.

“Of course,” I nodded, acknowledging the man, and only him.

Alexandria frowned behind her mask, my control over air that was this close to me enough to read facial expressions. “Then you will follow our orders?” she pressed.

Still looking at Legend, I lifted an eyebrow, “I do not recall anything about the Protectorate being in charge of *every* Endbringer battle. Or even any of them. If some still wish to listen to you, after the last few, that’s on them. I certainly am not, though, after those fools either die or flee,” I waved towards the waiting Hosts, “if you would allow me and mine, say, three minutes to try something, I would appreciate it. We’ll be trying it regardless.”

“Why should we?” Rebecca demanded. “You aren’t in charge here.”

Taylor, unable to help herself, replied, tone cold and just a little buzzing, “**And neither are you.**”

Both Hosts flinched involuntarily, and Alexandria turned her attention on my partner, floating towards her as she declared, “Mastering is a breach of-”

Rebecca Costa-Brown cut herself off, as I *moved,* faster than even her, faster than light itself, really a self-teleportation via the Mark on Taylor’s armor, repositioning myself as I did so, holding a burning purple pyrokinetic blade, point an inch away from the Brute’s neck. While the first bit she could power through, her Shard protecting her, if she attempted to go any further she’d receive a *nasty* surprise when she got within three inches of my flesh, and her power failed her.

“That’s rich, coming from you, *Cauldronite*,” I remarked flatly. “If you can’t handle a few words, laden with meaning, how will you handle **The Warrior**? Me and mine are here to kill Behemoth. We did you a favor in giving you warning, and this is the way you treat us? At least you were intelligent enough not to bring David-”

A familiar Aura caught my eye, though it was a good distance away. “Ah, I’m sorry, I appear to have overestimated you. *Again.* Now ***back off***.”

Alexandria gave me a cold look, which normally would’ve been obscured by her half-helmet, but perhaps she *knew* I could see it, or maybe she was just counting on body language to do the trick. I merely waited. She flew back, and I dismissed the sword, teleporting again back to where I’d been, as if nothing had happened. “So, Legend,” I said conversationally, “we’ll be moving on Behemoth after the first fighting is over. If our plan doesn’t work, I’m fairly certain that my people will help, though they will not blindly follow.”

“And you?” the man questioned, not challengingly, but as if he were merely interested, showing why *he* was *their* PR frontman. “Will you assist? Or others, like Nephilim?”

“If I see a way I can help, I will, but Nephilim has decided we don’t need him,” I shrugged. “And he’s likely correct.”

The man nodded, not getting closer to me. “Then I hope he’s right. It would be good to have a victory, a true one, after so long.”

“In that, I completely agree,” I smiled, one the Hero returned, and, with a significant look at Rebecca, he left, the woman following without more than a glare our way.

Listening to them, both with **Acoustokinesis** and through the listener-bug Taylor planted, I heard Legend ask Alexandria, once they were both half a mile away, “Was that Vejovis, or was that Nephilim?”

“. . . Vejovis,” the other woman asserted, after a moment. “His speech contains similar structures, but Nephilim was on another level. The difference between one of us, and an Endbringer. And that is why he isn’t here, but I doubt *Vejovis* knows that.”

“It would be nice, to have an Endbringer of our own to fight the others with,” Legend sighed wistfully, and I just had to shake my head at the confirmation that the Cape-inati had misjudged me *that* badly. Then again, I *had* done my best to obscure my nature, so I supposed this worked. “You think he can pull it off?”

“No,” was Alexandria’s immediate reply. “But the losses he should suffer should help curtail his numbers.”

I didn’t need to see his face, I could *hear* Legend’s frown, “Any losses we take in an Endbringer fight are *tragedies*, Rebecca.”

“He brough a fifth of the entire *Protectorate* to this, Legend,” she shot back. “He brought as many people as *we* did.”

“And?” the Hero questioned. “You and David both treat him as if he’s a threat-”

*“He’s working for an Endbringer,*” Alexandria stressed. “One who has been seen conversing with the *Simurgh.”*

*Apparently they have cameras covering the dark side of the moon,* I remarked, Break having not found any in his hacking attempts in timelines-that-weren’t, but if they’d done even *basic* air-gapping, he wouldn’t’ve. Then again, *basic* security practices were so lacking when you had an insta-win precog, I was somewhat surprised they had done *that* much.

Legend, in turn, pointed out, “And who then informed *us*. Then again, every time we’re warned, things get. . . bad.” He sighed, “Maybe you have a point. We have evacuation plans?”

“Several,” the woman stated with conviction, as they moved back to the command tent, and others vied for their attention, the sounds harder to pick out, but the topics mundane. Their plan amounted to ‘hit Behemoth a lot’ in various incarnations, showing that, ultimately, they had *still* learned nothing.

Endbringers, in their own ways, were *puzzles*. Kaiju sized puzzles of misery and murder, but still puzzles. They brought very set skills, strengths, and weaknesses, and had to be countered in turn. That adaptation was part of the reason they existed, as, while they could be destroyed, their ‘seed’ would be preserved, the data they gathered integrated, and they would emerge in the next Cycle to do it all again, pushing those Hosts to use their Shards to the fullest in the eternal pursuit of negentropy.

Behemoth, the first, was the simplest of tests: Can you implement esoteric powers effectively?

It was enormous, and strong, but it was also incredibly *slow*, only ever lashing out with ranged attacks in response to others, never pro-actively. It practically *screamed* ‘SHOOT ME!’, except that was a trap, as its control over energy meant doing so conventionally would only lead to pain and death when it retaliated.

No, the thing was sixty feet tall, walked in a straight line, and did so at a *jogging pace* despite its size. You were supposed to lay traps, set up effects, to overwhelm it in ways different than ‘okay, hear me out, how about a *bigger* explosion?’.

And no one had, because Cauldron were *idiots,* yet demanded to be in charge of every fight.

Mind you, I was *well* aware that our *own* plan was ‘hit it with its own power, *but bigger,*’ but we could do that because Herb and his Replicants were *fucking broken*, able to take an unskilled brute force attacker and, ironically, do the *same* thing to them that Behemoth had been doing to the Protectorate for over a decade. Against a high-skill opponent, like Leviathan, Break would have trouble, and without the proper powers ahead of time Ziz would *wreck* him, but this?

He *had* this.

I, meanwhile, had a *different* task.

Letting out a deep breath, I activated the bit of Tinkertech that I’d had Arachne Assemblages throw together. It was kind of amusing, in that I’d original used Taylor as their symbol due to her multitasking, but with her having taken it over during my convalescence, at least half of the Tinkers who worked for me were absolutely *certain* she was one as well.

It probably didn’t help that, in the last month, she’d started to learn how to assist them, working alongside me.

Now, a holographic display appeared around my head, showing the others. . . my head. Or at least, my head as it was *now.* Giving it a second to ‘calibrate’, a light in my vision, and only mine, turned green, at which point I pulled back the lenses of my mask to truly **SEE**.

Before me was an ocean of power, Flames and Auras aplenty, and I **Saw** them all. It was a bit like trying to chug a keg, crossed with typing out thirty different messages on thirty different keyboards, crossed with listening to a room full of conversations simultaneously.

But compared to trying to unlock a restricted Shard?

It was *easy.*

I still hadn’t managed to free up **STING**, but I’d gotten *closer*, and it was only matter of time.

Casting my gaze across the area, my eyes *burned* with power, as I studied and categorized each and every one in sight, some so low they were barely visible, and handful so bright they *had* to be Abaddon Shards, and one?

One was *ridiculous.*

It had *six* separate powers, layered on top of each other: **Pocket Room, Protocols, Perfect Mind, Stark Winter, Elemental,** *and* **Power Hub**, the last one burning particularly bright, indicating a Second Trigger, just like Taylor and Herbert.

Making a note to search out that person, likely someone who’d Triggered due to the changes I’d made in the timeline, as that power set seemed on par with my *brother’s*, I kept looking out at the others, making sure to prime them all for copying. Some of the Hosts were even actively *using* their powers, and, leaning ***out*** a little, I could see a few dozen new stars spark into being in my Constellation of Possibility.

After the full sweep was done, I re-covered my eyes, disabled the hologram, and descended, the atmosphere in our impromptu base a mixed one, confidence and joviality from my own people, completely confident in our victory, swirling together with the nervous fear of the others that wandered in, their incredulity easily readable in their Flames and Auras as they were greeted, fed, and mixed with the small *town’s* worth of Parahumans I’d brought along with me.

Walking among them, I attracted a good number of stares, and I smiled at them, nodding here and there, projecting calm assuredness as I strode out of our ad-hoc fortress, spotting more and more powers that I skimmed the top of, paying back the Shards with a little bit of **Essence** in thanks, causing the Hosts to sit up and take notice, though they knew not why.

Taylor was by my side, silent in her yellow, grey, wood, and metal armor. She’d gone to Panacea after Boston and switched out of the, admittedly, somewhat ugly browns she’d been in before, her initial explanation only that this ‘felt right’. More than that, when I’d pressed for details, she’d pointed out, with how we worked, she didn’t *need* the stealth, and if she did need to go unseen a simple outer shell of Midnight Oak would suffice, both reasons which I couldn’t argue against.

Together, we made our way to that *particularly* powerful Host, who I was *absolutely* going to try and poach, or at the very least copy. Trump powers were pretty hit or miss with me, but **Stark Winter**’s ice sculpting potential looked interesting, and if I could somehow pick up **Perfect Mind** (and it *wasn’t* locked away as soon as I could grasp it), that had a *great* deal of potential.

Interestingly, I came to a halt in front of one of Dragon’s larger transports, two young women, both about Taylor’s age, maybe a little older, working on a pair of power-suits. One was *obviously* made by Dragon, the ‘woman’s’ design scheme distinctive, while the other was a bit odd, though given it *wasn’t* being made by a Tinker, but by the person I was looking for, temporarily copying a third of the capabilities of *every* Tinker in a mile or so, that made sense.

Skimming off the top of both Shards, I was actually impressed, understanding how it all fit together, but having *worked* with Tinkers I could tell which bits were Tinkertech, and which bits were the girl’s own design. That said. . . “Did you mean to shunt the heating elements into the interior compartment?” I questioned. It’d make sense if she used her Elemental Power *in* the armor, but otherwise could be quite dangerous.

The girl, Caucasian but darker skinned, possibly Greek, sighed, and turned to give me an annoyed look, something about her seeming familiar. “It is,” she informed me, a little crossly. “It’s handled by something else. No, I won’t tell you what.”

The other girl, a somewhat average looking pale brunette, laughed, “I *did* tell you that working on it in the open would get attention, Khione.”

The first girl groaned in annoyance, “Your ship’s too small, Dragon. And I didn’t expect. . .” she trailed off, turning around. “Wait, you’re not a Tinker,” she accused, and I read her power, noting that the **Power Hub**, the one that let her *copy* powers, *also* had developed a ‘radar’ component. Looking closer, I could tell it hadn’t *started* with one, what was *clearly* an Abaddon Shard shifting as she’d trained it.

“I dabble,” I shrugged, which got the attention of the *other* girl, who had an entire Tinker set of her own, along with a few other powers. They were stronger than Armsdick’s had been, discrete powers instead of a way to better utilize her Tinker abilities, which was. . . odd.

One thing was certain, though. Whoever this girl was, she *wasn’t* Dragon, as I wasn’t sure if that Sentient AI even *had* powers, let alone the full set I was looking at.

“Vejovis!” not-Dragon almost yelped, standing up straight, recognizing me, causing the darker-skinned girl to frown.

“Wait, *this* guy?” she asked skeptically, giving me a measuring glance. “You the one that’s been harassing Dragon?” she demanded, not giving me time to respond, marching up to me and announcing, “No means no!”

To my side, Taylor bristled at the implication, but I just lifted an eyebrow, fully aware I could *kill* this girl in an instant. She had a lot of powers, I could **See** them swirling around in her **Power Hub**, but any precog ability would be giving her null-results about me, something that a *number* of overly arrogant Thinkers had relied on until they had found out their hubris was baseless all too late.

“I’m pretty sure I don’t know-” I started to reply, but was cut off by Not-Dragon.

“It’s not like that!” the Tinker interrupted. “Please, Khione.”

“No,” the belligerent girl told her. . . friend? “He’s been-”

This time it was Taylor that interrupted, stating coldly, “I reached out to Dragon about a few opportunities. Not him. So maybe **back off** before you start something you can’t finish?”

“Ex-*cuse* me?” the dark-skinned girl replied, offended, inhaling to escalate things, but Not-Dragon cut her off.

*“Khione!*” the pale girl ordered. “They contacted me about the, um, *thing* you helped me out with. It’s *not* like that.”

The power copier hesitated, looking at the Tinker, who nodded to confirm her own statement, and the other girl sighed, the wind taken out of her sails. “I. Dragon’s had to deal with some asshole men. Ones that *wouldn’t* take no for an answer,” she gave as an explanation, but I noticed there wasn’t any actual *apology* there, *only* an explanation.

“So your response is to assume that *every* man must thus be an asshole?” I questioned. “I’m *sure* that won’t backfire on you. Repeatedly.” Looking away from the other girl, I turned to Not-Dragon. “And, I’m sorry, but are you *sure* you’re Dragon?”

The Tinker looked confused, before she brightened. “Right, you can see powers! I, uh, only advertised *some* of what I could do,” the girl clearly lied. “Being a Tinker can be dangerous, so I thought this was safer.”

“Wait,” the dark-skinned girl interjected, suddenly nervous. “You can see powers?”

I nodded, then smiled, amused at how quickly the tables had turned against her. “Don’t worry, I see no reason to disclose your. . . *multitudinous* abilities.”

The dark-skinned girl sighed in relief, nodding, but frowned again. “You. . . you sound familiar,” she informed me.

“I’m pretty sure we’ve never met,” I told her. “I’m *fairly* certain I would’ve remembered *your* Shard. And I’ve never met Dragon before either, at least not in the flesh.”

However, that just made the girl frown harder. “No, I. . . *Lee?*” she questioned incredulously.

“Yes?” I replied, my name widely known. “I’m Lee Elric. Kind of bad form, using my civilian name, but it’s not like it’s hidden.”

“Elric?” she frowned even harder, “Your last name isn’t Elric. It’s *Rycroft.*”

I froze, as that was my *real* name, one that *no one in this world should know.* “I. . .” there were a *dozen* ways for her to know that tidbit, with powers, it didn’t *really* mean anything. “Who are you?” I asked instead.

It was open ended question, and I expected a number of answers, but what I *didn’t* expect was for her to smile and tell me, “I’m Grace! Don’t you. . . no you wouldn’t. Someone should have a. . .” she trailed off, eyes going distant. *“There!”*

Before me, her form shifted and changed, the girl losing half a dozen inches, features shifting, until she looked *exactly* like my cousin, who I hadn’t seen in months. Hadn’t seen since I’d arrived on Earth Bet. “But, *how?*” I demanded, suddenly confused.

“Fuck if I know,” she shrugged, going back to the way she was moments before, the power she’d copied at one-third strength only enough to let her hold her old form for a moment, and now that I *knew* what to look for, I could track the changes as **Peak Condition** smoothed out her edges, enhanced her physique, and took the girl that had previously been ten pounds of attitude in a five pound bag, like an overly protective chihuahua, and turned her into the girl before me, who grinned. “I’m so glad it’s not just me here!”