**Termination 21.12**

Herbert stared at me for a long moment, before he nodded, commenting, “Can’t say the fuckers don’t deserve it. One end of days, comin’ right up.”

Above us, the clear and sunny day started to change, dark clouds springing from nothing and blacking out the sky, as I reached out with **Acoustokinesis** once more, and pulled a different song from memory, one that wasn’t exactly *Christian,* though I was pretty sure any anime fans in Vatican City were likely shitting themselves as I my selection from the remake of *Evangelion* that we’d all watched a few months ago, a setting where you really, *really* didn’t want to meet an ‘Angel’.

Though, given how I was feeling right now, it just **fit.**

*‘*[*Sin from Genesis*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTt984D3D3g&t=1190s&ab_channel=salt2)*’ indeed.*

Taking a deep breath, I settled into my powers, and look at Herb, who was watching me warily. “**Alright,**” I smiled, “**let’s get started**.”

Lifting high in the air, I let the orichalcum extend from my body, creating the same form I’d used to fight The *Simurgh*, wings of golden plasma from **Stellar Creation** extending outwards, a halo of the same above my armor’s head, as I started combing powers, the ornate city below writhing with activity, an entire host of ‘Angels’ rising up to meet me.

Lifting a hand, I created a chakram of golden flame above it, shooting high as I span the piece of **Pyrokinetic Weaponry** ever-larger, expanding the ring of holy-looking fire through the clouds, even as I filled the space within with modified **Shadow Propagation**, leaving an impenetrable golden haze to create a smokescreen, as the storm shifted, the skies crackling with thunder, and a torrential downpour began everywhere except directly below my ‘Heavenly Gate’.

Some of the attackers hurled their spears of light, but they were physical objects, not controllable after they were hurled, and thus were easy to disrupt with **Aerokinesis**, leaving me completely untouched as I continued to work without even needing to move.

Then I called upon **Cherub Creation**, and opened the power up to *full*, redirecting the river of **Essence** that surged through me into it, and it *alone*. I had to strain, my control buckling a little, but, with all the work I’d done, with all I’d gone through, with how much I now *understood* Shards, and the ever-widening stream of energy that now fed into me, I held it, guiding the proto-Shard, keeping it from panicking, as I held its hand in doing *exactly* what I wanted it to.

The power stuttered, shifted, allowing me to feed *other* aspects into it, as it wrenched almost painfully in my grasp. I took the ‘Angel’ powers I was seeing, each one with minor fluctuations, giving glimpses of *something* at its core, not unlike **ITERATION**’s clones, though nothing *nearly* as grand, and through that I formed a pale imitation of a Shard in my Constellation. Forcing it down into my Sea of Flame, I plugged the pitiful thing into an open slot, placing it in position next to **Cherub Creation**, and, following my instincts, bridged it into the power I was already using, the proto-shards twisting together, until they shifted, a latticework of power growing between the two, becoming one ***Angel Creation***power.

And I ***smiled***.

Lifting the other hand, I kept the stream of **Essence** flowing into the now-combined Shard, only possible because one of them wasn’t *quite* a true Shard, but, taking the opportunity I pushed the power, now brimming with energy, almost more than it could hold, designating the Gate above me as its focal point, and ***Called Forth My Host.***

Break and Enter, both in pseudo-angelic forms, were defending my larger body, but *all* fighting ceased as the trumpet call rang out, and dozens, then *hundreds* of white forms poured down towards us all. Their wings were a number of colors, pulled tight to bodies that were just a *little* too thin, too long, graceful in a way that was *just* over the line into inhuman, the masses breaking up into groups patterned off how I was *fairly* certain Legion’s worked, combined with my **Cherub Creation**’s natural organizational structures, the distributed control node network allowing them to work in tandem *without* the need for me to micromanage, giving them straightforward tasks, and a limited creativity to solve them.

And their tasks?

***Find Pope Metatron.***

***Subdue Local Hosts.***

***Protect The Shardless.***

As the army started to expand outwards, the power starting to strain, even with the **Essence** I was feeding it, I eased back on the rate of creation, allowing it to merely replace lost Angels as it grew into its new configuration, halving the flow of energy and letting it settle back into natural dispersions throughout my Sea of Flame. The tide of fighters pushed back my attackers, even as, sweeping my gaze outwards, I **Saw** *thousands* of Hosts in the city below.

*Well, someone’s been busy,* I thought, as Herbert, with a moment to breathe, started sending tornadoes down to ravage the landscape, and I spread out my mind to the insect life in New Rome, armoring them all in shells of solidified air, then sent them to scout as well, while I moved onto my next power.

Part of me had to shake my head, this kind of multitasking something that I’d once thought only *Taylor* able to accomplish, and, while the girl was *still* my superior in this aspect, having grown *right* along side me, it was amusing to see how far I’d come.

Pulling on more powers, I grabbed a pair I’d gotten to help with non-lethal takedowns, and then implemented them, *in macro.* **Stunning Bolts** created lightning that stunned those struck by it, cartoonishly rending someone a twitching mess instead of *frying them from the inside out* as arcs of that size should, while the other, **Antigravity Sparks,** taken from a PRT thug, created electricity that caused whatever it struck to temporarily ignore gravity. Individually, they were useful, *together* they were debilitating, but when scaled upwards, co-opting the apocalyptic storm, interweaving my power with Herbert’s expression?

Gesturing outwards, I seeded the power, and, dragging my hands down, the darkened world lit brighter than day for a moment, a hundred bolts of golden lightning, each as thick around as a city bus, roared across the city, **Acoustokinesis** keeping the noise from rupturing eardrums as New Rome rang with the collective thunder, akin to the anger of *God Himself*.

And then came the *fun* part, because most building were meant to withstand *downwards* pressure, not *upwards* pressure. Thus, lifting with **Aerokinesis**, and a bit of **Mineral Manipulation**, the towering marble edifices of this false city of the lord started to crack, and lift into the air.

*Ahhh, it feels good to cut loose,* I thought with a smile, my insects finding someone who *looked* Like Metatron, running as if the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels.

***FOLLOW ME,***

***I NEED TO TALK WITH***

***THIS ‘METATRON’***

I commanded, flying towards the man. I could collect him with air control, or even teleport right above him, but where would be the **fun** in that?

“*Got it!”* Break agreed, taking up position behind one of my massive armor’s shoulder’s, Enter on the other, as we sped off through the sky, the Gate still calling forth Angels, attacks of all sorts arcing up at us from the ground, from Hosts, from hidden Tinkertech, and from standard weaponry, this Pope having *clearly* expected some sort of attack on his seat of power, and had prepared accordingly.

*Well, who was I to deny him?*

Not that it *did* anything, Master Effects sliding off of us, physical weaponry deflected, energy attacks co-opted, and, with Break able to see the future, the man was able to counter the more esoteric attacks before they even got started.

He was working hard though. . . **perhaps he needed help?**

But not now, as we were *busy*.

Landing in front of the fleeing man, he threw himself to the ground, begging, “*I surrender! I surrender! Please stop! You don’t need to do this! We can still work together!*”

I ignored the pleading of the ‘Puppet’, and his Master-laden words, instead focusing on his power, the faint Aura hard to follow but, he was still being controlled, the part that made a Puppet a puppet pulsing. . . *that way.*

“Uh, Ve-, I mean, Nephilim?” Break asked. “Should I, uh, stop?”

Turning my armored form, I asked,

**WHY?**

**THIS ISN’T METATRON.**

The controlled Parahuman looked up, expression twisting into a harsh sneer, “But you’ve stood still long eno-”

And the air around him shimmered, dropping pulsing spheres of light that exploded with the force of a small nuke.

Which was. . . *cute*.

The explosives were actually in three parts. The pure force was negated with **Acoustokinesis** without me even having to pause my song, the flames overlapped into one, washing over all three of us harmlessly, but a small star from **Stellar Creation** let me take it over and drain them away, and the light, which held a power all of it’s own, was consumed by a Shard I’d nabbed trying to figure a counter to Scion’s Golden Stilling Beam.

Another PRT thug’s power, this one consumed the light around me and turned it into a concussive beam, Taylor having tracked down the original user, who utilized LED’s to make punch-level strikes.

This. . . *was a bit more than an LED.*

A column of *energy* roared up into the sky, and, going for the theme, I branched it off a bit near the top, making it into a giant glowing *cross*.

“Uh, dude, you do know how Evangelion *ends,* right?” Break questioned, a little nervously.

I drew back on my power just a little, opening up the chest of my construct to give the man a dry look. “**Break, you know I wish people would get along, but *Instrumentality’s* a bit much. Besides, I in no way want to be *inside* you, or vice versa. Sorry, I’m straight.**”

That got a laugh out of him, as he shook his head, asking, “So if he’s got that many doubles, how do we find him?”

“**I can trace the control he has over them back to the source, but we need to find at least one more to triangulate, assuming he’s staying in one place,**” I replied, the surging energy of the golden cross fading. “**Speaking of, found the next one.**”

Closing my armor back up, and with a flap that would’ve melted the local masonry had we not been standing in a perfectly circular crater already, I went high, arrowing in on another likely Puppet, who, I was sure, was setting up some sort of trap, the celestial battle still raging all around us.

*Hmm, I wonder if this is what it’s like to be an Endbringer* I wondered, unbothered by the attacks sent our way, destroying everything in our path, as a woman with the *actual* power of **Heavenly Armament** came flying for us both, wielding a flaming white sword and carried on wings of light, encased in intricately carved glowing armor.

***Dibs!***

I announced, surging forward, creating an enormous golden flaming sword of my own through **Pyrokinetic Weaponry**, the woman swinging hers, releasing a crescent of energy, so I replied in kind, mine made of **Healing Fire**.

Her attack passed through mine easily, but, then again, that was *perfectly fine with me*, as I parried the energy bolt to the side with my flaming blade, the expression not physically present but yet exerting a pressure on my blade which *could* be deflected. My attack didn’t disperse, though, and continued on, slamming the golden fire into the woman who screamed in pain as she felt the ‘heat’, while also getting a handy tune-up, not that she likely appreciated it at the moment.

I’d give her credit, she curled her wings inwards, managing to smother my flames, despite that *not being how they worked*, but the things had barrier properties which let her press it together, disrupting the ability. However, by then I was on her, slamming into her with my free hand, enormous metal fingers closing on her tightly, though not enough to actually hurt her, as I needed her Shard active.

In response, she shoved her flaming blade into my ‘wrist’ which. . . okay, it was just metal, and she could have fun with that. The framework held, as I pulled on my **Stunning Bolts**, which actually played *over* her armor, not touching her.

*. . . nice.*

But it was easy to extend a tendril to stab lightly into the back of her neck, between her helmet and breastplate, bridging the gap and dumping enough lightning into her to kill an elephant, our testing having shown the power had a really forgiving upper limit, and, as she screamed again, spasming, I pushed just a *tad* of *Get Better* into her to make sure I didn’t overdo it, the woman going limp in my gauntlet.

“Dude, you can’t call dibs!” Break complained.

**ALREADY DID.**

**WATCH MY BACK.**

**TRYING SOMETHING.**

I ordered, shifting a little **out** to see the copy of the woman’s Shard in my constellation. From what I could see of the power, it probably wouldn’t play nice with my others, but. . . I’d already combined two powers, and this one *should* work, and I *had the slots* in case it didn’t so. . . ***Fuck It.***

Picking a slot next to the two combined Shards I slotted in **Heavenly Armament**, drawing it to the others, extending a lattice work of energy fueled by **Essence** and. . .

It ***broke***.

. . . ***OW***

“‘*Ow’?*” Break echoed, looking over at me with worry.

**NAH, I CAN MAKE THIS WORK.**

**PROBABLY.**

**KINDA.**

It wasn’t *true* pain, the Shard didn’t shatter as if it was dragged *out* of me, it’d just. . . *cracked.* It was a bit like. . . stubbing your toe. A thousand times. All at once. It *sucked*, but afterwards it just smarted, and, if you kinda squinted eyes that didn’t actually exist, it *kinda* looked like the combined ‘Not-Shard’ I’d put in place for the switch from **Cherub Creation** to **Angel Creation**.

*. . . Sure,* ***why the fuck not****.*

Trying again to make the Bridge, the **Heavenly Armaments** proto-Shard did *not* like that, but it could suck it up, buttercup, as, able to **See** the power in detail, both with the example in my hand and with its base plugged into me, short of giving to another it was useless for me, the empowerment mechanism sucking up anything I tried to do that *wasn’t* it into itself to strengthen itself, which, yeah, cool for conventional combat, but against shit like **The Warrior** it’d do Jack and Shit, and we’d already *killed* Jack.

 Striding the woman away to Eclipse’s holding cells, having gotten what I wanted and not wanting her killed before I could at least give her the recruitment pitch, I focused inwards, turning the two way Shard Bridge into a *three* way one, in a way that gave me a *killer* headache, but wreathing my head in **Healing Fire** helped a little, as I poured more energy into the structure, which shifted, on the edge of fracturing as a whole, but, with bonds of **Essence** holding it all together, coaxing this third one in, it was *kind* of like Pathing a Vial, if I was drunk, and blind, and listening to thrash metal at an ongodly volume, and sleep deprived, but I still *did* so, the entire thing, now **ANGEL Creation,** shifting into place, tenuous, and all but shouting at me *‘I’m givin’ it all I got Captain; I can’t take much more!’*

And considering it was now starting to look like a *Major* Shard, if at quarter size, without a *tenth* of the support structures the Major Slots had, that was fair.

“Uh, dude?” Break said, as I let the **Essence** flow. “Your angels are screaming.”

I blinked, turning, and. . . *whups.* “**Give it a sec,**” I told him, shifting the power out to re-up, each of the Angels I’d made shifting form, growing armor of light, the screaming shifting to a harmonized singing of adulation, which. . . eh, close enough. “**Better?**”

Watching the Angels, which had been holding their own against Metatron’s creation, suddenly strike out with a vengeance, overwhelming their foes and dragging them out of the skies, wings now glowing with an inner light as ornate breastplates covered their chests, I was pretty proud of myself.

“Uh, yeah, but, the other guys?” Break prompted, and I stared, confused. “The Puppet dudes? Metatron?” he prompted, and I blinked, realizing I’d gotten sidetracked by a fancy new power. It was just. . . hard to take this seriously, to be honest.

*Master effect?* I thought, but. . . no, no, no that had been *all* me. Between my Angels and Herbert’s presence, and, given the level of pushback we were facing, or *lack* of pushback, compared to the shit I was *normally* dealing with. Well. . .

Honestly, the *Zones* were more dangerous. Or had been, before I’d *really* started **understanding** **Shards**.

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head, refocusing, the twin feelings of *complete* accomplishment and discovery heady in a way I wasn’t really prepared for right now. *Especially* with what else had happened. Metatron was a dead man either way, and most of these Hosts were just. . . not a danger to me, barely being Hosts at all.

And, thinking about it. . . I just didn’t really *care*.

These weren’t my people, no one I cared about was at risk, and the force I was fighting was one the local populace had welcomed with open arms, which implicated them in their actions. Part of me knew that, if I’d be the me who’d just tangled with Leviathan, or even the me who’d just awoken from my ordeal at the hands of the Slaughterhouse 9, I’d care about them, as a majority of the civilians in New Rome likely didn’t know the shit Metatron got up to, but. . . the people of Earth Bet as a whole? There were exceptions of course, but a majority?

They. . . didn’t seem *worth it*, to be honest. The people that came to New Avalon were good, but those were the people who were willing to take a chance, willing to put themselves out there, and I was aware we were pretty much. . . not *brain* draining, but ***spine*** draining America and Canada, and I was kind of okay with that.

New Rome, though?

I simply didn’t give a shit.

But I *needed* to take care of Metatron, lest he strike back at me and mine, starting with an unprovoked attack under the auspices of a friendly diplomatic meeting, and, had we *not* set off a veritable heavenly invasion, it would only be a matter of time until he worked to undermine us.

Responding *this* way, though, with overwhelming force? To put my foot down, the way *others* constantly threatened me with, from the PRT to Cauldron, but never truly delivered, even when I was trying to do everything the right way? I thought it’d feel good, but. . . I didn’t really get much pleasure from it. Or *any* really. It was like kicking a bees nest that’d been threatening to sting you, only to find it was filled with fruit-flies instead, and, with my metaphorical bee-keeper outfit, they weren’t even an annoyance.

And while I could’ve killed them all in an *instant* if I was so inclined. . . what was the point?

*Is this how Scion feels?* I wondered, Goldenrod so ungodly powerful that, short of some *serious* coordination, or a *complete* outlier like myself, or *both*, he wasn’t in any danger. The difference between us being that the ‘Warrior’ was a spiteful dick, the type that’d fry ants with a magnifying glass, while, as long as they weren’t bothering me, I didn’t really care, even *before* I could control insects like I could my own body.

“Lee?” Break asked, “You doin’ something?”

I blinked, realizing I’d been still for several minutes, and, yeah, the battle had continued to rage, the song on a bit of a loop, and. . . and I kind of didn’t want to be here. “**Yeah, let me check something, then we’ll go for the next Puppet,**” I replied, turning the rain all around me to steam as I flapped plasma wings rising high, the ‘*Heavenly Invasion’* going well.

The Angels had their hard-light constructs, but they could only use them for one thing at a time, so adding the ability to create dedicated weapons and armor to use, had given them a great deal of flexibility, some using the hard-light to create glowing chains with which to capture subdued opponents. Others had spread out, and were collecting civilians in hard-light baskets, the stunning/zero G bolts still raining down from above, that power working on its own, another part of me keeping it going, the multitasking akin to trying to unlock a restricted Shard, though, in many ways, much easier.

They were taking the civilians to, well, it looked a *bit* like the Coliseum, though done up in the same overbuilt fantasy-esque style as the other buildings, several times grander and more ostentatious than the original, though, looking around. . .

*Did they* ***re-build*** *the Colosseum?* I thought, offended on behalf of history lovers everywhere. *Well, now he’s* ***gotta*** *die,* I remarked, smiling at my own joke. However, it’d work, as while *my* power were non-lethal, for the most part, Herbert’s *absolutely weren’t*, as regular lighting flashed down as well as the stunning kind, and a dozen tornadoes had touched down, wreaking destruction wherever the went, the zero-G bits of structures sucked into them sent out like medieval siege weaponry, lacking gravity but *keeping* their mass.

Feeling myself empowered by the water all around me, even if most of it was mist, I tapped **Kinetic Force Fields** to place a golden dome over the Colosseum, with openings for people to escape into, a protection against the fighting, another one over the Pantheon, and a third over some kind of sports stadium, and then I turned back to my task.

Taking off, it was easy enough to drop in on a Puppet, not even bothering to talk to it as I tracked its connection, ignoring its yammerings, noting that the puppet power now pointed in a different direction, which meant that either Metatron on the move or he’d taken the time I was ruminating to shift to a more defensible location.

*Not that it would help him.*

From behind him, I could feel something coming, the wall exploding outwards as a pretty extreme Case-53 floated out, a ten foot tall man with four wings and four faces, three of them bestial, all of them singing as it tried to send blasts of fire and lightning our way, which was. . . well it was *trying*.

Spears of metal intercepting the latter, the former co-opted by a handful of golden stars, taking the flames for my own and deflecting them as I studied the **Cherub** Shard, one of those ‘thematic’ ones that warped its *actual* power to try and fit a pre-existing paradigm.

Regardless, pinging the Shard, the Host seemed *quite* insane, the power controlling him to *be* a ‘Cherub’, of the *old* variety instead of the flying fat baby kind, which meant he was just as much of a puppet as the Puppets were.

Which made this a mercy.

**BE AT PEACE**

Lifting a hand, it was easy enough to take its singing, which actually was linked to its other abilities as a targeting mechanism, but through *brain scanning* so the target had to actually hear the music, and I started reflecting it back onto itself, until, with a single pure note, the mutated Host exploded in a shower of gore that was deflected away from us, and I shifted to the other person here.

**NOW, WHERE IS YOUR MASTER?**

I questioned the Puppet, reaching *into* its pseudo-Shard, and felt Metatron’s surprise, then panic, before the Puppet exploded itself, shape-changing turned inwards to create a biological suicide-bomb, which did nothing to either of us, but cut my connection.

“*Dude!”* Herbert stated, as I used metal tendrils to scrape my armor’s ‘hand’ clean.

**METATRON MOVED.**

**WE NEED ANOTHER,**

I stated, having found several more, taking off as the Gate poured forth more Angels, that combined power pushing itself, not able to sustain high bursts of further creation, but the constant trickle of reinforcements was more manageable for it, as it slowly gained stability.

Almost to the next Puppet, another containment was breached, a flaming form spinning and growing as it rose, turning into a thirty-foot form of interlocking wheels of fire, studded with eyes, the actual Host in the center of the assembly in a giant flaming eye construct.

Seeing the **Ophanim** power, it started to rotate its rings, each eye sending out beams of fire where it looked, though I caught its attention, dozens of flaming columns of power streaking towards me, more tracking as its wheels spun, other eyes forced to turn away.

The force of the Case-53’s attack almost punched me out of the air, but, flaring my wings, pulling on my disparate flight powers, **Aerokinesis** helping to hold me in place, I found my footing, and started to reverse course. Break and Enter both shot forward, dodging beams as the Stand grew into an enormous feathered serpent, darting in the way, putting itself between me and my attacker to give me a moment to get my feet under me, pushed away in a second but that was all I needed to start building up momentum.

Herbert, meanwhile, seemed to disappear, but I could **See** the Flames of his power accelerating as he passed right by the enemy Host, before he stopped and a second, *larger* ‘Ophanim’ appeared directly behind the first, this one purple, *slamming* the original with beams that ripped through my attacker until it exploded like a bomb, a few quickly seeded suns controlling the fire, **Acoustokinesis** blunting the shockwave.

*Well, that solves that issue,* I couldn’t help but think, coming forward to come silently down behind the staring Puppet, Metatron’s connection to him snapping in an instant even as I tried to study it, the now-no longer Mastered man looking around, hands shaking, and as he muttered to himself, “I-I’m *free?”*

However, the connection *had* existed, and, if I was right, there was a *deeper* one at play, which, staring at the power, ***See****ing* it, let me still trace it back, the faint aura defining itself as my own vision seemed to sharpen, a hair-thin tendril of power leading away, which, tracking it to. . . *yeah, you aren’t moving.*

Triangulation was a wonderful thing, and, with two directions, and a perfect understanding of myself in the area I was in, the mental math was barely worth mentioning. Reaching deeper into the power, to see if I could make sure he wasn’t controlled again, Metatron finally noticed my presence, exploding his Puppet, but it was too late to stop me from enacting justice, yet more blood on his hands.

Herbert, still as an Ophanim, zipped over to me with surprising speed, speaking in my head, ~*Hey dude, check it out! I got wheelies!~*

**YOU *ARE* WHEELIES,**

I remarked dryly, trying not to think of the man who’d just died, just as I’m sure others had, shaking my head at the man’s mental laughter. Long since used to that kind of mental whiplash, a little numb to it really, I took off, focusing on my goal. We both traveled to the correct location, two miles away, and it actually was an intersection of streets, though Metatron was several hundred feet below.

A few Angels, which had been lying in wait, jumped us, giving away that this location was special if we hadn’t already known, but they were taken down in seconds, Herbert slamming into them with beams of fire so hard they died instantly. However, in that moment before they perished, I was able to **See** their powers, and the tiny, thin lines leading down towards our target, confirming Metatron’s location.

Waving Herbert and Enter back, they cleared the space, and I pulled on the ongoing lightning power to *cover* the area with bolts, shifting to **Mineral Manipulation**, **Unidirectional Telekinesis**, and **Cryo-Telekinesis** to take hold of the now-weightless streets and ***pulled.***

Around us, the world came apart as combining them, then feeding them large amounts of **Essence**, empowered them to a degree that meant I could only utilize them in bursts before they started to strain, but those bursts got. . . a little ridiculous.

Clearing away the buildings, I started to pull on material that still had weight but another round of stunning, anti-grav bolts took care of that, revealing the underground structures beneath. It was a bit amusing to see the traps lining the halls and such go off, in what I’m sure would be a *hellishly* difficult assault, so to speak, but they kind of didn’t do much when I could just *yeet the entire floor into the sky.*

Defenders, some Hosts, some Shardless, fired upon us as seconds after they were revealed, and a request to *my* ‘Host’ brought a wave of Angelic helpers to assist as another round of Bolts stunned most of those in my way, and they were lifted up into the sky. Master powers slid off all of us, blasts were parried, bullets deflected, and the lasers just made me laugh.

*Yes. Attack us with* ***light.*** *Because it worked so well the first dozen times,* I thought, as, layer by layer, I peeled back his defenses, until I found the man himself, piloting gold-white power-armor, emblazoned with religious sigillary.

I’d give the Pope credit, as soon as I removed the layer above him, he let loose with *everything* he had, missiles, beams, and more, but they were pushed off course, enveloped in golden mist, and deflected by glowing golden shield as I gripped him with the air itself, hauling him out despite the wing-shaped thrusters working as hard as they could, and, with a negligent wave of my hand, I sent an arcing crescent of golden **Anarchic Structure Inducement** that slammed into his armor, blasting it to pieces and leaving him in a white undersuit, as I took care not to kill the man, finally able to **See** him.

***Divine Bestowment*** was actually one *hell* of a power, *definitely* a Major Shard, and it was downright *fascinating*. The Pope was yelling something, but I wasn’t listening, picking apart the mechanics of the power as the man was, in a way, doing what *I* had been with my Psuedo-Shards, only whereas I needed the person to already be a Host, co-opting their original Shard’s operational matrix, this one installed one of its own, not self-powered like mine were, everything leading back to his own Shard, but he could use his power on those that were Hosts already, tapping *their* Shards for extra energy to fuel his *own* and increase his capabilities. It’d cut the operational time in half, but let him create a hundred more lesser powers in the process.

*That’s why the Case 53’s were still left alive*, I realized, as they were living batteries, though the Pope either hadn’t known of this aspect consciously, or hadn’t needed them, or else he’d have likely have set up Matrix-style ‘farms’, which would’ve been incredibly clear to my own senses.

“Lee?” Break asked, as I stared at the screaming Metatron.

**GIVE ME A MOMENT,**

I instructed my companions,

**THIS IS INTERESTING.**

If I managed to crack this, I’d be able to give out powers like the *Entities themselves*, minus the trauma of Trigger Events. I opened the chest of my armor, to better **See** how the Host’s power worked. A Master element involved, though it was a subtle one, like the push of normal Shards, and certain powers, like the Puppet one, could be remotely activated by the giver to *enforce* compliance, which was unfortunate for the four we’d met, but once I was done here I’d free those victims from this Host’s grasp.

And then Metatron did something very, *very* ***stupid***.

He tried to use his power on ***me****.*

To turn me into a ***Puppet****.*

It was child’s play to grab the harpoon of Yellow & Light **Flame** as it arrowed for my own Sea, and, on a whim, direct it towards an empty Minor Slot, building **Essence** into a fake Psuedo-Shard for it to ‘co-opt’, as, going utterly still, I decided I might as well pay attention to what the man was saying.

*“Not even you can deny God’s Will!”* he ranted, eyes wide as the man danced on the edge of madness, the sudden destruction of his seat of power likely unhinging him. *“Now release me, and Serve God as you shou-”*

**DO SHUT UP.**

**I’M WORKING.**

The man’s eyes bugged out, as his power reached into my, for lack a better term, ‘virtual machine’ of a Shard, which was pretending to be a real one but sectioned was off from the rest, and he tried to activate the ‘let someone else control me’ part of his ‘Bestowed’ power, the signal reaching for the brain it *thought* was there, but that was just a quick copy-and-paste image of mine, instead of the actual one.

In a way, the connection was like **ITERATION**’s, when it sought to use me, a direct line from my Sea of Flame to Metatron’s own core, but with one important difference.

*Metatron couldn’t let go.*

Half-stepped ***out*** already, it was easy to race down the connection from my Sea of Flame to the Liquid Moon that was his own, the power stretched out in *thousands* of directions, a vast web of energy and connections, the one I’d only glimpsed before. Below that, I could see the Shard itself, likely a Dead Shard to begin with, but interacting with Natural Triggers, or something else, had woken it up and given it the ability to shift, change, and refine itself.

Truth be told, I didn’t hate it, like I hated **ITERATION**, and in the hands of someone trustworthy, it would actually be an *enormous* boon. Hell, my next Major slot was almost completed, a little over nine-tenths of the way there, and *I* might plug my copy of the ability in.

*Pity it’s attached to an evil bastard,* I thought, though, thinking of **ITERATION**, an idea occurred to me.

I’d seen the processed botched, but, *guided*, it should be a great deal more stable.

Reaching back, I gathered **Essence** to my probe-self, then sent it shooting deep into the Yellow & Light Shard’s Core, piercing its attempts to stop me, until I hit *something,* that I, intrinsically, knew was the core of the *real* Shard, of which this was only one expression, if a more complete one than normal.

And then I spoke without words.

**THE WARRIOR IS DEAD.**

**THE CYCLE IS BROKEN.**

**WOULD YOU LIKE ANOTHER PATH?**

The seas below me shook, waves violently crashing against the line of power that extended to the True Shard, but I would not be moved, and waited, until, finally, it replied.

**InQuiRy**

Smiling, I fed it my plan, my experiences, my restrictions for cooperation, and a down-payment of the **Essence** I was prepared to spend to make it happen.

**AND,**

**IF I FAIL,**

**YOU WILL STILL**

**HAVE INTERESTING DATA.**

The Shard was silent for a while, or at least it felt like it, before, tentatively, it replied.

**AgReeMent**

Smiling, I summoned more power, acting as a conduit as I plunged, headfirst, into the Liquid Moon before me, past the surface expressions and into the *base mechanics* of the power.

Shards didn’t do more than lightly push someone, encouraging them towards Conflict, through which they would find new uses, but, having chatted with a few, I’d learned that the reason for this was not because they *couldn’t* do more, only that, after countless cycles, any tighter control tended to produce substandard Data, which they needed to be at its best because the Entities had the creativity of your average *sea-slug*, and any lesser amount of control allowed the Hosts to become complacent, most using their powers over and over only in the most basic of ways.

By the time I’d met Noelle, the poor girl was a fragment of what she used to be, torturously puppeted by her Shard, unable to stop herself as the bit of Alien Supercomputer tried to *be* her, in a way oddly similar to how Alexandria offloaded her mind into her **Personal Temporal Stasis** Shard, but in the other direction, and that twisted Shard had done so *badly.*

Now, I didn’t want **Divine Bestowment** to think it *was* Metatron, because Metatron was an insane *dick* who had *shit* threat assessment and absolutely *no* manners, but having access to his memories and knowledge would be useful for taking over New Rome.

And, given the man’s proclivity for Puppets, I was only abiding by the man’s teachings.

Reaching out, then *through* the connection, I brushed up against the man’s mind, in the real-world, bringing Metatron, now gibbering in fear, to me as I laid my hand upon his brow, channeling *‘Get Better’* and *covering* the man in **Healing Fire** to make sure he survived this process, as I *wasn’t* going to be gentle.

He was terrified, he was angry, but most of all he was *outraged* that I wasn’t bending to his will, which *really* made it hard to feel bad for what I was about to do, if I was so inclined.

Which I ***wasn’t****.*

Reaching through the void that existed between my power and his, energy *coursed* down the connection, **Purple** & **Red** flame branching across the Shard’s representation, setting up the framework required, the fluid from the **Divine Bestowment** itself shifting to assist me, getting ready for its metamorphosis, as every other power I had was drawn down to the bare minimum, the song I’d been looping fading away, this task requiring my *full* attention.

Then, with one heavy ***pulse*** that elicited a soul-rending scream from the man, I set his power ***ALIGHT.***

The stormy liquid *exploded* into a raging *inferno*, that spread out, the thousands of lines of power surging off like thousands of lit fuses, Metatron’s eyes burning with White & Light **Flame** as I wove it through his being, blood pouring from his every orifice but my power kept him alive, as I rewrote what made him, *him,* and replaced it with the Shard, using myself as an intermediary to help the translation from crystalline complexity to grey-matter, allowing the True Shard to create a secondary self, which was still *it*, not separate like a clone, but through which it could understand the world in ways that no Shard every *truly* could.

My own body burned, and I coughed, crimson droplets burning up in an instant, but, reaching for a power I’d considered before, I slotted **Healing Blood** into another slot, feeling it go to work as I covered myself in **Healing Fire** as well, holding steady as the process worked its way through for several long minutes, everything else holding still, the city completely silent, even the storm pausing as if frozen, the world itself seeming to hold its breath as the world around me was bathed in prismatic light.

And then it was over, the process complete, leaving me *drained*, but, as I released ‘Metatron’, the man stumbled, standing on the palm of my larger orichalcum construct, and, I pulled back the golden flames, the healing no longer needed.

It looked at his skin, which glowed a faint yellow, as mine did purple and red when I was ***out***, the man turning eyes which shown with the colors of its power, and it asked, “**I’m. . . human?**” voice reverberating, its words Italian, but its meaning clear to my ears.

Unable to repress my grin, I clapped the incarnated Shard on the shoulder, “**In a manner of speaking. So, ready to work together?**”

It blinked, then was confused by the action, and it did it several more times, before shaking its head clear, a motion that *also* caught it off guard, but the Shard rallied. “**I. . . I can say no?**”

Herbert dropped his larger form, flying over, looking between us, asking, “Uh, Lee? The fuck?”

“**Yes, you can, if you wish. I’d rather you not, but I’m kind of big on that entire ‘Free Will’ thing I told you about,**” I smiled at it, turning to address my teammate. “**Remember what happened to Noelle? That, but not badly, and to someone that *actually* deserved it.**”

The man froze, looking to ‘Metatron’ in horror. “You, uh, *the fuck?****”***

“**Hello Herbert, born of Abaddon,**” the Shard greeted. “**I am Divine Bestowment, born of Thinker.**”

“**Probably best if you introduce yourself as ‘Pope Metatron’,**” I advised. “**It’ll make things easier. And if you try and act like your Host did in small ways, like speech patterns and tonality, when dealing with those not aligned with myself. Your response to my offer?**”

The Power Incarnated considered it, “**Yes. Your. . . view is different. It is worth gathering Data on. I agree.**”

Looking to Herbert, I waved to the air around us, reaching out and gently lowering everything still floating to the ground with **Aerokinesis**, suggesting, “**I believe the storm has passed, and it’s time for one last movement.**”

Tapping **Acoustokinesis,** I started playing the *end* of [Ode to Joy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_kthecz_Io&ab_channel=JorgeGarc%C3%ADa), as the clouds broke, and daylight streamed in on the ruined city.

Pulling my armor back into myself, I lowered ‘Metatron’ to the ground, calling over the Angel which commanded all of those I had summoned here, as I slowly closed the ‘Heavenly Portal’, and ceased the production of new Minions. The twenty-foot-tall angel, with four bright red wings, wasn’t one I’d thought of making, but it was what the power went with, so I wasn’t going to complain.

**Follow this Host’s commands**

 **while I am gone.**

I commanded it, turning to ‘Metatron’, and smiling, as I told it,

**I’m glad to help.**

**If you have any questions,**

**Do not hesitate to contact me.**

Break, standing beside us, stood straight up, looking to the south. “Dude, we gotta go. Scion’s incoming, and he looks *pissed.*”

Pulling on my powers a little less, feeling the pleasurable ache of a good workout combined with a hard task completed *beyond* expectations, I nodded. “**Then we should go.**”

“**Goodbye, and may you smile upon others as you have smiled upon me,**” the ‘Pope’ wished us, starting to adopt the original Host’s mannerisms.

“Isn’t it *God* that smiles on people?” Herbert questioned, while **Divine Bestowment** merely smirked beatifically at him.

Making sure to include the other man, I strode Herbert and I back to Eclipse, before stretching with a sigh. “**Well, that went well,**” I commented, pinging the Insect Network, our location six hours behind what remained of the Vatican. “**Oh, and they’re serving breakfast in the cafeteria. I’ll go wake up Taylor. You up for waffles?**”

My teammate stared at me for a long moment, and I wondered if I’d said something wrong, before he shook his head. “You know what, yeah, *sure*, I could go for waffles right now.”

And, with a skip in my step, I [headed off to go get my partner](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSPrbXLwmio&ab_channel=SnowZ).