**Diversification 19.10**

Amelia’s mother glared hatefully up at me, gagged, and I could see her power flex as she shifted to a ball of light. Her changer form was easy enough to read, if one had eyes to see. I couldn’t see what she was doing, but only needed to wait for the flux and. . . *there.*

The woman came out, still gagged, holding a sword of light that she tried to thrust through my heart, but, compared to what I was used to, she was *pathetically* slow, and I moved to the side, idly smacking away the hand, a loud, wet *crack* sounding as the woman went down, screaming, holding her broken hand.

*Right,* I remembered, using Acoustokinesis to mute her. Despite acting like a front-line fighter, the woman possessed *no* enhanced endurance whatsoever, nor did her costume, which she wasn’t wearing, have any kind of armoring, the woman having relied on bluster and the general ‘normal people can’t fight capes’ messaging to muddle through, along with retreating to her alternate, invulnerable form.

“Not that I don’t enjoy the present,” I told Mick, who was watching with a smile on his face, “but what’s the occasion?”

The Replicant chuckled, “Need a favor. Villain stronghold. Only got one chance or they’ll scatter. Like roaches. Need backup.”

“Any innocents?” I questioned, and the other man rolled his eyes.

“Few. Sex slaves. Kidnapped kids. Not many. You want to save them,” he stated, and I nodded. “Figured. Single building. Easy to Secure.”

“Then I’m in,” I told him, turning back to the woman, who was getting ahold of herself. “Brandish, Brandish, Brandish,” I sighed. “I told you, the next time I saw you I was going to kill you, regardless of circumstances. Well, I told your family, who I’m sure passed it on to you,” I corrected, and the woman got herself under control, the endorphins released by her body in reaction to the injury she suffered likely settling in. “And I, unlike *you*, am a person of my word.”

Actually, thinking about it, New Wave’s actions these past few weeks hadn’t been mentioned at all in any of the reports I’d been provided. Well, I was still in range of the IN, and used one of the setups that Taylor had set up at a computer terminal in Eclipse to look it up.

Brandish snarled something from behind her gag, as Mick waited, unnaturally still, smiling, and I ignored her. That was, until she turned into another ball of light, and I turned a look the Replicant’s way. “Do you know what the definition of insanity is?” I questioned, getting a chuckle from the replicant, and took a step to the side.

I knew she was blind in that form, and it was clear she was spending more time than she needed in that other form to try and ‘surprise’ me when she came out of it. I read the Flame of her power, and as she reappeared, shoving a spear of Light where I’d been, I casually kicked out, breaking her knee and sending her backwards, her screams of pain muffled as she fell, the limb twisted the wrong way.

“Do be a dear and *stop* that while I’m checking something, would you?” I asked, knowing it would trigger her, but not really caring. After all, she was going to die soon anyways, so what was the point?

As she dealt with her new injury, I went back to check what had happened. Flashbang, to his credit, had visited every couple weeks or so, the logs saying that he met both his daughters when he did so. Laserdream and Lady Photon had both visited a couple times each, the latter meeting both girls, while former only visited Victoria. Brandish had *tried* to come, but had been turned away at the doors to Eclipse, after word of my being out of action got out, and, from the incident report, had tried to make a scene, Victoria coming out to talk to her.

Also, the woman had tried to bring charges against me for a number of things, from kidnapping Victoria (and only Victoria), to ‘theft’ of the things still in her house, to others, first in State Court, and then Federal Court, getting no traction whatsoever. With me out of commission, the woman had felt emboldened, having obviously learned *nothing*.

Nodding, I gestured outwards, using hardened bands of Air to pick her up, a twist of the wrist forcing her upright and facing me. It was easy to cut the gag free, and the woman, breathing quickly, glared at me, turning to a ball of light once more. Forming a solid shell around her, moving it to match her as she tried to fly out of her ‘bonds’, I waited for her to ‘escape’, a sword at the ready, collapsing it down on her to hold her still once more.

“Brandish, I warned you,” I sighed, “and I have to wonder, do you have *any* idea why you’re going to die?”

“I didn’t want to come here!” she yelled. “Your lackey kidnapped me! You-”

I cut her off, the woman yelling without the sound leaving her throat. “A lawyer to the end,” I mused, shaking my head. “Mick, what does the phrase ‘regardless of the circumstances’ mean?”

“Means ya don’t care,” he supplied, and I nodded, holding a hand out to him.

“And *he* doesn’t even have a Law degree,” I mused. “No Brandish, I’m going to kill you, because you’re an evil cunt who doesn’t understand the concept of *consequences*. Then again, from what I know of your life, I can see why that happened. You’ve always had your sister, and her friends, to pull your ass out of the fire whenever you jumped in it. You go after a Villain who *far* surpassed you in strength and skill, but because of his code of honor, you never were harmed for it, when you should have died *dozens* of times over. And when *you* broke the unwritten rules, going after him in his own home, you thought nothing would come of it. And even then, it was only when you tried to kill his *daughter* that the man did what you could not, and acted as a parent should, giving himself up to keep his child safe.”

“I wonder,” I mused, “when Fleur died, did you realize it was because of *you*, or did you blame everyone else?” The woman yelled something, Acoustokinesis informing me it was something swear-ridden, and I gave it no mind. “You abuse the girl entrusted to you, and neglect *is* abuse, though what you did went *far* past neglect, and thought nothing bad would ever come of it. You attack me, when I had done nothing wrong. And I could’ve forgiven it, but then, when I came under flag of truce, and maybe even friendship, you tried to have me killed.”

“They would’ve also killed Victoria, you know,” I informed her. “The PRT has a *thing* about Human Masters, you see. They would’ve blamed it on the Elite, but that wouldn’t’ve changed the fact that your actions would’ve killed your daughter. But I killed Tagg, so that did not happen. You can thank me now.”

I let the woman talk, and her screech of, “You Monster! If you hadn’t-”

Cutting her off again, I sighed. Part of me, a very, *very* small part had wanted to spare her, when I’d first seen her, but the woman had successfully persuaded that part of me to retract its objection. “Interesting fact,” I informed her, “when you and your sister were kidnapped? I looked into it, and your sister, back when you all still were relevant, talked about it. If *you* hadn’t pushed to go out during that mission trip, even when you were warned it was dangerous, *you never would have Triggered.”*

“Everything bad that has happened to you, was, in part or in whole, *your fault,* and you never, once took responsibility for it.” I laughed, “Ah, but *you* are an actor, your actions excused by your circumstance, while we all are the observed, our actions because of some innate trait. No, Brandish, today is the day when you finally experience *consequences*, but they have a tendency to build up, so it is also the *last* day you will experience them.”

I lifted a hand, only for the Flames of the woman’s power to *explode* outwards, streatching and folding in on themselves, as Mick froze, and I could sense *something* coming. Pulling off the shades I was wearing I ***SAW*** her, her power, and the Shard that was trying to shift and change.

*She’s. . . She’s Second Triggering*. I had to laugh, shaking my head. Herb had been tortured, had seen me tortured for *hours,* and then *something* had happened with the last Replicant, enough for Herb to warn me to *kill it on sight*, and *that’s* what it had taken for the man to Second Trigger. And, despite everything that had happened to me, *I* hadn’t at all. Yet this woman was hurt a *fraction* of what I went through, and had a single talking to, and that was enough?

It was like the world was trying to conspire to bail out this woman. My luck was *terrible*, and had only gotten worse when I arrived on Earth Bet, yet this woman was practically blessed. And what had it done to her? She’d rotted to the core, and started infecting everyone around her with it.

I reached out into the space between spaces, to the Shard that was trying to help someone who did *not* deserve it.

Don’t Bother. This Host Is About To Die.

And, just like that, the effect broke, the woman’s Flames returning back to their erratic, flailing normality. “What*, what’d you do!?”* she demanded, eyes wide.

“Professional courtesy,” I shrugged, setting up the boundaries, something much easier to do as the woman was still suspended in the air. “Goodbye Brandish. The world will be better off without you.”

The woman flailed at her bonds, then shifted back to her ball form, and I waited, and waited, until she finally ‘broke free’, trying to carry herself away, holding on to a shield of light between herself and me, and then I moved.

The woman didn’t say a word, but the faint sound of her hammering heartbeat was enough. I took the sound, then ramped it up into a move I hadn’t done in quite a while, the woman exploding in an instant as the sound of her heartbeat became an explosion that tore her apart, ramping upwards until all that was left was a red mist, which was contained in the sphere of air still surrounding her.

I’d rather not have to wash off the stupid.

It might be contagious.

A snap of my fingers, and a blood red dart of starstuff was created, shooting forward, igniting the sphere in crimson flame that I kept going until all that was left was ash, which I caught, compacted, and fed into a star. “All right, you want to take care of your problem tonight?”

The replicant stared at me. “That’s it? She hurt you. Weren’t you gonna hurt her?”

I lifted an eyebrow, “I wanted to know if she even understood the situation. She didn’t. You don’t torture a mad dog, you put it down. Now,” I said, shifting my costume, turning it black while giving myself an extra few inch in my shoes, growing a lion-faced helmet and a pure black mane of ‘hair’ behind it. Extending metal tendrils into ‘claws’, I tapped **Shadow Propagation** to create a shifting shadowy aura around myself. “*Where are we going?”* I growled, making my voice harsh and animalistic.

Mick looked at me for a long moment, before shrugging, lips pulled back in a mockery of a smile.

“Mexico.”

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Able to Stride, borders weren’t even ‘suggestions’ to me, and no longer ‘Vejovis’, I was keeping to the agreement with Cauldron, as much as, with their spies, they were keeping their agreement to ‘leave me alone’.

Soon enough, we came across the compound in the middle of the desert, even as Mick gave me a quick rundown on the situation. I’d found it odd that Mexico hadn’t been mentioned *once* in the original story, and was finding out why. While Canada had finally given in and became America’s Hat in truth, keeping a separate legislature but, in the way that mattered, bowing to the PRT’s, and thus America’s, will, Mexico had fallen to pieces.

In truth, from what I remembered of my old world, only the northern end of Mexico was actually dangerous, the American border, and its opportunity for crime, funding the criminal gangs, when we didn’t just outfit the gangs with weaponry ourselves. Central and southern Mexico while it still had some problems, was actually rather nice.

Not so here.

Here they Cartels had moved quickly, using Hosts to take over large portions of territory, as America had washed their hands of the country in order to continue their ‘golden age’. After all, it would’ve been hard to convince the world that Hosts were untouchable when they died by the score in the next nation over.

Honestly, with how Contessa worked, the only way that the one hero had died was either because she wanted him to, or because a Blindspot got involved. The first seemed. . . ill-advised, given how it accelerated the decay of the world, and the second should’ve been a wake-up call. I wasn’t sure which was worse.

Regardless, while Canada, like America, still maintained a sheen of normalacy, Mexico had turned into an absolute shithole, the violence and corruption of the north spreading across the entire country, invading Guatemala and Belize, stopped at the border of Honduras and El Salvador as Hosts of those countries, working with the governments, and refugee Hosts from the fallen countries, had created a no-man’s land border, where *no one* was allowed to cross.

Those countries had become authoritarian Host-run dictatorships, but had received support from their southern neighbors, and stopped things there. Refugees had tried to pour north over the American border, only for the American government to slam that border shut as well, the PRT keeping it closed in a way that would’ve been shocking normally, but had happened over a decade ago, and, with cultural control in a way only possible with Contessa pulling the strings, had been quickly forgotten.

It was, in many ways, hell on earth, the Cartels constantly fighting with each other, people suffering in a way that America should’ve never allowed, but had turned a blind-eye to in order to keep the status quo.

It was in this clusterfuck that Mick had dived into, having the time of his *life*, playing the Cartels off each other, and killing evil bastards to his heart’s content. And, to be honest, I had to appreciate the consideration. The man was obviously sadistic, that much was stunningly obvious, but he’d kept it to acceptable targets, and was, in his own way, trying to make the world a better place.

Arriving there, the compound was obviously power-created, the buildings that made up the area seemingly copied and pasted, down to the patterns of rust on the sides of the metal warehouses identical. The earth itself had been pulled up and packed up into encircling walls, and spheres of light hung over them, a thin beam of white shooting out and striking something in the sand as we watched, floating high above it.

“That’s the one you want,” Mick said, pointing out one building, and I looked through the eyes of the insects of the eyes in that room, finding what I was quickly realizing the standard sex-slave setup.

*What does it say about me that I can recognize the standard sex-slave setup,* I thought, amending that to, *what does it say about this world that there* ***is*** *a standard sex-slave setup.*

I considered various approaches, before I finally realized that this *wasn’t* my operation, it was Mick’s. Turning to the man, who was standing on an invisible platform of air, not looking bothered in the slightest, I asked, “Loud or quiet?”

He grinned. “Loud. Of course. You ready?”

I held out my hand, using **Shadow Propagation** to a level that I never had before, but, with my work with my other abilities, it was surprisingly easy, copying the same mental models. The moon hung above us, shining light down on the compound, the balls of light and electric lights in the buildings casting more. Because of them, as I drew a line a hundred feet distant from the walls, using the sphere’s attack range as a guide, nothing in the compound radically changed as I lifted up a cylinder of pure darkness, cutting off the area from the rest of the world.

Within them, I extended walls of hardened air. They weren’t a perfect defense, not in the slightest, but they’d let me know if someone tried to break out. “Ready,” I told him, titanium threads filling my body to further enhance my strength, and my toughness.

The Replicant took a step backwards off the platform several hundred feet up, opening his arms and falling. His Stand appeared beside him, both of them shifting and twisting into Nightmare Mantises, each the size of a person, if barely, and both opening wings to fly down, circling around, the intense Flames of the Replicant’s power sampling that of each Host in the complex, only able to be seen by how Mick’s power flickered, the others out of my sight. Finishing their circle, both man and Stand shrieked, a terrifying sound which I took hold of and forced to echo throughout the space, and both dove down into the largest conglomeration of Hosts, metal tearing apart under their claws.

And then the screaming started.

With my own appointed task, I dropped down into my chosen building, crashing *right* through the flimsy roof and into the room with the few men hanging out, making sure the women and children stayed in line.

The men who’d been lazing about, as it *was* just after one in the morning, were startled, reaching for guns, as the one Host who was drinking a beer tried to use his **Cross Beam** power, a dozen glowing golden crosses with red gems in the center forming in the air, shooting beams of burning light at me.

Me.

The guy immune to fire and who was literally drenched in Darkness from my **Shadow Propagation** power.

Taking a copy of the ability anyways, as it cost me nothing, the shadows seemed to leap outwards from my form, smothering the room, as I grew the metal tendrils of my claws outwards in a long, ribbon blades.

And then I took a single step, turning to the side, and burned a single malleable shield to enhance the motion, and swept the room.

The chopped remains of my attackers, their equipment, and everything in the room hit the ground.

Disgustingly, the pubic lice that was rampant in this place identified the one attacker who had taken cover outside the door, who hadn’t been present when I’d arrived. While I couldn’t see through the eyes of the insects around me, as everything was dark, I could hear the sound of the man clutching his gun, and, concentrating, could feel the thin bar of air in the rifle’s barrel.

Between the two, it was easy to pull the metal of one hand back, while the tendrils for the other hand coiled together, then shout outwards, piercing the man in a dozen places. Hooking the tendrils in, I *pulled* and rendered him down to chunks as well.

Reaching out with Mineral manipulation, I pulled up blocks of sandstone that someone else had pressed the cleared shrubland into, and used them to block the doors, then more to create a shell for the building as gunfire erupted from elsewhere in the camp, accidentally creating a bit of a dry moat around the space.

Pulling the Darkness back, I used the insects to check the building, but everyone else was female, and obviously not here by choice, or under the age of twelve.

Nodding, I leapt upwards through the hole in the roof I’d made, watching a Nightmare Mantis chase down a woman who wore armor of. . . *Yes,* it was crystallized blood, her **Blood Knight** power giving her enhanced strength and durability as others bled out around her. I grabbed the power, but looked at the specifics. *Hmmm, can’t be your* ***own*** *blood? That’s an annoying limitation* I thought, as the Mantis caught up to her, lashing out.

The first strike from the Stand surprisingly didn’t break her armor, even with the projection empowered by the ongoing fight, but it did crack it. Unfortunately for the enemy Host, this version of Herb prioritized *speed* over brute strength, as did his Stand, the creature slamming a dozen strikes before she could turn, wielding a sword also made of crystalized blood, and try to strike her opponent in turn.

If it hadn’t been empowered by the ongoing fight, she might’ve hurt it, but all she did was scratch its beige carapace, the same color as the sandy soil in every direction, and the encircling walls. The Stand didn’t stop, armor shattering, the woman howling as she lost an arm, the scratch in the Stand’s body healing as it tore into her from her exposed section, singing claws deep into her and *wrenching* them, the woman’s Flame going out as she died.

“*Well*,” I commented to myself, as several men with guns, who had been watching the fight, laid down a curtain of fire on the Stand, bullets sparking off the chitin. “*I best get to work.”*

Taking a few steps, I launched myself off the roof and towards the mass of shooters, titanium claws already extending as I trailed Darkness, pouncing on the soon-to-be-dead cartel criminals.

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Taking care of the rest took less than an hour, Mick leaving a few to ‘track down further leads’. I made sure their screams didn’t escape the building they were in while I went in the stone-clad building, the shielding pockmarked from dozens of bullets fired in haste.

Room to room, I freed those chained down, or locked in, or otherwise trapped, gathering them together. I *wanted* to just move them to a hospital, or somewhere they could get the care that I, as this persona, *couldn’t give them.* However, International-range teleporters were just as rare as healers, if not more. However, *short* range teleporters were a bit more common, and I *did* have that idea for a female Darkness user that I never utilized.

Using a bit of broken wood from a table in another room, I grew a wood-only Dryad form, but smaller, slimmer, and covered it in Darkness. *“Where’s the nearest safe location?”* I growled to the masses, the women and children cringing away from me in fear as I did so, the first words I’d said this entire time.

As I worried that none of them spoke English, a woman, her face bloodied and bruised, wearing only a sheet, stepped forward. “Nueva Pastoria,” she said, and I realized that I had *no* idea where that was. Pulling out a phone, I looked it up, frowning at what I saw.

*“Nearest place with a hospital,”* I clarified, looking over the others. *“Some here need help*.”

The other woman frowned. “Villa de Cos. But it’s forty, fifty miles away.”

I looked over my shoulder, as the mini-dryad walked in, several of the civilians shrieking in fright when they saw her. “*Saiya, can you make that?”*

It was a bit hard to play around with the sound manipulations, to twist my voice into that of a more feminine timber, and, well, I failed, so when I tried my ventriqism, my ‘partner’s’ feminine giggle was twisted and distorted. *Screw it, go with it.* Not bothering to fix the distortion, ‘Saiya’ replied, “**Of course I can, fuzzy! I just need a couple dozen jumps to get there!**”

I nodded, looking to the others. “*Everyone gather together. We don’t want to leave anyone behind.*” They quickly did so, the women and some of the older children managing the more injured and younger of their number. *“Everyone hold together. Don’t worry. It won’t hurt you,”* I reassured them, as the mini-dryad gestured outwards, darkness billowing out to encompass everyone, to better hide the my Striding.

Some of the younger ones cried, especially as, when I reached out, trying to move more people than I ever had before, my Acoustokinesis dropped and the agonized, tortured screams of the last few Cartel members that Mick was questioning could be distantly heard.

Making sure I’d encompassed everyone I Strode, taking a *tiny* step in the correct direction, allowing the darkness to billow out and fade, revealing the empty scrubland, before I brought the Darkness back, repeating the process in waves, getting everyone ever-closer, until we finally were on a hill overlooking the city. Peering out, I spotted the hospital, and moved us all, not in front of it, in an area that was *sure* to be covered in cameras, but a few streets over in an alley, which let me, at range create an expanding cloud of Shadow for us to Stride into in front of the hospital, letting it drop as men armed with rifles rushed out, guns trained on us.

They shouted *something*, but I didn’t speak Spanish, my two classes from college not helping in the slightest, but from the way they gestured with the guns, it was likely some variant of ‘get down!’. Ignoring them, I turned to the group’s speaker, asking, *“This good?”*

“It is,” she said, staring at the building in stark disbelief. “I, who are you?”

*“A Hunter,”* I replied, stepping up to the mini-dryad. “*Take us out, Saiya.”*

Summoning another wave of Darkness, I took the construct and strode out into the desert, re-orienting and taking similarly small steps back to the base, in case anyone was watching via satellite.

Getting back the shadow walls had dissipated on their own, without me to keep them up, and I walked both bodies to where Mick was still working, walking around the dismembered corpses. Muting the last man, who was missing all four limbs, and whose torso was covered with shallow, bleeding wounds, I asked the Replicant, “You good?”

“That I am,” he smiled. “None escaped?”

“None. Women and children were dropped off at a hospital forty miles away,” I reported, the Replicant rolling his eyes at the statement. “This was kinda fun,” I commented, “And I got a few interesting powers out of it. Tell me if you need help on another hunt.”

Mick looked at me, surprised, before a please grin spread across his features. “I will,” he promised. *“Trust me.”*

I returned home, glad my costume was auto-cleaning, and left the mini-Dryad in a forest in Arkansas and burying her deep, teleporting to the Mark in my office. I sighed, using a sun to insta-boil some water and brew a cup of tea, adding half a cup of sugar to it, making sure to shape the wind to keep the smell of it from waking up Taylor, who was still fast asleep. Stretching, I sat down, insta-cooled the tea down to a more drinkable temperature, as even being immune to heat overly-hot tea just *felt* different.

It was *delicious.*

Opening my schedule, I noted that Quinn had gotten Flechette to come visit us, in exchange for healing a few family members. *That man is a far better Vizier than King,* I thought, shaking my head, the Tinker having mellowed out in the last week. *Give him a task to complete, and he’d do it. Ask him to come up with his own tasks, and he started to second guess himself.* When he’d needed to take responsibility for his own decisions, to *own* them, it’d worn at him, in a way that it hadn’t worn on Taylor or Herb.

Herb, in fact, had seemingly *thrived* under the pressure, while Taylor? Taylor was Taylor, and she was ‘*Queen* ***Administrator****’* for a *reason*.

*‘Heavy is the head who wears the crown’* I mused. To me, that pressure, while it weighed on me, was not something I shied away from. Something I took up, because, all to often, *no one else would*. In doing so, though, I’d left Quinn in a position he was *not* suited for. By taking on the decisions I’d centralized authority, the only pillar holding up the edifice of New Brockton Bay.

However, soon enough, I wouldn’t be the only pillar, but one of many. And, the benefit of many pillars, was that, if one fell, the others could support the structure. I’d fallen, and they’d kept things going for a time, but they weren’t strong enough to hold things up on their own completely.

In time, however, they *would.*

Smiling, I got to work on the next report.