**Diversification 19.7**

That evening, at five fifty-five, I received an email from Quinn, informing me that the first stage of building plans had been locked in. Other than a link to the document, the message included no other information, and I wondered how many, if any, employees we’d lost in the process.

After the meeting, I’d asked Herb about the PD, specifically if they’d had any Vial Triggers. According to him, ‘Accelo-break’ had claimed to be a Natural Trigger, but on one of Overwatch’s hacking of Cauldron in a day that never was uncovered the person’s name on a list of assets. During another of Déjà’s precognitive visions, he’d openly checked the person’s identity, tripping *something* and the Cape had disappeared into a glowing rectangle that’d appeared right under his feet.

If anything, finding that out had shown me just how well the others had handled things in my absence. *Yes,* my Sight allowed me to pick up on things the other hadn’t, like the Cauldron Agent’s nature as a Vial Trigger, something that Herb *couldn’t* see even when he copied my power, it manifesting only as floating menus instead of Flames, but all three of the people in charge had found things out in other ways, and taken careful steps to determine the threat.

Taylor had wanted to get rid of him, but Herb and Quinn had both nix’d that, having explained to her that a *known* spy was more of an asset than a threat, properly managed, and with the enemy capable of opening doors *anywhere* inside our base, it was best to keep Cauldron thinking things were working. My mere presence would keep some of the more complicated ‘us knowing about the spy to try and stop Cauldron won’t stop Cauldron because Cauldron would Path around our knowing of them so that nothing matters and we still lose’ bullshit, which meant they needed more *subtle* measures. And while Cauldron could open doors *anywhere* in our base, at any time, it was *not* subtle, which is why they likely resorted to using spies.

Overwatch *had* gotten his hands on a teleportation inhibitor, fixing it up with his own Repair Tinker power, that could cover Eclipse if need be, but that would also stop *our* teleportation, so was really a last resort measure, but, regardless, was still something I was glad we had.

My first instinct was to agree with Taylor, wanting *nothing* Cauldron related in my base, but, in a way, it was already too late. After all, we got our Vials from them, and Herb was, as far as *they* were concerned, still a loyal agent, if one that got a bit touchy when I was involved. Interestingly, when Alexandria had showed up, she very carefully *hadn’t* pulled rank as a member of the Cape-inati, not saying *anything,* until pressed, and then claiming to speak for the *Protectorate*.

Regardless, after meeting the Penumbral Defenders, Taylor and I had returned to my office, as there was *still* a lot of things I needed to be brought up to speed on. Nothing else groundbreaking *thank god*, but dozens upon dozens of little developments, like the construction of the memorial gardens for those dead in Leviathan’s attack. The general design was included in Accord’s algorithm, able to be scaled, and they’d gotten Brix to do the construction, as while most of the buildings could not be created with Crimson and Midnight Oak, the red and black variants of the bio-engineered wood that Panacea had created as a training exercise, and then further improved.

The girl had then *further* improved it, and had been unhappy when she’d been told ‘thanks, but we can’t use it’. Accord’s plans utilized the version of the Tinker-Lumber that she’d developed *at the time,* and, when Quinn had sent a message asking if we could switch one for another, he’d gotten back an emphatic ‘*NO’* from the Thinker. Utilizing the new ‘Ruby’ and ‘Onyx’ Oak was something the planning committee had apparently wanted to do, and a justification for why they’d previously scrapped their plans, some even going so far as to try to delete the planning program, only getting rid of the copy on their dedicated server.

*Those* people had been fired, at the very least.

“So ready to get started?” I asked Taylor, stowing my tablet in an armored section on my back, my ability to control my costume allowing me to manipulate it almost like an extra limb. A limb that’d fallen *asleep,* with *very* faint feedback and nothing I’d want for fine point control, but an extra limb nonetheless.

The girl smiled, nodding, and stepping up when I held out a hand. All of my Marks outside of the few halls I’d walked today were *long* since expired, but I had *two* teleportation powers, and, even though I no longer had my Marks to ease guidance, I’d been all around New Brockton Bay. As such, it was as easy as stepping between rooms to use Strider’s power to move us out from my office to several hundred feet over the city, above the buildings I’d constructed.

With a Lift Field wrapped around Taylor, it was easy to keep her up, and the two of us flew towards the first rooftop overlooking the empty lot where I’d start. The building was going to be a fairly simple one, an apartment building with built-in ground-floor stores and a restaurant, constructed in such a way that the restaurant’s smell wouldn’t permeate the other spaces. Things could get fairly specific, but we’d made sure they didn’t get *too* specific, as while it would be possible to specially build so one *kind* of restaurant could be most efficiently built, restaurants could fail and new ones could move in, and having things be configurable was far more valuable.

It would, theoretically, be more expensive to build things that way, but since the construction cost was *near zero*, it was well worth it.

Tapping into the Insect Network, I looked around the area. Some people were moving around, doing various things, but a few men and women in purple uniforms caught my eye. They were armed with rifles, though a *lot* of people around were carrying, and they were clearing the area, which was itself gathering more attention. “Who’re they?” I asked Taylor, focusing the surveillance flies’ attention on the eggplant-clothed individuals.

“City guard,” she explained, copying what I was doing in the IN to show me dozens upon dozens of other individuals all across the city in the same uniforms. “Break picked the color, and, well, they’re not really cops.”

On one hand, seeing heavily armed individuals walking around *should* be making people nervous, especially with how, well, *cape-dependent* people in this world were. Everything about this should seem *wrong,* given what I’d seen of Earth Bet’s media, but, if anything, people seemed *less* tense around them. Voicing my confusion, Taylor nodded.

“Yeah. It’s kinda weird. But, we had some Anomalies break out. We could handle them, but a few made it into the city, and having the guards there helped.” She waved a hand outward, and through the IN highlighted a half-dozen parahumans jetting around the city. “We’re around, but we’re not everywhere, and having them around helps.”

Pinging the IN, I commented, “You seem to be most of the way there to being everywhere to me.”

The girl shook her head, smiling. “I need to sleep sometime,” she replied, which *wasn’t* a no. “We’re starting here?”

I nodded in turn, grabbing a few insects as I pulled out my tablet, queuing up the building plans. “Yep, but let me grab Dryad.” Reaching out mentally, I pinged my **Tree Growth & Control** power, wincing as the *entire* city hummed in response. *Right, I’ve grown too much to see them easily*. Trying again, I focused on bits under the ground, trying to find a human-sized creation, separating them out from the masses of Crimson and Midnight Oak.

*There you are,* I thought, focusing on it. Pulling it upwards, I realized I’d breech the street, so moved it to the side instead, the body breaking through the pit wall. The guards turned, guns coming up, and I made the Dryad body wave in greeting. It was awkward, compared to the Golems that I’d been creating, but that power had been. . . it was currently rebuilding itself. However, mentally shifting gears, Dryad was also *easier* to move than it originally had been.

I didn’t have access to **Golem Creation** any longer, but I. . . I *remembered.* Taking a half step *out*, I cast a glance down into my Flaming Sea, seeing the two powers I was trying to use pulsing in patterns that seemed. . . *right*. Releasing a sigh, I told it, *alright, let’s get to work.*

Reaching down to the Dryad, I paused, considering it, and something just seemed to *click.*

I cocked my head to the side, as did Dryad, and, moving a pair of insects discretely into the construct’s eyes, I closed my eyes, only to open *both* *sets*. “Well, this is odd,” I remarked. It almost felt like I was trying to put on a Persona, like Boardwalk, but, having mentally shifted gears, Dryad’s powers seemed to shift to my forefront.

“Vejovis?” Taylor asked, and I looked over with the wrong head, switching over to my *other* body, seeing the girl staring at me.

“Yes?” I asked.

The teenager looked unsure. “Are, are you okay? You’ve been standing there for fifteen minutes.”

I blinked, wincing in *both* bodies. “Sorry,” I told her, with my. . . my *real* body. “Slight power weirdness. I’m trying. . .” I *realized* what I was doing. “I’m trying to control Dryad like you controlled that humanoid bug. Well, that and a lot more.”

Watching her move the doppelganger insect, even for as little as I had, I *hadn’t* gotten that sense of a lack of separation from her that I was feeling now, but, the more I worked both bodies, the more I was able to differentiate inputs and outputs. “Alright,” I said, splitting things up even more to move Dryad to the edge of the pit, dropping a small piece of wood as a seed, then shooting out a tendril of wood to drag her up and land at the top of the pit’s edge, taking a few steps before turning around. Tapping into the IN, I considered the blueprint, and reached out with Dryad, like a conductor, and *began*.

Creating the metal blocks for Quinn had been a bit of a chore, but this? This was *interesting.* Something about this just felt *right*, the difference between doing bicep curls ad nauseum and *dancing*. It was a dance I’d done before, having made this kind of building a dozen times before, but not in this *exact* configuration, which mattered. Both powers leapt to my command, twisting and shifting, just as I wanted them to. Dryad’s arms lifted, and the ground *exploded*, metal and timber moving in pre-ordained patterns, until less than a minute after I started, I was *done*.

Letting out a long breath, I checked the plans, *just* to be sure, but everything checked out. Normally, such a thing would take a quarter of an hour or so, but now it’d taken a tenth of the time. And, more than that, my power pulled at me, ready to *keep going*. Pulling up the next building, an odd multi-layered workshop affair, with a sort of separated loading dock assembly so that deliveries could be made to each of them individually, I held out a hand, and Taylor took it. I Strode us to the inside of the building, which, in the twilight, cast odd shadows with its unfinished state, everything checked out here as well, the flowered art designs *exactly* as I’d pictured them in my head.

The two of us made our way out, and I walked Dryad to us, nodding to myself, and nodding back in return. “Not bad, Dryad,” I smiled. “Good to have you back with us.” The construct gave a one shouldered shrug, gesturing in the direction of the next building, before I made it touch her wrist. “Yeah, fair enough,” I told myself, putting my own hand to my ear. “Alright, bring us to the next one,” I instructed, reaching out to encompass all three of us. With a twist of will, and looking through the IN, I selected a target and Strode us there in an instant.

The Guards there glanced up, not even lifting their guns. *Right*, I realized. *Herb, Karen, and Quinn teleport all the time, but busting out of walls is probably a rarity*. Their stances firmed, as they looked more closely at us, one man saying, “Dryad?”

I nodded in my secondary body, as my primary one asked in turn, “You know how I was taken by the Slaughterhouse Nine?” The guard nodded. “She was there, and escaped, but, for better or for worse, went somewhere only I knew where to look. I’m glad she’s okay, and vice versa,” I stated, thankful of the fact that *her* powerset hadn’t gotten grabbed, “and know we’re both back to pick up where we left off.”

Taylor, to my side, nodded, and I brought up the schematics, turning Dryad to look at them, finalizing them in my mind. Before, I’d been getting better, but doing so had been difficult. Now, the complex, three-dimensional structures just seemed. . . *simple.* Compared to Shards, they *absolutely* were, I supposed, *only* existing in three dimensions, in a single dimension, as they did. Crossing the arms of my main form, Dryad turned, holding her hands out.

From a single finger I fired a small piece of Crimson Oak, which expanded outwards, planned roots securing things as the blood-red base formed, rippling as spires of metal arose like a hundred reaching hands, scarlet limbs twisting up to join them in a waltz of wood and metal. Both bodies smiled, and Dryad laughed, a dry, rasping sound as my powers spread and synced, hundreds of tiny changes re-aligning, making all of the small changes I’d overlooked in my creation of the secondary body.

It took longer, but it was a larger, more complex building, my **Metal Creation** and **Tree Growth & Control** powers subtly shifting as I focused on them, smoothing and shifting to my needs as I fed them more energy from my own constantly filling reserves. In only a few minutes, it was done, the interweaving designs on the front formed in such a way that each workshop’s section was distinct, but formed a beautiful whole.

Dryad nodded, looking back to my other body, and I nodded in return, both of me looking to Taylor who stared. On a whim, I spoke through dryad instead, the supple wood forming rudimentary vocal chords whispering, thin and reedy, “What do you think?”

The holder of **Administrator** jerked back in surprise, looking over to my main body, and I used that one to ask, “Well?”

“I. . . it’s. . . good. Faster,” the girl stated, glancing between me.

I smiled with both faces, though the setup of my two heads made the gesture subtly different. “Good,” I told her through my main body, holding out a hand, which she hesitantly took, Dryad putting a hand on my shoulder as I reached up, telling no one at all, “Next.”

<AB>

In less than an hour, we’d completed the fourteen approved structures, finishing right as the sun finally set. Dryad nodded to Vejovis, turning and heading for an open space of ground, and digging down into it, **Mineral Manipulation** allowing me to subtle reposition things to make the process near seamless, only the slightest disturbance left behind, topsoil’s composition still too muddied and complex for me to control fully, even with my enhanced powers.

Mentally disconnecting made me a little whoozy, suddenly *only* having one body, but, like walking while reading a book only to stop one of those two, let me more fully focus on the remaining task. *~Are you alright?~* Taylor asked with a nearby swarm. Well, nearby as in the base two miles away, but well within range of us both.

I put a hand on her shoulder, announcing, “Okay, that’s all. Bring us back,” before Striding into my office. “I’m fine,” I reassured her, heading over to the small side area, with the couch, dropping into it with a sigh, arms spread across the top as I relaxed. “Just. . . it’s good to be doing things again.”

While my time in my Sea of Flame had been needed, things had started to. . . *skew*, for lack of a better term. I could get a sense of progress, as I’d fixed one Shard after another, but there was something. . . *grounding* about constructing those buildings, not just for myself, but for others. *Yes,* I’d be the one that ultimately profited, but I was making places for people to work, to eat, to play, to *live* and that just seemed. . . *right.*

But, more than that, was the *ease* with which I could now use my powers.

When I’d first started, my use of them was akin to a Vial Triggers. I *had* the powers, and, *yes*, I could copy the uses I’d seen with Sharingan-like exactness, but anything more than Host-See Host-Do I was left fumbling in the dark. I *could* figure things out, and use the powers I’d had, but they were crude, fumbling attempts, like writing with the wrong hand, in a language you didn’t speak. It *had* been getting easier, slowly, especially in the powers that I’d used the most, but it was truly slow goings. I wondered how things would’ve gone, if I’d been allowed to keep my previous method of use, when I’d fought Leviathan.

Able to use *all* of the powers, I would’ve been a power to behold, but, at the same time, there would’ve been *no* way to hide what I was.

After I’d interacted with Eidolon’s Shard, my power had changed. In retrospect, I finally recognized what his power was. He held the **CONTROL** Shard, through which Entities accessed their powers, and my own Unlimited Shard Works power had seized on that, implementing it, even if I didn’t want to.

I knew Shards had a certain degree of intelligence, and my *own* certainly did, though, with my powers, I was unable to see which Shard was dominant in myself, the same way I couldn’t fully understand *any* of those who received their Shards from Abaddon. Regardless, just like my ability to no-sell time powers from my copied **Temporal Protection**, the second I’d reached out to that power, everything had gone. . . *wrong.*

Well, not wrong, but certainly *different*, at a most inopportune time. Oddly enough, I *hadn’t* copied **CONTROL**, but my power instead had looked over the way it had done things, and then modified *itself* to match. Thankfully, I didn’t have David’s three-power limit, but, in the process, the underlying mechanics had shifted, giving me slots to fill, and use at will.

However, with those limitations, had come benefits that, while not seeming so in the moment, had *definitely* been worth the cost. I remembered my failed attempts to meet Leviathan, Aerokinesis versus Hydrokinesis, and, while I *had* failed, the fact that I’d been able to control it that finely, use it that adroitly, to even hold Leviathan off as much as I had was, in retrospect, *amazing.* With more time, and more powers, my threat had only grown. With a slightly different power set, if I’d been just a little luckier, I might’ve even been able to *kill* the Endbringer.

Though, given what its death would’ve triggered, perhaps that was for the best.

After, though, my use of my powers had grown by leaps and bounds. If before, I’d been a Vial Trigger, now I was a Natural one. My powers still required training and experimentation, I had a feeling that would *always* be the case, but now, instead of trying to operate a counter-intuitive system in such a way that blowing yourself up was *dreadfully* simple, as my many close calls could attest, my Shards were now much easier to understand and work with.

I called to mind the two powers I’d slotted, hoping to get sacrifice them instead of losing something needed, **Kinetic Force Fields** and **Injury Empowerment**. I’d also hoped the second would’ve helped me break *free*, but the damn thing had originally settled as my head being cut open as being my fucking *default*. Unfortanately, it’d since understood that *no, that was wrong,* so I couldn’t even utilize of having a whole skull considered being a state of ‘injury’, and thus strengthening me.

Taking a half-step *out* I looked at the power, a relative unknown to me, and reached out to it, redirecting my normal flow of energy to increase its yield, and opened my eyes, not having realized I’d closed them, to find **Administration** had taken a seat next to me on the couch, leaning slightly into me.

“How long was I out?” I wondered aloud with a smile, having got caught up in my thoughts, and she glanced up, concerned, but relaxed and smiled back.

“Only ten minutes,” she shrugged. “New power?” she guessed.

“Kinda,” I replied, playing around with my powers a little. A Lift Field raised us a half an inch over the couch, and hardened air created a secondary cushion. Making the hardened air *soft* was an interesting problem, and one that I’d had a *little* progress with, downgrading it from ‘steel’ to ‘hospital bed’ in stiffness, but now, as if reading my mind, the power shaped *itself*, pulling from my others to crib notes on the structure and weight distribution, and I played a round a little with weight distributions until I got it, not perfect, but good enough. “Mind if we head over to the testing range?”

Taylor shrugged, moving to get up, but I gently pushed her back down into the ‘seat’. “I got this,” I reassured her, using the Mark I’d left from my time with Gallant to zero-in on it, and Striding us there. “No need to get up,” I reassured her, using the arm opposite of her to grab one of the Crimson Oak chips I’d collected from Dryad and flick it out.

Another Dryad body was made in an instant, and Taylor opened her mouth to speak until I held a hand out, and shot a beam of crimson kinetic energy at it, striking with enough force that I needed to move wooden limbs to keep from being overbalanced.

“Laserdream’s?” the girl beside me asked.

I shook my head, “More like half of New Wave. Lady Photon and her kids all share the same Shard, with expressions close enough that they’re effectively the same power. I copied all three and combined them into this.” Firing another beam, this one purple, Dryad dodged, then a blue one that *curved* a little catching me in the hip and cracking the wood slightly as I healed myself. “I’m still limited in my coloring, so no greens. . .” I paused, wondering *why* that was. It was because the colors of *my* powers were Purple & Red, but. . . Holding out a hand, I held a charged beam in my hand. I couldn’t *over*-charge it, unfortunately, but examining the Shard as I shifted it back and forth, I tracked it down to its source, and bi-directional mechanism in my *core* power that determined appearence. “Gimme a sec,” I murmured, reaching into it.

The core of my Sea was. . . *complex*, and I could almost feel *my* Shard, watching me warily, almost as if it was ready to step in if I tried something *really* dumb, but for this? This *should* be alright. Interfacing with it, the control mechanism *only* had knowledge of red and blue, so I tried to, well, explain the concept of *green* to it.

And failed. Miserably.

It had *no* idea what grass was. Or leaves. Or Jade. Or *anything* that wasn’t a power.

Starting to pull out of it, dispirited, I paused as a flicker of *Green* caught my eye, and I remembered that Cricket’s power, **Acoustokinesis**, was Green! Looking around for more references, Vista’s power, as well as Trickster’s were both similarly colored, and I mentally facepalmed at forgetting that, having spent, apparently, *weeks* hip-deep in them, though at the time I’d been focused on what the colors had *said* instead of the colors themselves.

Diving back inside, I directed the power to look at my ability to control sound, pointing at *that* as what ‘green’ was, and, suddenly, something *clicked* into place, the line turning into a two-axis triangle. Another dive, pulling on **Aerokinesis**, displayed black and white, with **Arthropod Control’s** Grey being the midway point, and the design turned three-dimensional.

Pulling back out, I considered the glowing globe of kinetic energy in my hands, which now shone a brilliant pure white. With a mental flick it turned green, then yellow, then black, then every other color I could think of in quick succession. Making it two *different* colors was still impossible, and I couldn’t make it *clear*, but even then the *enormous* variabilities I’d just opened up were something I’d never expected, and, the kind of thing I *couldn’t* have done before.

“Time?” I asked Taylor, who was still leaning against me the girl having taken off her mask, which now sat on the invisible seat next to us, glanced up, startled.

“Oh, two hours,” she said, frowning. “What, what were you doing? The power kept. . .” she trialed off, glancing at the quickly shifting globe. “Doing that. But. . . slower. And with less colors.”

I smiled, “Alright, you know how I could See powers, right?” She nodded. “Well, after Leviathan, it got. . . *more* so. I could not just see them, but. . . *talk* to them, kind of.”

“Like with Gallant. The first time,” she agreed.

“Right,” I replied with a hesitant smile, able to still only *vaguely* remember what had happened then. On the bright side, whatever was causing Synthesia whenever I tried was no longer there, so trying to recall it no longer made me taste blue, see music, and smell hope. “Well, after, um, after I’ve come back I’ve gotten *another* boost. I don’t know *how*, mind you, but I can now actively interact with them.”

Taylor nodded again, “Like with Gallant today.”

*“Exactly,*” I confirmed. “But, it’s not only others, but also, to a lesser extent, *myself*.” Reaching a hand out, I fired another beam, but this one I reached into and *twisted,* the beam spinning and fracturing, sending a hundred smaller, weaker beams out and catching Dryad mid-dodge. The blow wasn’t enough to do any damage, but *was* enough to knock my other body on its ass.

Doing it again, I paid close attention to *how* it broke, and it did so in fractal patterns, which I, with a force of will, froze in mid-air, though the beam only was able to stay still for a moment before breaking apart and vanishing in a shower of motes of light. “And, they’re easier to use, even more than then they were before.”

If before, I’d gone from Vial Trigger to Natural Trigger, now I’d gone from Natural Trigger to. . . to I wasn’t sure, to be honest. It wasn’t magic, it wasn’t insta-mastery, and I didn’t know *how* I was doing *half* of what I was doing, but I was doing it.

*Is this how Entities use powers?* I wondered, but, from what little I knew, *no*. The interdimensional space snakes used their Shards in a fire-and-forget method, tools to be *used*, not abilities to be *understood*. It was *Vial* Triggers that were closest to the Entities, while what I was doing. . . what I was doing was the next step *away* from them.

That said. . . “I’m. . . I’m going to go check something,” I told her. “It might be a bit,” I warned.

The girl shrugged, leaning a bit more into my side, controlling the IN without moving, and informing me, “This is comfy.”

“. . . okay,” I shrugged, not sure what else to say, and closed my eyes, going back to the Sea of Flame. I went deeper than I had before, but kept a single connection back to myself, feeling myself sitting, Taylor against me. In that other world, I turned, and moved back towards the damaged Shards.

Some had healed a little more, while **Lightform**, the last one I’d finished, had barely started. However, it wasn’t the damage I was looking at, but *how* they’d separated, flitting between powers, whole and broken, and remembering how the latter *used* to look, comparing the three different sets.

When they’d been. . . *removed,* it’d tore parts of me with it, but the damaged portions were, for lack of a better term, hookups. Channels that had carried data, channels that had carried data, channels that formed the core of the Shard’s. . . *brain* wasn’t the right word, but the section that determined a Shard’s purpose.

Looking over them, the powers that had been taken would be broken things, more akin to Vial Triggers than fully formed Shards, but even less so. They’d be lacking in *key* base structures, but, I supposed, if the person *already* had the needed formations, it could. . . well *piggyback* off them, but it would stress the system something *fierce*.

But . . .

What if it didn’t?

I couldn’t *un-*slot a power, they were intrinsically *part* of me, just as my arms or legs were, even *more* so in some ways, as my own power could probably, eventually, regrow my limbs. However. . . what if the power wasn’t *broken*, the *interface* ***shattered***, my **soul** ***torn-***

I felt someone tugging on my arm, and, *slowly* pulled out, blinking my eyes to see the world once more. “What?” I asked, looking down to see Taylor, staring at me, concerned.

“You started twitching,” she replied, eyes searching my own face.

“Just, bad memories,” I replied, pulling my mask back to try and help reassure her. “This. . . this helps,” I said, hesitantly bringing my hand down to hug her momentarily. As a friend. “If I start doing so again, though, pull me back out?”

The girl looked at me searchingly, before nodding. “I, I will,” she promised. “Oh, and, it was, um, six hours.”

I blinked, that meant it was approaching on two in the morning. “*Damn.* If you want to go to bed, that’s fine too.”

“Will you keep doing whatever you were doing?” she asked in turn, without hesitation. I, however, *did* hesitate, which was all the answer she needed. “No. You, you need me,” she declared, glancing away as she did so. “I, I wasn’t there then, but I can now.”

“You don’t *need-*” I started to argue.

“I *know*,” she interrupted. “But I’m going to anyway.”

Well, I didn’t really have anything to say to that. “Alright. Anything I could do to make that easier?”

Taylor froze, hesitantly suggesting. “Can, can you extend the cushions? So I can put my feet up?”

“Sure,” I shrugged, as copying pre-existing structures with **Aerokinesis**, something that originally would’ve required a mental effort, *especially* with something as complex as the ‘air cushion’, was now child’s play, if that. Gently forming it, I lifted our feet, and I had to admit, it *was* more comfortable. “Anything else?”

“N-No, this is good,” she told me, blushing, for reasons beyond my understanding. Feeling her with **Arthropod Control**, all I got was a sense of *pleased/embarrassed/content*, which made *no* sense but, well, she seemed happy, so. . . okay?

“Well, see you on the other side,” I told her. “And, even if things are fine, pull me out in the morning, please. Time doesn’t really. . . well *exist* that way. Or, well, there’s no way to determine time. Cause and effect is still a thing, *obviously,* but. . .” I trailed off, realizing I was butchering the explanation, but she nodded, seemingly understanding me anyways.

“I don’t need sleep,” I stated, and, given that with Noctis I’d review my memories with *perfect clarity* if you slept anyways, it was something I’d be giving a *wide* bearth, “but if I’m going to be up and around, I need to keep a more normal schedule.”

“You can count on me,” she promised, with *far* more seriousness than being a living alarm clock warranted, and I smiled at her, before leaning back into the air-couch, closing my eyes, and mentally falling backwards into the Sea of Flame.

Flying over to the broken, but repaired, Shard, I considered it. What had been done, something I was *very* much not focusing on, had been done *badly.* But, given the fact that the Tinker in question *had* no way to access powers like I did, the fact that she’d succeeded at all was a miracle in of itself. I’d done *some* research into the Corona Pollentia and the Gemma, but short of *dissecting* a parahuman, I didn’t think I’d get any real answers.

And that was a bridge too far, and one that I wasn’t going to cross, no matter *how* evil the Host in question was. Mad dogs didn’t get tortured, after all, even if it was for science ™, they were *put down*.

But I was getting off topic, lost in my own head, *in my own head*, and I turned back to the original issue. Bonesaw had. . . *removed* the powers, but blindly, with all of the finesse of a stoned chimp in a store full of Fabergé eggs, ripping them off their stands, not realizing that was part of the piece. I’d salvaged them, and they’d come back, which is where the metaphor broke down, but the *damage* could not be understated.

The way it’d been *done* to me, it’d left me broken and bleeding, but . . . did it have to be?

More than that, though, what if I could decouple the power myself *manually?*

Was removing them like that even possible, let alone doing so safely?

What if I removed only part of it, leaving a ‘seed’ Shard intact?

What if I could then *further* modify it to suit its Host?

I didn’t even know if it was possible at all.

But I knew where to look.

And so I descended.

Into the Flame.