**Diversification 19.3**

Growing the blocks of rare earth metals from the pads provided was. . . *boring.* I mean, it was needed, and using **Metal Creation** at first was nice, but by the sixth pallet was repetitive. So I started growing two pads worth at once, mentally shifting between the different materials in turn. After a few, that got too easily, so I started something I hadn’t before, doing it in pairs.

Taylor, who had been sitting nearby, glanced up when I walked over, to put the two pads in rage of my Stellar Negation, and created a pair of purple suns, melting what I’d grown. “What’s wrong?” she asked, as she was looking over several dozen reports, writing a half-dozen reports herself at once, and keeping tabs on the night shift putting the finishing touches on one building, and hooking up the wiring in another, wiring that was being pulled through the walls with a small army of custom-designed ants.

“Trying to mix metals,” I said, rephrasing it as. “No, that’s what I *did,* what I’m *trying* to do is make two different kinds of metals at once. They *feel* different, but it’s like trying to. . . well, write and talk at the same time, where you accidentally type what you meant to say, or vice versa.”

She nodded in understanding, though she did look skeptical. “But, couldn’t you do that before?”

“I couldn’t mix metals,” I disagreed, but from her expression, I then understood what she meant, clarifying, “Yes, but now do it in a foreign language you’re still learning and have only ever written before. I’ll get it, but, it’s a work in progress.”

“You’ll get it!” she told me with a smile, going back to her work, and I had to shake my head at her belief in me. Trying not to prove her wrong, I tried again, but slower. I managed the lanthanum and scandium blocks without issue, but got some cerium in my terbium, though not vice versa. So. . . progress.

Trying three at once was a *mistake.*

Regardless, the hours rolled by, and I tried some other things, like growing the metal *without* looking directly at it. Well, not with *my* eyes, but through the eyes of an insect. At first, my accuracy was *terrible*, but once I could reliably do so, though I had to concentrate more the further it was away, I was able to head back to my office, as Taylor, occasionally yawning, followed.

And then found that my office had been moved, though to a much larger, much more impressive looking room, with an armored window overlooking the inner space of Eclipse. Taylor told me that my old office was actually one for a department head, and, as they’d brought everything online, she and Quinn having poured through the literal million-plus pages of documentation, along with several other people. Which led them to one undeniable conclusion.

The source of this building was extra-dimensional.

Now, I’d already *known* that, from the unique screws in the building’s equipment, but the more they’d found, the weirder it had gotten. There were things in this base that *did not exist* in the rest of the world, except for, tellingly, some of the less impressive pieces of Tinkertech, from Tinkers that could create large amounts of items. More than that, Herb had, with his new powerset, gone snooping through Cauldron’s servers in one of Déjà’s precognitive visions, and found that Cauldron *itself* didn’t build this place. There were connections to their servers in Eclipse, but only through our original base. *They* were working under the belief that we’d contacted Agnes Court of the Elite, to create it, as they’d contracted her services before, but there was just far too much here for it to be her work alone.

However, when the Elite had approached Overwatch about working in the city, but had balked at the fact that they would need to make themselves subservient to the Penumbral Defenders, Herb had done the same thing he had to Cauldron, and borrowed Quinn’s power and rummaged through the Elite’s electronic doors in a day that never happened.

And this place wasn’t created by them either. Some things, like the impossible construction of solid pieces of stone in places they couldn’t feasibly be installed, had pointed at them, but Mrs. Court’s power was very specific, and couldn’t have been the cause. She created a crystal seed that grew a woody flesh, which expanded outwards, growing exponentially. When she had what she wanted, the living ‘wood’ would harden into ‘stone’, self-petrifying, and while she could turn it a variety of colors, it was a *solid* piece, and only stone-*like.*

The black marble floor of my office, as well as the limestone, granite, and other rock I’d seen throughout the arcology? It was actually what it looked like, not just colored, as it’d been tested. However, some of the rocks found *couldn’t* be traced to any known source.

At least, any source on *this* earth.

The answer was as simple as it was unlikely. That the structure had been created, wholesale, integrated into the networks of Brockton Bay, and left to wait, hidden inside a house that had never been sold, a warehouse that had never been used, an apartment that had never been rented, and a Cauldron safehouse which wasn’t even supposed to exist.

Looking at the entire thing logistically, it was impossible. To not only build this entire thing, but to do it in secret? Likely when Brockton Bay was at its economic peak? To have computers that were advanced *now,* when it was built over a *decade* ago? It was ridiculous, and beyond the abilities of any cape or organization

Any *human*.

But to an Entity?

It cost no more than implanting the knowledge needed to use Parkour effectively, with the muscle-memory, innate planning habits, and skills required, without harming the subject. I wondered if Abaddon had even made it itself, or just copied and pasted one from another earth, letting a specialized Shard handle all of the ‘fiddly bits’.

The tank, as ridiculous as it was, was further proof of this theory, as, while all the labels inside were in English, the internals didn’t match *anything* we could find, and its type in the manual, an M1 *Weyand*, just drove the point home. Quinn had our people go and file the relevant patents for everything we’d found, though the government was dragging its heels, the Military-Industrial Complex *very* unhappy that we’d gone and made something without them. Not that we were planning on producing them, though, with Æonics growing complex of factories, we probably *could,* but it was the spirit of the thing. They claimed it was Thinker-produced, and thus falling afoul of the various laws meant to screw over Rogues, but almost all of the testing was coming back negative for that.

Not *all* the testing, interestingly enough, and that was just more evidence of the deep, *deep* rot in the center of what called itself the American government, as, funnily enough, each of the ‘checkers’ that reported that our extra-dimensional tech was instead created by Thinkers had some connections to various corporations. And the ‘Think-tanks’ that reported our tech was power-created, and thus restricted, changed depending on what the tech was.

The reviewers that were related to corporations that specialized in military contracts claimed that our Tank was the result of powers, but had no problem with the unique designs of our computer’s motherboards. However the reviewers that received support from computer companies, who had no problem with the tank, were quick to complain about our motherboards.

It was, to put it simply, *blatant* corruption on a staggering level, several such companies having gone so far as to contact us for ‘donations to the cause of keeping the markets fair’. The ones Quinn had paid off, to no one’s surprise, had rubber-stamped everything we’d sent them, but the ones that had asked for ridiculous funds labelled our submissions ‘questionable’ at best, and ‘clearly Thinker-derived’ at worst.

. . . *Why had I stopped Ziz from blowing up DC?* I wondered, reviewing the logs, as more metal slowly grew itself from the pallets. *Right, because the rats had already scurried away after our warning.*

“So,” I commented, Taylor glancing up from her tablet computer, “Bribes?”

The girl tapped a camera-bug behind me, looking over my shoulder to read my screen, and grimaced. “We had to,” she said. “We reached out to Dragon for help, but she wouldn’t talk to us. PRT was the same. You hadn’t woken up, and we were going to need the money, and. . .” she trailed off, *sadness/resentment/worry* coming off of her. “And it was the only way. *I* wanted to show how they were corrupt, but I was outvoted.”

“Outvoted?” I echoed. “Did the Penumbral Defenders all have a say?” Checking our files, I looked for ‘meeting minutes’ or anything like that, but found nothing. “I saw a bit of something like that in the legal setup, with the tiers, but-”

“No,” the teen disagreed, struggling with herself. “You. . . you used to make the decisions. And you still do,” she quickly added. “But you were gone. No, not gone. Not here. Not that way. And. . . decisions needed to be made. Some wanted Herb to be in charge,” she stated, and I had a moment of panic, before realizing what her wording implied.

She nodded, my reaction not hidden. “Yeah, he said he’d be bad at it too. But, who then? Overwatch didn’t watch it. I, I volunteered,” she offered, blushing a little in embarrassment, even as she tried not to scowl. “But no one wanted to listen to a teenager.”

I winced. “I think it’s less ‘listen’ and more ‘follow’,” I told her, which didn’t exactly help, soI continued, “and, let’s be honest Taylor, how many of them *know* you? Because, if you were like, say, Vicky, would they be wrong to be hesitant?”

“But I’m not!” the girl argued. “I’ve been managing half the things in this stupid city, but all they see is a stupid kid!”

Holding up a hand, I clarified, “Wait, half the city? How’d that happen?”

She just shrugged. “Things needed to get done. Overwatch did a lot of the professional stuff, working with lawyers, and planners, and things, but most people here aren’t that. They’re electricians, and plumbers, and most of dad’s people. And they didn’t really know what to do. So I started to talk to people. Find out what needed to be done. Get it done. And it did,” she noted, with a small smile of pride. “I’m pretty good at organization.”

“Or Administration,” I mused, the girl frowning in thought before nodding in agreement. Thinking about it, the problem was clear. “They thought you were speaking for me,” I told her, checking, “Did everyone know I was, um, healing at that time?”

Taylor shook her head. “No. We weren’t certain when you’d wake up. *If* you’d wake up. Herb and Overwatch said it’d start a panic if people found out. They were right, I guess, but by then the thing with the Fallen had happened, and we’d been doing things for a bit so we could just point to that. But, *I* was the one telling them things,” she argued.

“And they thought you were only doing so because *I* had told you to do so,” I argued back. “And then, later, that Herb or Overwatch had told you to do so. Besides, half the time you were just passing on what the city planners had said to do, right?”

“Only because I talked to them to get it in the first place,” she shot back hotly. “And tried to keep doing the things you’d been doing them!”

*Why are we arguing?* I wondered, this having gone from zero to one-hundred in a few seconds. “Which I’m thankful for,” I told her, which undercut her anger. “And you did so well enough that people thought it was still me, while I was recovering. Taylor, *I* know you can do this because *I know you.* To most people, though, you’d be a teenage girl at worst, which matters to some people, or the daughter of the Dockworkers Association Spokesperson, which would get you *some* clout, but not a lot. But none of this answers my question: *Who voted?*”

“Voted?” she echoed, confused, before she shook her head. “Right. Um, it was Herb, Overwatch, and me. Herb tried to talk for the PD, since he knew everyone, and also tried to make sure to meet all of the capes that joined up with us, so he could represent them too. Overwatch spoke for all of the office-people. Lawyers, researchers, scientists-”

“We have *scientists?*” I interrupted, catching a flash of *frustration/annoyance/happiness*, which was confusing, but I added a “sorry,” for cutting her off anyways.

“It’s okay,” she told me with a small smile. “Yeah, we have scientists. You isolated the Powered Anomalous Locations so we could study them. So we started to.”

“PAL’s?” I questioned, the name much friendlier than the reality, but for PR reasons, I could see why they’d called them that. “So Overwatch spoke for the white-collared workers. Did you speak for the blue-collared ones?”

She nodded. “I did. It wasn’t official, or anything, but, when we could, we talked. Overwatch and I could do a meeting from pretty much anywhere, and Herb could get Nick or Smith to handle things if he needed to.”

“Taylor,” I told her. “If you were doing it, and making decisions, and getting things done? That’s official, for everything that matters. So, you made your own Triumvirate, with Herb as Eidolon, Overwatch as Alexandria, and you as Legend, only ninety-five percent less screwed up. Not bad,” I smiled.

“Why am I Legend,” she asked. “Shouldn’t I be Alexandria?”

“Alexandria is *also* Chief Director Costa-Brown, while Overwatch is *also* Quinn,” I argued. “Besides, my favorite of the three is Legend, *by far.*”

“Oh,” the girl said, blushing and looking away. “Legend’s fine.”

Rolling my eyes, I returned to our original topic. “So, bribes to get things approved?”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I wanted to show them for what they were, but Herb said it wouldn’t matter, and Overwatch said it was more trouble than it would be worth.”

“They’re right,” I sighed, and Taylor frowned, looking at me questioningly. “As much as it pains me to say it, we need to prioritize. It’s not our job to make the American government function the way it’s supposed to, the way it claims to. We can control New Brockton Bay, and so that’s what we need to be concerned with. Well, that and Scion, because if he’s not stopped, we’re *all* going to die,” I added.

“I had some time to think, while I fixed my Shards, and. . . this is not worse than I feared, but it’s certainly worse than I hoped,” I told her, waving towards my screen. “When the rot hits a certain point. . . you’ve honestly got just three options.”

“And those are?” she asked, hesitantly. She likely already knew the answer to her own question, but, like me, didn’t want to face the truth.

“One, the system falls apart,” I said, holding up a finger, “And those who can do something about it let it. That’s what we’re doing. We’re not *pushing* it that way, like some are, to make a quick buck, but we’re making sure to get what we need and stay the hell out of it otherwise. It’s one of the hardest, for people like us, since we *want* to help, but we can’t. Not really. Not by playing by the rules put in place by the very people that are destroying the system. So we make sure we’re okay, make sure that when the pillars finally crack, we’re not under their roof, and we aren’t.”

“Then, just, fuck everyone else?” she asked, frowning.

“Yes,” I agreed, easily, her frown turning into a full scowl. “However, until things fall apart, if they want to come here, and live by our rules, they’re free to come. Hell, even *after* things go bad, people will still be welcome, as long as they don’t make trouble. But they’ll be welcome *here*, in an area that *we* control. They haven’t asked for our help, they don’t want it, and the people who *do* control things will resist pretty damn hard if we don’t do things *exactly* the way they want. And, the exact way they want? It won’t help, not really, just extend the fall.”

“But we can’t help a *little*?” the teen demanded, and I was reminded of the fact that, in another life, she’d be one of the Warlords of Brockton Bay, or at least its ruins. “Give people more time?”

“We are,” I offered. “By making ourselves a target, we’re taking some pressure off others. And we are trying to give them better tech. That’s what the bribes are apparently for,” I smiled sadly. “But if you mean more than that. To go out and help them directly. That’s option two. Well, option two for *you.* I’ve been banned from leaving the city. Unless I’m allowed to leave now?” I questioned, and she grimaced.

“No. Alexandria came here, a month ago. Demanded to see you. Killed one of my puppets,” she admitted.

“Puppets?” I questioned, and Taylor reached out through the IN, and, feeling me watching her, pinged one insect in particular. It was *large*, and hibernating, which was why I hadn’t noticed it before, but when I tried to get a sense of it’s capabilities I got a *ton* of feedback.

To start with, it was *humanoid,* which my powers did *not* like, for reasons I couldn’t really put my finger on, and, as she made it get up and walk out of it’s secret closet in the base, I started to realize why.

It was *human.* Only it *really, really* ***wasn’t.*** It was like someone had gene-modded a human to fuck and back, and I isolated the feeling of ‘wrongness’ to not be any of my copied Shards complaining, but one of my *own* powers, **Peak Condition**, throwing a bitch-fit, that sensed me with a deep, *deep* feeling of unease. It was like it was close enough to a person that my power wanted to ‘fix’ it, but, only able to connect to it, through **Anthropod Control**, it *couldn’t*.

Hesitantly, I reached out to the puppet as it walked down the hall, and the second I did the literal man-sized insect had what I could only call a seizure, twisting and wrenching about unnaturally, prompting shouts of fright from the, thankfully, two other people in the hallway, even as Taylor flinched, *hard.*

“*What the hell?*” she asked, as I quickly let go of it and she reassumed direct control making it stand and apologize to the people that’d seen it, promising them she was going to go see Panacea.

“Sorry?” I replied. “I. . . I don’t think I can control those things. My Shards *really* don’t like it.”

Taylor collected herself, looking to me, concerned. “But, it’s *my* power!”

“It’s not yours that’s the issue. It’s another one of mine,” I explained. “But. . . they’re not, you know. . .” I trailed off, remembering the sentient centipedes that wanted to eat us all. “Nevermind,” I told her, hesitantly feeling out the ‘puppet’ insect, but not picking up a trace of intelligent thought. “So, Alexandria killed what she thought was *you.* Why did you want to be her, again?”

“She didn’t *know* it was me,” the bug-controller argued, but changed the subject. “She didn’t believe you were healing. She thought you were doing something in Portland. The one in Washington. Herb showed her to you, but wouldn’t let her touch you, and dragged her out when she tried anyways. She left, but she told him you weren’t to leave. And, well. . .” she pinged the IN, “so I heard too.”

I raised an eyebrow. “And you want to help these people?”

“Not *them,*” Taylor replied. “Normal people.”

“And that’s option two,” I replied in turn, “which is a *trap.* Option two would be to help the failing system. To try and do what good you could, to help ‘normal people’, but people who refuse to help themselves, people who refuse to lift a finger to help *you*. So you join the Protectorate, and convince yourself that doing *something* is better than doing *nothing,* but it’s Alexandria and others like her that are calling the shots. And because they are, you’re constantly addressing the effects of societal rot, and not the causes. So you extend the glide, turn the bang into a whimper, but when things go bad they will do so everywhere.”

I paused, “Though, to be honest, for a lot of Hosts, the abilities their Shards give them *isn’t* enough to do what we’re doing here. And things are very specifically set up to not allow them to meet up to pool enough power to do so. And, if they try to go option one in any way that’s public, they’re quickly either labelled Villains, and attacked, captured, or killed, or. . . no, no it’s really just that. Herb can now kick Alexandria’s ass, Taylor. That’s a level of power that shows the ironclad rules to be more like strongly worded suggestions.”

On one hand, even with a lesser power set I’d likely still try to do what I was doing now, in some manner. On the other, I’d already shown myself to be borderline suicidally stubborn when it came to my own red lines. I would still judge those who bent the knee, but that didn’t mean I didn’t understand.

“So what’s option three? Take over?” Taylor asked, and I nodded.

“From a moral perspective, it’s honestly the correct action. If the people in charge are acting like Villains, not Heroes, then isn’t our job as Heroes to fight them?” I asked in return. “If you *know* they have committed crimes so black they deserve death or life imprisonment in every civilized nation, isn’t it your *job* to bring them to justice? And, if you do, and others attack you, knowingly or unknowingly defending the Villain, isn’t it right to stop them? And if you win, and the people are left undefended, would it not be your job to step in and protect them? And as you are protecting them, isn’t it your job, as a Hero, to make sure that the corrupt system that either allowed a Villain to take power, or installed them willingly, and *absolutely* covered up their crimes and protected them, is cleansed as well? After all, it’s never ‘and then, for no reason at all, the German people elected Hitler’, there’s a number of people who don’t do their jobs to allow someone truly evil to take power. People who were supposed to warn others, who didn’t. People who were supposed to enforce the laws, who didn’t. People who were supposed to follow the rules, but didn’t, because, for reasons selfish or well intentioned, they didn’t.”

I opened my hands. “And it’s not even a ‘slippery slope’, it’s the only thing that is acceptable to someone whose morals are not negotiable.”

“But that’s what you’re doing,” the teenager argued. “Are you saying you can be bought?”

“I *can* be bought off, for a time,” I agreed easily. “And the price is your life, and Herb’s life, and the life of *everyone in the world*. Scion is a threat to *every Earth,* and while I won’t drop to Cauldron’s level, they are a lesser priority. Give me time, time to gain enough power to win *without* putting the lives of everyone I care about on the line, and I *will* be taking option three, because, with the Warrior dead, that’ll be the time we find out if Alexandria is a fallen Hero, who has done what was easy instead of what was right to avoid even *risking* the destruction of all, or if she’s a Villain who believes that humanity can only survive under her iron grip.”

I sighed, “If I thought I even had an eighty percent chance of success, I’d probably go after them, but I don’t *know* how much force Cauldron can call upon. They only have a dozen or so core members, but they have literally thousands of agents, either active, or, like Battery, Hosts that owe their powers to those witches and have a marker that is waiting to be called in. So I’ll do number one, until I’m strong enough to do number three *without* destroying several major American cities, which is at the level that You, Herb, his Cousins, and I are at.”

Taylor recoiled at the suggestion, “I couldn’t destroy a city!”

“*Wouldn’t*,” I corrected. “With enough relay bugs, you could drop on a city and kill ninety-nine percent of its population, drowning them in an endless tide of insects. You *wouldn’t*, and that’s one of the reasons I trust you, but you *could*. With your puppets, they even wouldn’t be able to track you down. If you weren’t a good person, Taylor, you’re powerful enough to be one of the *Slaughterhouse Nine*, and the only thing that stops you from being Triumvirate-Tier is the fact that you’re still at human-ish levels of ‘Squishy’, though with your armor I’d put you on the lower end of even *that*. But you’re a good person, and while that limits you, that’s not a bad thing.”

The teenager frowned, an muttered, “I don’t feel like a good person.”

Without my Acoustokinesis, I probably wouldn’t’ve heard her, but she was in front of me, so I had no reservation telling her, “And that’s one of the things that means you probably are. So, bribes? Okay,” I shrugged. “My first reaction is yours, Taylor, but I have to deal with things as they are, not how I want them to be. I’ll just need to keep track of who *can* be bought, so that, when I have an opportunity to do something, I know who *not* to trust.”

Taylor, looking lost, let out a laugh that seemed to surprise her. Shooting her a questioning look, I got an email from her, with the *exact* list I’d just mentioned.

I smiled, “And this is why I trust you.”

**<AB>**

It was the third time Taylor had almost fallen asleep in her chair and I suggested she head to bed, only for her to say she was fine, that I waved her towards the couch that was part of a sitting area set off to the side of my office. I suggested she just take a quick nap, and she agreed, extracting from me the promise that I’d wake if I left.

She was out like a light in seconds.

Pulling on my costume, I created a blanket that I drew over her, which she quickly latched onto, and got back to work. Without her active, the IN had gone quiet, but I could easily co-opt the camera-flies in the loading bays to finish up my creation, as I continued to pour through the reports of what had happened while I was away, and our current situation.

As Taylor had said, the issue of leadership had settled itself fairly quickly, the our own triumvirate forming. Technically, by the way a good bit of our proto-government worked, *any* Parahuman could try to throw their weight around, which was something that’d need to be fixed, and, looking further in the timeline, was something they were already trying to figure out.

As it turned out, once I found Overwatch’s own notes, my status as Schrodinger’s Leader had been at the root of it, Herb and Taylor both refusing to take any formal power, both insisting that *I* was in charge, and that I’d be back, eventually. Similarly, Overwatch had needed to hack the Eclipse VI to take over functions that I, honestly, would’ve given him access to, but *couldn’t*.

While the fact he had screamed ‘Evil Vizier’ to part of me, the fact that he’d waited let me tell that part of me to *shut up*. My centrality to the functioning of Eclipse and New Brockton Bay, while I’d thought was a feature, not a bug, had turned into a serious problem. Without my disappearance, they might not have gone scrounging around the base to patent everything they could, and I saw that the Keepsakes Reclamation project had been halted.

We were still gathering them, and putting them in a warehouse, but the literal hundreds of thousands in shipping costs had been deemed an unnecessary cost, and while we hadn’t fired anyone, hiring had dropped off sharply. Some of the patents were paying off, though most of them were either still caught up in approval, not something that anyone wanted, or, in one case, another company had filed a patent that was pretty much the same thing and was arguing that they invented it first, and had already started production, suing *us* over ‘patent fraud’, but civilly, not criminally, which was pretty telling.

Construction had, indeed, slammed to a complete fucking halt lacking the two powers that were required to follow Accord’s plan. Several were arguing to say ‘screw it’ and start building normally, but the sheer cost required to do so had put most of them off, but it was clearly only a matter of time, plan be damned.

I was better, so I could handle, and I’d go do the next set, the areas already cleared by Sheryl’s deconstructor-truck and the others, but the core problem remained.

I thought I’d be *happy,* knowing I was invaluable to all of this, and that, without me, things ground to a halt. It did, after all, show that to backstab me would ruin things for everyone, but that only prevented threats from *within*. And, to be honest, I really didn’t expect that to happen, at least in a way that I couldn’t handle.

Herb was an idiot, but he *was* loyal, and seemed. . . *different.* He was still himself, both in powers and occasionally in action, but he seemed more. . . *centered* than he was before. Quinn had ample opportunity to take over, but hadn’t. Hell, if he’d wanted to, he could have *easily* done something to me, to make sure I didn’t wake up. There was the meeting he asked for in a few hours, but unless that was a ‘here’s the new reality, I’m in charge now,’ betrayal, I was pretty sure he wasn’t going to at all.

And then there was Taylor.

I looked at the girl who slept nearby. The girl who’d done her best to do what I would’ve wanted. The girl who, I could tell in a way she couldn’t fake, had been sure I’d come back, just as she feared I never would.

No, I had nothing to fear from her either.

However, that same protection was a vulnerability to those that relied on me. An Achilles heel that would now become glaringly obvious with me back up and running about. If I was taken out, permanently, it’d cripple the city, possibly beyond its ability to recover.

I was the lynchpin holding everything together, and that was *not* a good thing.

In terms of raw combat capability, Herb had honestly outpaced me, the recruitment he’d done in the last few months had only bolstered his power, able to, in seconds, go from decently powerful to Endbringer-Tier.

At the next Endbringer fight? The man would be on the same level as *Scion*, at least for an hour, *especially* if he could copy whatever the Golden God had active. Though that was by no means assured, Herb might be in the same league but *below* the Warrior, and, from what I knew of projections, the chance of Herb able to copy Goldenrod’s powers through the meat-puppet were fifty-fifty.

So Herb had combat on lock. And there were, theoretically, *eleven* of him.

Quinn and Taylor were handling administrative tasks *far* better than I could be. He had the experience, but she was apparently learning quickly, and, just looking over the records, doing a phenomenal job.

So what was my role? Moral base? Leadership?

Taylor kind of had the first, though she was still young, and it showed. In terms of leadership. . . *maybe*? Again, they’d had some trouble, but things had stabilized pretty well, and, if anything, my awakening was making things *worse*, not better.

I was needed for my Dryad set, but, past that, I wasn’t *really* needed, only helpful.

Again, this should’ve worried me, *would’ve* worried me, but instead all I could think was how, if I’d died, like I’d come so close to doing, I’d have wrecked things for everyone else. Thinking back on things, I’d come close to dying repeatedly. Boardwalk’s fight against Oni Lee had been close. Dealing with the hive of powered monsters was another, and the fact that I couldn’t remember how I’d survived made things *worse* not better. And just. . . *Leviathan.*

Lately, I’d gotten safe, *complacent.* I’d been captured by the PRT, but had been sure they wouldn’t just kill me. I’d *beat Ziz like she owed me money,* but I could *only* do so because I’d had *just* the right selection of powers to do so.

Which, thinking about it, answered my question.

With my power set, I wasn’t going to be the complete engine of destruction that Herb would be. I wouldn’t be the omnipresent force Taylor could be. I wouldn’t be the ghost in the machine that Quinn could. I wouldn’t be the driving force of progress that Panacea could be.

No, I was, at my heart, two things.

The first one, the one I’d become as Dryad, was a supporter. I liked playing around with powers, finding out how they worked, improving them, finding new uses, and finding interesting synergies. The problem came when my support became *vital* instead of supplementary, when things were dependent on me, and me alone, or else the entire house of cards came tumbling down.

The second thing I was, was equally obvious.

I was an assassin.

That was, after all, my express purpose in being here. My *entire* existence hung on one single task, and that was the murder of one specific entity. Or one specific Entity. Everyone else’s existence hung on it, but, looking at what I’d done, I’d built others out, and myself up. If a power couldn’t be used to support others, I took it to try to kill Scion, or kill someone else on my way to killing Scion.

That made my way forward clear. I needed to start filling those empty slots, patching those holes in my defenses, and prepare myself to kill the Warrior. Goldenrod hadn’t used any Master powers, even when he probably should, against Eidolon, but that wasn’t a guarantee he wouldn’t against *me*. Flechette’s **Sting** was certainly a Major power, so I’d keep that clear, however I still had a number of slots yet to fill, and while I shouldn’t waste them, I needed to up my capabilities.

Against Scion, I wouldn’t stand a chance as I was right now, but while Herb powered up quickly and nova’d by throwing everything at his opponents before falling off, I could build combos he’d miss, and hit his level, then move beyond.

If I died, taking out Scion, that would suck but. . . I could live with that. Metaphorically speaking. However while killing the Warrior would be enough to fulfill my purpose as an Assassin, the others able to pick up the slack against lesser threats if I was gone, they couldn’t continue building this city without me.

In a perfect world, that meant I wouldn’t want to throw down with Scion until I was sure that, not only could I kill him, but that I could survive doing so. That was a level of surety that I’d had before, but. . . but recent experiences had thrown into doubt. I’d been taken out by a trial-member of the Slaughterhouse 9, and only luck, along with the direct intervention of the being that was clear on its non-involvement against the Warrior, to save my ass.

I could try and tell myself that I’d learned my lesson. That I’d be better. But I’d thought I was better before, and had convinced myself that I was. Told myself that I was hot shit, and tough, and able to take anything that was thrown at me, short of the entirety of the Cauldron-backed Protectorate.

Now. . . now I realized that, despite being powerful compared to most, I was still weak.

And, more than that, I was. . . *tired.*

Not in a way that sleep would help, not in any way I could really explain better, but I felt weak. Worn. *Tired.*

But I had a job to do, and I was probably the only one who could do it. The canon path of bullying the Entity until it was nearly suicidal, and then hitting it with almost every Host in existence, was almost certainly non-viable. Even if I wanted to sacrifice Taylor, and, to be honest, I’d rather die myself than force that on her, I wasn’t sure it’d even work.

It was *strongly* implied that the entire thing was one giant Simurgh-plot, and just by existing, along with Charlie and my father, we’d screwed *that* up royally.

So, while I’d *like* to survive, I couldn’t count on that. I couldn’t assume I’d always be around to handle things. I couldn’t set things up with myself as the unquestionable center, no matter how much fears, and, to a certain extent, my ego would’ve preferred it. The fact that I had, even accidentally, done so was a problem.

I wasn’t sure how I could fix that, but I had some ideas.