**Termination 21.8**

“It’s a trap.”

“It’s *not* a trap,” Taylor disagreed. “It’s the *catholic church*.”

“. . . I don’t think that’s the argument you seem to think it is,” I mused. Both of us were using Computer Spiders to do research, directing each other’s attention to what we found. “Look,” I stated, showing article after article on the church’s Hero group, *The Blessed Saints,* “they practically *rule* Italy using their ‘blessed’ Hosts. You *can’t* tell me there’s nothing fishy going on there.”

“Of *course* there is,” she agreed, finding accounts of the Pope inviting *others* to meet him, including the Triumvirate. “But that doesn’t mean *this* is a trap. We’ve got a lot of attention. A *lot* of people want to meet with us,” my teammate argued, showing emails she’d handled, some of which I hadn’t seen, some I had and turned down. “And we killed *Behemoth.* If New Avalon wasn’t in the position it was, the *President* would probably want to meet you. Or at least meet *Break*.”

I took a moment to remind myself that, while to *me* what had happened was just the next step down the road, to the *public* we only had two left and then things would get ‘better’. “Okay, *point.*” Searching for more information, I found sales records in our copy of Cauldron’s databases, the Vatican going through a *lot* of Vials. If *that* was true, then they were probably doing what Cauldron thought *we* were doing, though the church wasn’t using the trash-tier concoctions that I was, one at a time, spinning into things *far* greater. “Also, check this out.”

Taylor was quiet as she skimmed over my own research, frowning, comparing the numbers sold with the number of heroes the Vatican ‘recruited’, and finding a sizeable disconnect between the two. “This. . . this isn’t good,” she admitted, quickly rallying, “But that *doesn’t* mean it’s a trap! If they warn people, then. . .”

Nodding, I had to agree, “Okay, yeah, I can see it. Putting your faith in God to protect you as you drink a Vial might *actually* help the calibration process. At least it’d stop the ‘I wish I wasn’t me’ issues, though I wonder if they’ve got a few ‘be ye not afraid’ style angels in reserve.” At her inquisitive look, I shrugged, “You know, wheels studded with eyes, human-animal hybrids, or giant masses of wings that’d make Ziz look *normal* by comparison. They’d be decently powerful, but not exactly PR friendly, *especially* if any had a destructive Shaker effect like Indiana Jones’ Arc of the Covenant. Still a trap, by the way. *Especially* with my connection to ‘Nephilim’. Actually,” I said, reaching out to page Herbert, who teleported in via his copy of Quinn’s power.

“What’s crackalackin?” he questioned with a smile, looking between Taylor and I, copying my assistant’s power and, thus, sensing the division in our control of the IN. “You two havin’ a lover’s spat?”

“Pope wants to meet me next week,” I stated without preamble.

“That’s a trap,” he shot back, without missing a beat.

Turning a look that practically shouted *‘See?’* in Taylor’s direction, she folded her arms. “. . . I don’t think that’s the argument you think it is,” she stated.

“She’s right. I’m wrong, like, *half* the time,” Herbert readily agreed. “Not even *most* of the time, so I can just do the opposite of what I want and be right. But it’s still *absolutely* a trap, so what day we goin’? I need ta clear my schedule.”

“You got an anti-Master power?” I questioned, as if they didn’t have at least *one* on staff I’d make a hat with my powers for the express purpose of *eating it*.

“Same one *you* do, only better,” he replied flatly, which. . . *fair*.

Nodding, I told Herbert, “Sunday, ironically. Or maybe symbolically.”

“Got it.” He paused, starting to grin. “You think I should go pretty-boy, or wheels with eyes?”

Taylor, throwing her hands up, demanded, “Did *everyone* know about angels except for me?”

“Nah, just thought it was cool,” Break noted, “And Lee knows the *weirdest* shit. Even before he started speakin’ Shard.”

“I was bored in church when I was a kid, so I read the Bible,” I shrugged. “Sue me. Also, it’s *way* more messed up than people like to pretend, and if someone says they’re ‘going biblical’, they’re probably about to be an unreasonable dick. But that’s not the point. You say it’s not a trap, Taylor? *Fine,* then there’s *no* problem with me taking along Break.”

“And when it *is* a trap, we’ll go biblical on their asses!” the other man agreed.

Shrugging, I added, “Pretty much. It *is* what they stand for, after all, and when in Rome. . .”

<AB>

It was late that night, Taylor having gone to sleep in my office’s attached bedroom, which she insisted *wasn’t* hers despite the fact that she was the *only* one that used it, when I felt it.

A Mark coming back in range.

Given that **Marked Teleportation**’s reach was over sixty-four *million miles*, that meant one thing, and one thing only.

Cauldron had opened a door.

“Took you long enough,” I smiled to myself, creating a Vejovis Projection who nodded to me, *knowing* why he was made, and I strode to the prepared room. In it sat two innocuous looking bags, and a half-filled rack of vials, each crystal container filled with a liquid so clear they almost appeared empty, only the slightly swirling motions of its contents twisting the light that passed through it giving lie to that assumption. Attaching both bags to my belt, I swiftly grabbed the next vial in sequence, popping the cork, and drinking the substance inside, which tasted of Light, Slick, and with a slight tinge of Serpent.

And, with a soundless ripple, I vanished to all eyes that were not directly attached to my body.

Floating in the air, I wrapped myself in a tight sound bubble, and, reaching out, *stilled* the air around the rediscovered Mark. Then, with a slow, sliding, barely audible *pop* I was there, in the white, sterile hallway, the plate bearing my Mark hidden so that none would see it, deep in the heart of Cauldron’s main facility.

And, a few seconds later, every other Mark I possessed vanished, out of range once more.

Shaking my head, I re-upped the nearby Mark’s energy reserves and started to make my way through the enormous structure, which spanned several *continents* through judicious use of permanent Doors, maintained by Doormaker. That Host, sadly, possessed a *Major* power, and I didn’t have enough to spare to waste on it without also having the omniscience that Clairvoyant provided. While I’d copied *his* power too, it was sadly locked up tighter than the Birdcage in my **Constellation**, and what little I could read off of it told me that making such a power safe to use was beyond my current capabilities.

Likely *why* it was child-locked by my own Shard, as that level of information gathering would be. . . severely tempting to have, despite its obvious downsides.

Getting a map of the place was child’s play for Quinn, with him able to say ‘damn the consequences’ in timelines that never happened, with Déjà’s assistance, and inserting the Mark had been, if anything, *easier,* Herbert merely given it by me and the man himself determined *not* to do so until *after* he’d copied Contessa’s power, at which point he spanked her in a precog duel, finding a way to drop it off in a way that didn’t mess with her plans, my *own* Blindspot nature meaning anything *I* did with it afterwards would not be part of her Path, so it paid as much attention to the Mark as that Shard would any other random slab of metal in Cauldron’s demesne.

I’d actually asked the Simurgh how *she* worked around Contessa’s efforts, both of them being global precogs, and the near-human had just smiled enigmatically.

Which is when Herbert had four of his Replicants, at my direction, *jump* her, copy her power, and kick her ass in a, to us, instantaneous Precog Duel, the four of them telling me that Ziz didn’t *actually* have Contessa beat constantly, the Psychic Endbringer was just *really* good at skirting around Fortuna’s sight and abusing the Endbringer’s status as a fellow Blindspot, though not a Blindspot to *herself* which is how the Replicants could beat her with her own power in the first place.

Essentially, by interweaving her *own* plans around Contessa’s Paths, they ran in parallel without Cauldron ever knowing, only going off at a critical moment in a way reminiscent of a shark coming in on an unaware diver, tearing off bits only to disappear in the depths once more. Ziz *completely* out classed the Host, neutered as **Eden** had made her shard, but instead of constantly managing the power behind Cauldron, the Simurgh conserved her energy to dance metaphorical circles around the Host’s sight with her own intricately orchestrated performance.

It was an elegant solution, and one that we promptly copied as much as we could in our dealings with the Cape-inati.

Simmy had been pretty put out by being beaten at her own game, but my firm reminder that we were working ***together****,* but also that I *was* the *Senior Partner* in this relationship meant that, if I seriously asked a question, she ***WOULD*** give me an answer, had helped. Herbert had insisted the whole thing was a ‘Shit Test’, which was apparently some bullshit where women would treat you badly so you’d put them in their place and ‘show them you were strong’ which I wanted *no* part of.

“The *crystalline engine* of *mass psychic destruction* is not a fucking *Tsundere!*” I’d informed him.

The man, of course, had shapeshifted into a copy of the Endbringer, sans-powers, and in *the* most over-the-top voice had spat, “Lee-chan, it’s not like I *like* you or anything, b-baka!” Then devolved into laughter which lasted *right* up until Taylor and I *both* buried him in beetles, which he still found creepy, despite the fact that he could *be them.*

All *that* work concluded with the fact that I was now soundlessly and invisibly flying down the hallways of Cauldron’s base, an airtight layer of my Shroud preventing any smells or particles from being shed, my control over the air itself meaning I didn’t even create a breeze, and a knowledge of the base’s security meant I knew where all the thermal sensors and the like were, so I could simply Stride past them with ease.

Turning one corner, I caught the faint Aura of **Wind & Air**, reading as **Dispersion**, the Custodian on patrol as she was oft to do. I’d talked with Taylor, and the way I perceived powers was. . . not *actually* colors, substances, *whatever*, though trying to describe how the **Yellow & Red** of Kid Win’s **Modular Tinker** wasn’t *anything* like the **Yellow & Red** of the now dead Victor’s **Skill Theft** was something that she was having trouble understanding, or I just was terrible at explaining.

Regardless, dealing with the invisible, seemingly ever-present guard was, for someone of my power, barely a challenge worth noting. The bodies she could create might be invisible, but they weren’t *projections*, every one of them *her* the same way that *all* of Fog had been *Fog*, and thus each incarnation of the Host lit up to my eyes like a Christmas tree. More than that, though, the woman’s spread-out bodies were made of *air,* ***all*** of which in several miles, in every direction, was under my direct control, and I could probably grab more if I wanted. She’d have to concentrate her bodies to do anything to me, and my **Aerokinesis** meant I could shred them in an instant.

I wouldn’t get *all* of them, I doubted the woman was stupid enough to concentrate her *full* form in any given place, and, having followed one of her around for a couple hours while I waited for a Door back to Earth Bet to open, I’d have to get *all* of her or else she’d be able to slowly regenerate the others, but she posed such little threat to me that I, essentially, treated the Custodian the same way that Ziz treated Contessa.

This time I merely flew up and around the ghostly woman, the undisturbed air not giving away my presence, my own invisibility doing the rest, the woman’s senses barely above Host standard, only the fact that there were hundreds of her floating about, if not *thousands,* was what made her seem omniscient to the others.

Sadly, like any of the ‘multiply yourself’ powers I’d copied, it was locked away, preventing me from slotting it despite it being a Minor power on its own.

A few Strides later and I was at my destination, a door that looked like all the others, but which held *immense* wealth.

Well, certain suicide for most, but I *wasn’t* most.

Not anymore.

Turning to Shadow for a moment, my control over my other powers loosened, as I was a fraction of a step out of alignment with reality, but I wasn’t trying anything *too* fancy so it was easy to keep everything together as I passed insubstantially through the entrance without having to try and open it, not setting off the alarm, and found myself in an archive, stacks upon stacks of metal shelving lining every surface.

Fishing the device I’d ordered from Toybox out of one bag, I let it go, as it scanned the room, then activated, seeming to disappear into thin air, when it would actually be more accurate to say the entire *room* vanished.

It was an interesting little doohikie, one that took an image of a room, and then laid a holographic layer over the entire area of what it had just seen.

*Technically* the suggested use was to scan an area before you modified it by installing a hidden door, or the like, then narrow down the ‘field’ to only project over that area, rendering something *functionally* invisible, but in such a way that *others* could walk right by it, or up to it, without an issue, where you could then tap in the code into an invisible keypad and walk through the seemingly solid door, platform 9¾ style.

*I* was using it to rob Cauldron blind.

Moving over to the first rack, I plucked up a Vial, which had a code embossed in raised lettering, the item seemingly clipping through the holographic shell surrounding it, but, as something that I was holding, Flamel’s invisibility counted it as part of ‘me’, and hid it from sight as well. The center of the finger-sized cylinder was clear glass, in which a metallic pinkish liquid swirled. Reaching into my right bag, I took out a smooth metal and glass canister of the same size, stoppered with black rubber just like the Vial was, the same metallic pinkish color filling it. A single flare of Kaiser’s **Metal Creation** copied the code, and I dropped the Vial in my left bag, leaving my own vial in its place. The base material had been something I’d had Amelia whip up, the girl able to make sure it was the right consistency *and* non-toxic, and as for the coloring?

*Sharkleberry Fin Kool-Aid.*

The next was a deep red, so I used Tropical Punch, the purple one was replaced with Purplesaurus Rex, the aqua colored Vial with Great Bluedini, and so on and so forth. Cauldron kept the high-end Vials in a *much* more secure location, along with the *truly* powerful, and dangerous, ones, like what created the Triumvirate, and the likes of Gray Boy and The Siberian. But these? These were *trash*, not even worth giving away, as, unTempered, the chance that a user would even survive the process *anything* close to human was one-in-ten.

I vaguely remembered from reading the original timeline, what felt like *years* ago, a single hallway filled with Vials being described, with Doctor Mother claiming to have ‘given away the rest’, something I’d accepted in the moment because I, frankly, just wanted the story to be *done,* but, now that I’d been dealing with the asshats for months, knew was an *outright lie.* Cauldron would *never* give away such power. It was a lie the others in the scene had accepted without question, because they were all *traumatized teenagers* in the middle of *the end of the world.*

No, with a base larger than a single person could explore in their lifetime, at one point they had a *lot* of staff here, the infrastructure *absurdly* overbuilt for their current team, but enough had happened over the years, especially with Simmy sneaking in a few Ziz-bombs, that they’d downsized to a suitably ridiculous degree in their paranoia, relying on Fortuna to make it work, which was also why the number of new Case-53’s being released into the ‘wild’ had dropped like a *fucking rock*.

And that meant they didn’t have several hundred Vials, they hadseveral hundred *thousand* vials, which they’d needed to burn through to try and understand how to take **Eden**’s corpse and create powers out of it via the scientific method instead of having Contessa play blind barista. *That* meant that they often created batches that were *deadlier* than average, yet also weaker than average, and created them *en masse* to make sure that any problems weren’t stemming from the Host’s binding process, which *were* an issue as the drinker’s physiology, thoughts, and psychological tendencies made them an *active* participant in the bonding of unTempered Shards, and good luck getting people to accurately describe their frame of mind before, during, and *after* they’d exploded into shards of crystal, or tried to separate into four separate imps who all lacked a full brain and promptly died, or turned into a tentacle monster that reflexively crushed anything that got too close.

So they’d run a *lot* of tests.

And a *lot* of people had died.

Like, *Cambodian Killing Fields* levels of death, only done with a clinical detachment that’d make *Mengele* hard, and with a near-religious belief that the ends *would* justify the means.

But they’d been spread out, taken, later individually, but at first wholesale, from countless realities, always in ways that Contessa could guarantee *wouldn’t* be noticed.

Yes, the Cape-inati were the *bad guys*. In other news water was wet and, *sometimes*, the sun went away for a few hours every day, but the sheer *scale* of their crimes were easy to overlook with their current setup, and with how they, likely at Contessa’s direction, ‘leaked’ just enough intel to make them look better then they where when, *not if*, they were discovered, which, according to Ziz, was *always* part of the Host’s Path.

Regardless, I continued to work my way down the shelves, in a room that hadn’t been opened in *years,* even for the Custodian to glance over, glad that my ‘Bags of Holding’ had room for *everything* here. Getting into the swing of things, I was able to process each fake vial in about fifteen seconds, picking out the color, making sure the code was the same, and orienting them to match the placement *exactly*. Which meant, doing a quick guesstimate, I’d be here for. . . about five hours, give or take.

And they had *dozens* of these rooms scattered throughout their complex.

Flexing my **Acoustokinesis** just a little, I started to play the Mission Impossible theme, just for shits and giggles, well that and practice, secure in the knowledge that, despite the wandering Custodians, there wasn’t a living soul for *miles* in any direction, and worked in peace.

<AB>

I looked over the gathered volunteers, the members of the PD, along with others, Break standing next to me. It was the day of the next Endbringer attack, of ***Legion****’s* debut, though there was no way I could name it yet, as it was supposed to be a complete unknown.

As he’d warned me, with the attack happening on Kansas City, Æonic couldn’t be bothered to help, though I spotted Brian in the crowd, and reached out through the space between spaces, giving him just enough **Essence** to temporarily mark him as one of *mine*, and thus as someone the Endbringer would use kid-gloves on. Well, it’d hold back for an *Endbringer*, but with Brian’s power he’d be fine.

Similarly, my father had sent me the warning email this morning, though this time it’d been unneeded, and, while I’d offered, Grace and Dragon were prepping with the rest of the Guild instead of coming down from Toronto. I’d forgotten, but Dragon *wasn’t* the leader of her group, *Narwhal* was, which took the sting out of any such decision, as they were backing their teammates, *not* snubbing me, and with both girl’s powers they *should* be fine.

The mood in general was tense, as, somewhat annoyingly, even most of my *own* people hadn’t believed me when I’d sent the warning out that, as Behemoth’s death had been unprecedented, we didn’t know if that would set something *else* off in the process. No, they’d celebrated, and had only started to stop when I’d sent out the call for fighters. We’d spread the word the same time we’d contacted the PRT, who *weren’t* happy about it, but they could *blow me,* and people had only now started to realize the ride wasn’t almost over, it was merely beginning for *real*.

Looking across the thousands of faces before us, the fact that *we* had been the ones to kill Behemoth pulled in Hosts in numbers I hadn’t expected, and I couldn’t help but smile. *I suppose actions spoke louder than words,* I mused, remembering my earlier attempts to bring people under my banner, and how they failed. With our victories against ‘Echidna’ and Behemoth, with the construction of New Avalon, and with the ever-growing numbers of Hosts in the Penumbral Defenders and Arachne Assemblages, we’d *proved* we had the strength to back up our words.

And if there was one thing that Shards and Hosts alike both believed in, it was *strength.*

I shifted slightly ***Out***, while keeping most of my attention focused on the real world, and, with a breath, gathered up the corona coming off my **Sea of Flame**, and cast it outwards, disgorging enough **Essence** that I felt a little light-headed, but the constant stream from my Negentropic sources not only replaced what I lost, but I was able to lean on them, just a little, to follow the latticework of *Power* that I’d spread out over the crowd, the Hosts, sensing *something* was happening but unable to say what, as they fell silent, their Shards collectively sitting up and taking notice, Flames and Auras alike starting to wax and wane in synchronicity.

Smiling at the effect, I took a step forward, and ***Spoke***, not using Canary’s Suggestion, but I didn’t need to. My words needed no **Acoustokinesis** to be heard, and there would be *no* misunderstanding what I meant.

**You are gathered here today because you are prepared to fight, to die if need be, in the defense of others. You know that for evil to spread, be it human or supernatural, all that is required is for good men, and women, to do nothing.**

**And you *refuse* to do nothing.**

**Behemoth is dead, but he is merely the first of many, and, for better or worse, the forces that have invaded our world, the ones that have brought the powers you wield with them, have started to realize we are not cattle to be harvested, but a threat to be taken seriously.**

There was a tensing in the crowd, some of these concepts things we’d *hinted* at, things we’d made sure to spread, but had never addressed directly.

Until now.

**And they *should* take us seriously, because we *are* a threat, the likes of which they have not seen, not because we’re stronger, or faster, or *physically* superior to other species they’ve done this to, but because we are smarter, more creative, and because we do *not give up.* I do not mean we fight to the last in every confrontation, but though we may lose battles, we do not break and lose the *war*.**

**And it *will* be a war. One we have all been fighting for nearly twenty years, though we have not realized it, because our enemy has made no formal declaration of hostilities commencing, does not have the honor to face us fairly, because they underestimate us, and do not understand the strength of Humanity.**

**This will not be like the movies, where one large battle decides the outcome of the world in half an hour, but a war, a great war a *World* War the likes of which we haven’t seen for nearly a century, and, in truth, we have *never* seen.**

**Not an industrial war, where the question is which side can field more forces and supply them, but a war of *Shards*, where standardization is impossible, and it is *personal strength,* not just of the body, but of the *mind*, that is most critical.**

**Not all powers are created equal, we all know this, but *all* powers can be useful, if only the Host can figure out *how* to wield theirs. And, while, *individually*, we have power, it is through working *together* that we truly become a threat. It was not the efforts of a single fighter that killed the first Endbringer, but a *team*, and, scattered and roughshod that previous battles against those monsters have been, it was only by working *together*, even accidentally, that we have been able to repel them.**

Which wasn’t *really* true for the two fights before that, where I’d single-handedly rebuffed Ziz and *ended* **ITERATION**, but my powers were such that I was, effectively, a one-man team, single in mind but *many* in capability.

**Today, we shall see the emergence of a *new* Endbringer, and so your mission today is *not* to kill it as well, though, by all means, if you can, *do so*, but to meet it in battle, learn what it can do, so that, the *next* time it dares show its head, after we are able to put together a strategy, know what combination of powers is required, we can *kill it,* just like we killed Behemoth, and shall do the same for every other monster our invaders possess, until that *Entity* is forced to take the field.**

**And then we’ll *kill it too.***

**But that means, above all else, you need to *survive*, as many of you as possible, not individually, but *together*. Every Host has value, and we all know of those who we once thought were weak, until they truly understood their powers, and became *truly* terrifying. Yes, we may have our differences, but it matters not who you are, Hero, Rogue, or Villain, our enemy will kill us *all* if it has its way, for to it we are all but *cattle* that are not yet ripe for the slaughter.**

**But Humanity is *no* *one’s* cattle.**

**So do not fight as individuals against our enemy, but as a cohesive, heterogeneous *whole,* each of us different, each unique, but combined in the common purpose of Humanity’s *survival,* because *that* is what is at stake here, nothing more, and nothing less.**

**Thus, just as last week marked the end of one era, the era of the Endbringer Attack, where, despite what you some hoped, most believed those creations of the enemy to be invulnerable, only able to be repelled, but never defeated, as everything, slowly and by degrees, got *worse,* today will mark the beginning of a new era, where we will win our freedom, our world, your very *survival* as a species, or we will lose *everything.***

**Today begins**

***World War Cape.***