**Termination 21.13**

Proving that my assumptions about this world were correct, after laying waste to the Vatican, setting off a brief Holy War, and breaking the Pope before reconstructing him in a way more to my liking. . . *nothing happened.*

Oh, there was a bit of a kerfuffle, and Herbert had to go give a report to the impotent witches, but with **Divine Bestowment** coming out to give a speech it all settled down quickly. The incarnated Shard did a good job, talking about how, after taking over from the corrupt clergy, one that had been given undue mercy, a *Master*. This ‘Judas, empowered by pagan deities but pretending to have God’s gift’, had then taken over, controlling him and twisting ‘God’s Will’ until the Lord Almighty had sent his ‘Angels From On High’ to set things right. That had come along with a bit of chastisement of the church’s people for letting it get that bad *without* the excuse of being mind controlled, and everything was settling as, now with ‘God’s helpers’ and able to ‘use his power freely’, they could do what they should’ve done before, and spread ‘God’s Beneficence’ through charity to the masses.

It was interesting, seeing a reflection of my own values through the inhuman lens of the Shard, and then the *papal* lens of the Shard pretending to be Metatron without *actually* being Metatron. It very much wasn’t *me,* as the way it was going about things wasn’t *exactly* as I would do, allowing for Human Masters to function at a low ‘guide the masses’ level. I communicated with Shards, bribing them to do what I wanted, and I *was* aware that a Shard could apply pressure on its Host, but it was only that, a pressure, and not *actual* Mastering.

Regardless, that was very much *not my problem.* There was a bit of a panic when the Cherubim all started overloading across New Avalon, then transformed into Angels, which. . . *whups*, but everyone was going along with it.

The deluge of requests to include more churches in future building expansions was somewhat predictable.

That said, given the. . . *deific* ties we now, however accidentally, possessed, that had, according to an annoyed Quinn, helped our standing on the global stage. To those who considered themselves ‘in the know’ it was clear the kind of power-play we’d pulled off, but, simultaneously, suggested that *we* might be working with some third party, with how recently *we’d* acquired our own heavenly host. We were even looking into setting up a portal from Midgar to New Rome, after having laughed my brother’s representative out of the room when he’d delivered Æonic’s ‘gracious offer’ of taking a 33% tax on all goods passed through it, along with several hundred million for building it, and another hundred million, each month, to keep it running.

What my brother hadn’t seemed to realize is that ‘Right of First Offer’ didn’t mean that we *had* to accept his bid, nor did we have to let him try and barter it to something reasonable.

Toybox had someone on hand, were more, well, *sane* in their offer, likely due to the fact that we were *already* doing them a solid by ‘hosting’ them, having shown that, unlike other nations, we *actually did what we’d said we’d do*. No special favors. No spying. No demanding intel on their clients. We rented out the space, did our deals, and even when we got attacked, their assistance was entirely voluntary, and well compensated if they helped us. From what Taylor had told me, they were downright surprised that *we* weren’t dicks, which. . . sadly fit, given how the rest of this world functioned.

So we’d met with some of their people, as while they didn’t have a gate-specialist, they had a *Pocket Dimension Tinker*, which was arguably better, and had hammered out a contract for a ‘corridor’ dimension that was going to cost a *tenth* of what Chuckles was asking for, possibly less, once goods started to pass back and forth.

Other than that. . . everything returned to life as usual.

Well, Herb had brought Taylor in, and had me explain what I’d done to Metatron, and how I’d ‘brought out’ **Divine Bestowment**, but after some questions about what he’d done, and what *he* was gonna do to us before I’d put the Shard in the driver’s seat, she’d just nodded and told me, “**Makes sense. Could you talk to my Shard?**”

I hadn’t really thought about it, but did so, finding that **Arthropod Control** was perfectly happy with the way it was being used and the steady supply of **Essence** I was providing it. It especially liked the ‘Sub-Shards’ it’d been given direct control over, the feeling I got from the Shard, amusingly, like an overworked office worker having been given two young and peppy interns to help them out. It was ‘teaching’ them how to do things, but they, in turn, were helping **Arthropod Control** do far more than the Shard could do on its own.

Now, weeks later, everything was humming along nicely. The Angels were a *lot* more combat-capable, and three platoons, that worked in shifts, helped those manning the Red Zone Barrier. Each Angel was a tiny drain, almost infinitesimal, with a larger burst required to create new ones. Maintaining the multi-Shard cluster was an education all of its own, Shards not *meant* to work that way, but as individuals.

Yes, they could be used together, but again they were *individuals*, like a team working together to accomplish a goal, whereas *I’d* created some kind of Frankenstein Shard with **ANGEL Creation**, only minus the original’s entire ‘Affront to God/hubris of man’ themes.

*Hopefully.*

Regardless it was. . . *odd,* more **alive** than a Shard normally would be, or maybe it was just easier for me to understand it, given how much of *myself* I’d put into its creation? **Projection** was *quite* talkative, after all, though it *couldn’t* tell me the specifics of Shard-functionality that I wanted, while also not able to tell me why it couldn’t, or tell me why it couldn’t tell me it couldn’t, ad infinitum.

In the end, I’d kept making Angels, and spreading them across New Avalon, the now four foot tall, rank and file ‘Angels’ filling out the pseudo-heavenly host, but every so often the power would spit out a higher rank one. The 4’5” black winged ‘Arch’s were common, as were the 5’ red-winged, ‘Chai’s. The first time I’d created the next one up, the entire power had *pulsed*, working hard, until it’d made what the power called an ‘Elo’.

Five-feet, four inches tall Angel had *two* pairs of blue wings, and, more than that, they could *talk.*

Well, they could *all* talk, but this one could talk even to *Shardless*, and every other Angel naturally deferred to it. It was quite the discovery, and, with time, I’d directed *quite* a bit of Essence into my **ANGEL Creation** power. Doing so slowed the development of new Slots, but, with what I was finding, It was *worth it*, and I had a number of unused slots as it was.

And, more than that, they could *heal*.

It was only equivalent to my own ‘Get Better’, and without my ability to enhance people above human standards, but even then, given how *rare* healers were, especially healers without some sort of unfortunate side-effect, that was a *big deal*.

Focusing on them, I was able to make half a dozen more, though the power needed several hours to ‘recover’ after every one. We had enough that each of our cities got two, and I dropped the last off with **Divine Bestowment**, who appreciated the help, requested a few more Angels, and gave me some of the extra Vials they had in storage to pay me back, Metatron leery of using them without *extensive* precautions after the Ophanim had tried to kill him seconds after it’d finished forming, and killing several dozen *others* before it was restrained.

But otherwise, all was quiet on the power front.

Hell, I’d expected *Grace* to come in and demand answers, but we hadn’t heard a peep from the girl, though she’d started hunting villains more actively up in Leaf-land. Nothing really that special, compared to what we got up to, but more than she’d doing before, so perhaps I’d finally gotten through to her?

The one time I’d wanted to contact my cousin, Taylor had shot the idea down, insisting that, from what she’d seen of the other teen, that might do more harm than help, so I’d held back. It wasn’t like I was out of things to do, working with Shards, Pathing Vials, taking dives into the Red Zone, and taking time to just enjoy things.

Tonight we were doing our weekly movie night, with accommodations made for our. . . *unusually* proportioned guest. I’d teleported her and her daughter in, **The Morrigan** chatting with Taylor, while talked with my unusual ally.

**So could you tweak anyone you’ve still got Mastered in Madison?** I requested of the Simurgh, who was seated in an oversized bean-bag chair in our small theatre, the Endbringer having been provided with a sack of popcorn and a gallon of soda.

**I could,**

the living engine of destruction admitted,

**But do I have to?**

I rolled my eyes. **You don’t *have to,* but otherwise I’m going to have to go, and wipe your influence from the survivors myself, *one at a time*. Haven’t you already gotten your Essence’s worth from them?**

The pale white woman, whose numerous wings wrapped around her like a high-fashion dress, popped a bit of popcorn into her too-perfect mouth, visibly considering her response. Her processing speed was enough that she could’ve responded instantly, but the Endbringer had been developing a more pronounced personality in the last few months, and minor affectations like this were one of her attempts to seem more ‘human’, like she said I did.

**The existence of the Quarantine Zone has other effects.**

I shot the endbringer a dry look. **That city in *Switzerland* still exists, and we’ve talked enough that you can include *my* actions, to a point, in your plans.**

**Like the Vatican?**

it questioned, just as dryly.

***To a point*,** I repeated with a smile. **One way or another, we’re clearing it. We’re moving in next Sunday.** I paused, as the Simurgh *smirked.* **Or. . . not?**

Eating another kernel, the Endbringer shrugged, commenting nonchalantly,

**Possibly. Who knows what the future will bring?**

***You do*. Generally speaking,** I reminded the precognitive powerhouse. **It’s another Endbringer, isn’t it?** From the woman’s sour look, I’d been correct. It was a little interesting, as I knew that Ziz had to *try* and make the expression, making it fake by definition, but, as time had gone on, they’d gotten more. . . natural. **Is it Khonsu?**

We’d skipped that one, having gotten *Legion* instead, but we still didn’t know the mechanisms behind how the next endbringers were picked, or formed, only knowing that there were a total of twenty, and even *that* was iffy, as it was a statement from Eden in a possible future, and Entities could lie just as much as the rest of us could. More and more I’d realized that a *lot* of what I’d ‘known’ about this world came from flawed sources, and had to figure it out myself.

Looking at Ziz, the smug was back.

**It is not Khonsu.**

Nodding, I questioned, **Then Tohu and Bohu?**

The Simurgh didn’t need to blink, but did so, starting at me to express her surprise.

**How did you know that?**

This time it was *my* turn to be smug. **I have my sources, and you have yours. Any other details you want to share? Specifically, is The Warrior going to stick his nose into the fight?**

For a second, the Simurgh went *utterly* still, truly focusing, before relaxing once more, deliberately taking a sip of her drink before informing me,

**He will not.**

Smiling, I nodded, looking over to Taylor. **Hey, Endbringer fight next Sunday. It’s Tohu and Bohu, and I’ll be joining in!**

My teammate blinked, then smiled back. “**It’ll be good to have everyone see us kill another one,**” she replied, looking to the mini-bringer she was talking to. “**You want to come with?**”

The plant-woman looked to her mother, who didn’t reply at all, allowing her daughter to decide for herself. Considering it, **The Morrigan** nodded. **I will.**

**Good,** I told her, **Stick close to Taylor, and watch her back, please.**

“**And I’ll watch hers,**” my partner declared, getting a slight nod and approving smile from The Simurgh.

Turning back to Ziz, I questioned, **So, calming Madison down?**

The Endbringer nodded, it’s multifaceted power flaring. A moment later it announced,

**Done.**

I had to shake my head, as it was easy to forget how incredibly *broken* the Simurgh’s power was. It took her a bit to ‘acquire’ a target, but once she had, you were her *bitch* unless you were a Blindspot.

**I appreciate it,** I told her. **General purpose, or is there a trigger?**

**General**

the Simurgh informed me, glancing towards the door.

**The others are here.**

I nodded, and Herbert entered a moment later, along with others who’d been read in on what we were doing. Mouse Protector didn’t take high-intensity missions any longer, but, when Taylor suggested we bring her in, I’d listened to my partner. That’d been a. . . *tense* meeting, Mouse, understandably, upset at the number of people Ziz had killed, but when it was pointed out that however many that was, her *old* bosses at the PRT had the Endbringer beat by a country *mile*, and that I’d flipped the Endbringer to *our* side, she’d slowly thawed to the Not-Angel.

Conversely, Victoria and Dean had both taken it much better, especially as while Ziz could see his shots coming, and move out of their way, the boy was immune to her mental powers. And when *Vicky* had freaked out and gone on the attack, the Endbringer had, gently but firmly, stopped her, set her down next to Dean, and pulled back.

Dinah had just nodded at Ziz when they first met, and, after some finagling that I was *completely* uninvolved in, Quinn had brought his family for one visit. His daughters had just thought the ‘the tall bird lady was pretty’, *not making the connection*, and it was one of those ‘so crazy no one would believe it’ things. And, well, if it *would* cause problems in a way that I wasn’t involved with, *Ziz would know.*

Mrs. Calle already had taken a Pathed Vial, one that’d given her a regeneration ability that she could subdivide and temporarily loan out to others, along with the ability to *take* ‘vitality’ from those she’d touched to supercharge the ability, since the Shard had *insisted* on a combat power and thrown a tantrum when I tried to explain to it the concept of ‘noncombatants’. It’d settled for ‘can defend itself’, and resolved to no push the Host into combat, after I talked about how *great* its ability was, so that it was a when, not an if, that it’d need to use it. Oh, and it delivered my standard physical upgrade suite, because why not?

Both his daughters also had Vials set aside, the twins getting complimentary Blaster/Mover/Breaker powers with enough sculptability to be useful enough to be ‘Rogues’, and, of course, the physical upgrades. They’d also gotten slight improvements over the standard capabilities of children their age when they’d visited, with Panacea double-checking that it wouldn’t do anything odd to their growth. If anything, it’d, er, *upgraded* it, clearing up genetic issues and meaning that they’d develop more than they would’ve before, something that Quinn had been iffy on, but his wife had been perfectly fine with.

They weren’t here this week, the man spending time with them at home, but, other than Gauge, that was the extent of our little group. I’d floated the idea of asking Kaiden, but as she was currently dating *Smith*, one of Herb’s Replicants, I was told it was for the best if she *didn’t* come, and I’d gone along with it. I personally wondered when Flamel would realize that I’d supplied her with more Simurgh feathers than should be physically possible, but she hadn’t asked, so I hadn’t mentioned that they were *donated*.

And as for Amelia?

Well, she’d made it *clear* that she didn’t want to be part of this when she quit the PD, and, as much as I didn’t like it, I *had* promised her, what felt like a lifetime ago, that I’d respect her wish to step away, and I wouldn’t break my word on that.

Even if I missed her.

“Alright, what’re we watching this time?” Herbert asked, clapping his hands and rubbing them together.

**Well, continuing our theme of ‘American Culture’,** I stated, floating up so everyone could see me. **Today we’re watching another classic. Rambo: First Blood.**

“Uh, dude, are you sure that’s okay?” Herbert asked, looking to Dinah.

The small girl smiled, but reminded him, “Uncle Herbert, I’ve seen worse.”

He grimaced, “Yeah, okay.”

**Also,** I pointed out, **why didn’t you say anything before we watched Alien? Or The Ring? Or Independence Day?**

“Those are *different*,” he argued. “They weren’t real.”

**The Morrigan** frowned, asking, **Is this a documentary?**

Thankfully, we’d worked with both her and her ‘mother’ to speak in a way that wasn’t. . . *distressing*, something I hadn’t noticed, but Taylor had pointed out. The pseudo-dryad had taken several weeks to figure out how to ‘speak human’, at which point Ziz had switched to speaking in a way that was perfectly understandable to the others in an instant. Either *she’d* been learning as well, or she’d just been a dick about it, and I couldn’t tell which was which, but at least she was apparently no longer blowing out people’s mental ears with every word.

**It is not.**

the Endbringer casually noted.

**But it requires some context, that the film assumes you *already know*,** I explained. **So, historically, you had World War two, which had public support, then the Korean war, which had less, and then the *Vietnam* war, which the title character fought in. For many reasons, including the fact that it was viewed as America’s first real ‘defeat’ in memory, the lack of any kind of formal enemy to fight *against*, the fact that it was the first real *televised* war, *and* the widespread knowledge of war crimes that would otherwise go unknown, the veterans coming home from deployment were often hated.**

Frowning, **The Morrigan** asked, **Was conscription not used?**

Taylor, sitting next to her, shook her head. “**No, it was.**”

The plant woman was confused. **Then why did they blame the slave soldiers for the actions of their masters?**

“They weren’t *slaves*,” Dean disagreed.

**The Morrigan** tilted her head. **I thought conscription meant you had to obey, or you would be imprisoned, and would be subject to violence if you resisted. Am I wrong?**

The boy winced. “You’re. . . *not* wrong. But-”

**Then how is that different than being a slave?** The pseudo-endbringer questioned, while, *yes,* Ziz was smiling, amused, at the boy’s distress.

Before the conversation could *further* devolve, I stated, **You know how Master victims are blamed for their actions, despite being controlled?** At the woman’s nod, I opened my hands, **Like that, to a lesser extent, except the modern understanding of Mastering did not exist. This was a time before Parahumans as well, so the impact of one dedicated and skilled individual was not as well understand either. However, the relationship of institutional power vs individuals seen as week is something that I’m sure those of us who’ve dealt with the PRT will be *well* familiar with.**

Dean grimaced, “They’re not *that-”*

“There’s a *reason* I quit,” Mouse disagreed. “That government cheese ain’t worth the squeeze.”

And with that, the conversation was *over*. Taking my seat, Taylor on one side of me, Ziz on the other, I started up the film. As we watched it the movie. . . *hit* harder than I remembered, and Taylor reached over, laying her hand over mine, and I shot her a confused look, but she just shook her head, and went back to watching so I did as well, even as that oddly *helped*, for reasons I couldn’t really put into words.

Leaning back, I watched the cinematic struggle unfold, and tried to relax, as, when we were done, the preparations for our next *Victory* over the Endbringer threat would begin.