

Why Was There No Truck?!

(Chapters 24-28)

Novus Peregrine

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Chapter 24: Team Planning

“Alright girls and Cyborg, time for planning!”

Cyborg rolled his eyes at the way Alyssa had said that, already used to getting a bit of shit for being the only guy on the team so far. Given that he'd been in touch with Winston and the two had hit it off, it wasn't actually a sore point. But that just made it perfect ammunition. Enough to land some harmless teasing and jokes, without causing real offense.

“We've been running through plenty of team training for the last week and a half, and we seem to be clicking *decently* well. We still have some rough edges, of course, but that's to be expected at this point.”

It was true, and they'd been doing regular post-training breakdowns, so Alyssa wasn't stepping on any toes by saying what the team already knew. Thankfully, Nico was the youngest member of the team at twenty, and even she was well past the teenage drama phase of trying to poke and prod at power dynamics. The fact Alyssa wasn't a tyrant either, actively leaning on Talia and Crystal to help craft team exercises, didn't hurt.

The result of having fairly mature adults, ones who hadn't hit on any major personality conflict yet thanks to careful recruiting choices, seriously work at team training? Well, they could at least not get in each other's way while fighting, at this point. Which was pretty damn good progress for the limited amount of time they'd had. Doubly so since they'd also been running minor patrols and a few small raids to establish their presence more firmly. Nothing major. Just enough to keep the criminal element aware they were there.

“That said, we also all agree we need to restart pushing at the gangs. Things have settled a bit, and we don’t want them getting *too* comfortable. Which brings up two problems. The *first*, of course, is finding ourselves a target. Yet it’s the *second* thing that means we need to be *extra careful* with target selection though. Specifically...”

Alyssa waved at the wall-display of the room and up popped numerous images of Solomon Grundy. No two were of the same iteration, and they showed off one of the reasons the local Endbringer was so *irritating*. He always came back *slightly different*, both in strength and power set. He wasn’t a particularly strong Endbringer...most of the time. But he had to be *treated* like he was, since he occasionally spiked towards being *much* stronger than normal.

Unfortunately...

“As our one and only Gotham native could likely tell you,” Alyssa waved at Dinah, who was scowling at the images, “it’s a *bad* sign that it has now officially been four months since Grundy was last taken down. The average over the last two decades has been *three* months, and each time it’s taken longer than that he’s popped up in an unusually powerful iteration.”

Dinah nodded, shifted, and pointed to one of the larger versions of Grundy in the compilation of images. It only *sort of* looked like what Alyssa remembered from the few times she’d seen him in animated or comics versions of DC. Yes, he was chalk white, heavily muscled like a super-roided out gym bro, and a bit monstrous looking. That all matched.

The most obvious thing that *didn’t* match was his size. While Solomon Grundy had always been depicted as large, even the smaller iterations on the screen were *twelve feet tall*. The one that Dinah was pointing too was even larger, close to *twenty* than twelve. There were also *growths* all over his body, which looked like a sort of ragged chitin armor. Notably, he wasn’t wearing pants. Not in that image, or any of the others.

Which, fair.

Regenerating zombie doesn’t mean coming back with pants. She supposed the comics and other media would have gotten censored or banned, in her old world, if that massive swinging dick visible in some of the images had been depicted. The one Dinah was pointing at was at least covered in that regard, with the ‘armor’ having built over the area. The blonde continued in a low, tightly controlled voice that spoke of bad memories.

“That was the *last* time an ‘Overcharged’ Grundy popped up. Three and a half years ago. That chitin armor was both tough as hell and *regenerated* just like the rest of Grundy

does. Worse, he was able to control swarms of insects that flooded into Gotham. It took a far larger mobilization than usual to bring him down, and something like 7,000 people died before they could do it. Including my parents.”

Everyone winced, doubly so Alyssa, who most certainly hadn't known that little detail. Dinah had half-turned to glance at them and must have seen her reaction, as she shook her head and shot a brittle smile.

“Don't. Even if you'd known, you needed to bring this up, since we'll end up being the first line of defense if it happens again. I won't freeze or freak out. In fact, I've responded to the last three Grundy attacks, so I've long since gotten over...most of my issues, regarding the monster.”

Another thing that Alyssa hadn't known, and now she had to consider if it was better to hand this briefing over to Dinah. That must *also* have shown on her face, as Dinah shook her head.

“I don't know anything specific about him that your research wouldn't have turned up. Well, not beyond the fact that he *does* react to my Canary Cry. I was able to use it once, two incursions ago, to lead him off a direct attack on a bunch of civilians. But it doesn't really *damage* him, just pissed him off. For damage...well, I'm sure you were getting to that.”

Alyssa nodded slowly, let out a breath, and picked up the thread she'd been originally aiming for. She started clicking through slides of combat against him, showing the effects of various attacks.

“Right. Basics first. *All* versions of Grundy have some significant super strength, probably on par with my own, serious durability, and *regeneration*. He is, for lack of a better way of putting it, a horrifying damage sponge that just *won't go down*.”

The entire team grimaced as a short clip of an *arm regrowing* was shown. Other wounds vanished, with varying degrees of speed.

“Important to note is that he's both *most* resistant to physical damage and regenerates from it the most quickly in turn. That arm, for example, was cut off by a Hero with a fuck-off huge sword. The sword was some sort of special power-generated thing that lopped the arm off pretty easily. But, since it was pure physical damage, it regenerated in under a minute.”

She clicked over to a new set of slides, which showed a series of energy-based attacks ripping into various versions of Grundy.

“Energy attacks, particularly those that are heat based, are generally considered the best way to deal with him, since most versions of him resist heat poorly and regenerate the damage slowly. Since you have to destroy at least fifty percent of his body to disperse him, using such attacks lets you stack on the damage over time a bit better. Notably, he has one other weakness that’s likely going to make Nico our most effective member.”

Nico nodded at that, seeming to already know where Alyssa was going. She spoke up before Alyssa could continue.

“Magical disruption. He’s directly reanimated by the Green, so he’s a magical construct. That means he’s actually *super* resistant to magic in general. *Buuutt* anything that *disrupts* magic fucks him up a lot. Powerful dispelling effects, even generated by spells, can cripple him heavily. I can’t just snap my fingers and make those happen, but given space and time to chant I can absolutely cause him major problems. You guys would have to be able to hold him in more or less the same place, though. Which is usually the problem.”

Alyssa smirked at that, switching the wall into holo-mode and bringing up a normal-sized Grundy along with models of the team. She started positioning the models around the Endbringer, with herself and Laserdream circling in the air.

“Thankfully, our particular team is actually well-suited for dealing with Grundy. Frankly, if we’re dealing with a ‘normal’ iteration of him, I’m virtually certain we can take him down without outside help. Laserdream and I can both produce high-output heat-based energy attacks. Added to the fact we can *fly* and Grundy isn’t typically all that smart, there’s an excellent chance we can contain him long enough for Nico to hit him. Then take him apart completely while he’s weakened.”

Smirk shifting to a frown, she replaced ‘normal’ Grundy with a larger variant, intentionally not choosing the most recent for the sake of Dinah’s mental state.

“Unfortunately, the same can’t be said for the ‘Overcharge’ variants. Looking at just how much damage he’s soaked in that sort of state before, the odds we can defeat him alone aren’t great. Which means, since we may need to face such a version of him, we need to work out the best stalling tactics we can. If we’re *lucky*, the Avengers can start responding immediately to him popping up and one or more of their heavy hitters will show in under twenty minutes to help. The Avengers are *busy* and often scattered on missions, though.”

Splitting off an extra display from the projection, shrinking it a little for space, she threw up an ‘average response times’ list on the new screen. It was...not great.

“Equally bad is the fact that Grundy is considered a *weak* Endbringer. Which means he doesn’t draw the rapid response and raw numbers of walking catastrophes like Godzilla, or even mid-ranged Endbringers like Electron Storm or Azathoth. In the event of Overcharged versions, more alerts go out, but the usual lack of worry over him hampers response speed. As you can see, average response time is all the fuck over the place, due to Grundy alerts being considered relatively low priority by most teams.”

Dinah looked pissed at that statement but didn’t argue it. More telling were the *appalled* expressions of the rest of the team. Alyssa didn’t blame them, even if she didn’t have the local cultural mindset to have quite such a visceral reaction herself. She’d already sussed out that there was a *strong* culture of uniting against Endbringers in this reality. The things had plagued humanity for thousands of years, though only in the last two centuries had they become so...active.

There were good reasons for that. Endbringers were a sort of immune system for the world, with the various Parliaments and a few other forces being the driving power behind them. Generally, they only responded to something *seriously wrong* in the environment. In ancient days, that had almost always meant someone had *royally fucked* an area with a widescale dark magic ritual or similar. In the modern day, however, it could be something as mundane as serious pollution that called one up. No dark magic or bloody sacrificed required, though both could speed things along if cultists got involved.

Regrettably, in a way, there were also a lot more powers around that could take on an Endbringer in the modern day. Which meant that the known prevention measures *weren’t* taken as seriously as Alyssa thought they ought to be. While the *majority* of this Earth *did* have better pollution control and stricter rules about destabilizing areas with abusive mining or logging practices, it wasn’t as big of a change as she would have expected.

Frankly, the fact that heroes always showed up to put Endbringers down *enabled* the callous to ignore them. What were a few thousand dead to a rich bastard in control of a multinational megacorp...or a government that fed off those megacorps? Sure, serious efforts *were* made to prevent Godzilla or similar high-end threats from popping up. But Grundy? Or even some of the mid-level Endbringers? The powers that be and the general public both just counted on the Heroes to deal with them, rather than take what Alyssa considered to be *proper and logical* preventative measures.

For obvious reasons that they tended to be the ones *dying*, the general population *did not approve*. At least not culturally. Even if they sadly weren’t quite committed enough to take those opinions to the polls, the general populace considered Endbringers a sort of

natural disaster. Culturally, they *expected* their leaders and, even more, their *Heroes*, to unite and deal with them quickly and professionally.

The idea *Heroes* slacked off against even a weak Endbringer? It was a slap to the face of that expectation. A breach of the social contract that saw the population half-worship 'Heroes' as the Good Guys who Saved the Day. Heroes were given a *lot* of slack, more than Alyssa would have believed without seeing this Amalgam world at work, but they had high expectations placed on them in return.

It was finally Cyborg that spoke up into the stilted silence.

"That's just fucking *wrong*, man. Like firefighters phoning it in because only *one* house is on fire. They don't shrug and go 'call us back when it's a whole ass neighborhood,' you know?"

Instead of chuckles, that half-joke only got grim nods. It was Dinah who cut in next, voice dripping with cynicism.

"Sure, Cy...but '*it's just Gotham.*' You wouldn't fucking believe how many horrible memes and shit go around every time Grundy pops up. Tons of anonymous fucks on the internet, and even professional comedians on late night TV, outright joking that 'maybe they ought to just let Grundy finish Gotham off.' 'It's not like anyone would miss it.' Or even, 'He'd be doing us a favor and raising property values!'"

Everyone else on the team winced at the pure *vitriol* that was dripping off Dinah's words by the end of her mini-rant. Not that any of them could blame her. It was a *seriously* fucked up thing to say. But, then, even in Alyssa's old reality, people would joke about 'glassing' the Mid-East to solve the problems there. Callously ignoring the millions of innocents that would die. So it wasn't exactly hard to believe that sort of thing would go around the internet here too. Still, she needed to say something.

"It's fucked up. But it's also what we have to deal with, and the people of Gotham have a *hell of a lot better chance* with us here than they ever have before. So let's buckle down and figure out how we can slow the big brute down until the lazy bastards from out of town get here, if it comes to that, right?"

Dinah let out a heavy, shaky breath, seeming surprised at her own vitriol after Alyssa's level voice broke her out of it.

"Y-yeah. That makes sense. Hell, maybe we can beat him even if he's Overcharged and make them all look bad?"

Her smile at the comment was just as shaky as the breath, but Alyssa smiled back, nodding. They all knew it wasn't likely they could pull something like that off. But whistling in the dark was a thing for a reason, and as they began to plan, they at least grew more confident they could keep the casualties down...

Chapter 25: Team Operations

"This is not going how I expected!"

Alyssa *really* wanted to respond to that, but she was a little busy weaving between hits from a pair of *military grade* exo-suits. While she'd known they *existed*, from her basic research into the sort of thing she might run into, she hadn't *actually* run into any of the suits until now. The exo-skeletal suits weren't *quite* proper power armor, but they were the next best thing, and honestly *more* annoying for her. Specifically because they focused on letting their user make full, brutal use of speedware, rather than tank hits.

She was still faster than the pair of professional mercs using them, but they were *good*, forcing her to work to keep up as they flowed seamlessly together. Worse, they had *fucking magical swords* that had managed to slice right through her armor once already, actually drawing blood for the first time in any fight she'd been in so far. They'd carved *right through* her own blades when she'd attempted to use them, too. The sheer surprise of which is what had let them get that thankfully shallow cut.

If she could just get some distance to properly use her starbolts or telekinesis, she'd be fine. Unfortunately, the railway tunnels they were fighting in weren't huge, and hers wasn't the only fight ongoing. Cyborg, who had made the comment in the first place, was fighting a pair of more traditional Borgs in the same merc uniforms of the two using the exo-suits. Cyborg's own augmentations were *far* superior to the two Borgs, but again his pair worked extremely well in tandem, frustrating his efforts to deal with them.

Meanwhile, Talia was working with *White Tiger* to protect a teenage kid that looked like a runaway, and their other three teammates weren't on shift at the moment. With Grundy overdue, they'd decided they should keep three people 'fresh' at any one time, while they targeted the smallish Ibanescu crime family. They'd been after a human-trafficking ring run by the family when they'd stumbled into Dragos Ibanescu himself about the *execute* White Tiger. They'd had to rush in to interrupt that execution without a plan, only Talia's teleportation letting her reach the vigilante in time.

Unfortunately, they had quickly discovered how the magically-empowered vigilante had *lost*. Alyssa had *no idea* who the fuck the extra muscle was, since they sure as hell

weren't within the means of the Ibanescu family to hire, but the resulting clusterfuck of a fight was *not* going great. The mercs had very professionally split them up, their own teamwork a well-oiled machine far superior to what Overwatch had managed so far. The mercs weren't *winning*, not yet at least, but that could easily change if everyone *one* of them made a mistake.

Displeased with that reality and kicking herself for not spending more time on her personal skills with all the team stuff going on, Alyssa waited until one of Cyborg's opponents was in her line of sight and reached out to mentally *tug* harshly on one ankle. She'd tried the same thing with her own opponents, but the level of TK she could manage while under pressure like this hadn't been enough to make the heavier exo-suited mercs truly stumble.

Thankfully, without the extra weight and stabilizing gyros of the exo-suits, Cyborg's opponent *did* stumble. The opening was enough that the Borg bit a lightning-fast jab to the face from her teammate's fist, rocking the Borg back and dumping electricity from that fist into the man's cybernetics. It wasn't enough to take the man out of action permanently, but it froze his cyberware just long enough for Cyborg to spin around him, using his immobile form for cover...

Cover he use to throw a magnetic-grenade that latched onto the back of one of her own opponents. The man felt it, eyes widening as he disengaged to frantically try getting it off, but it was much too late. The grenade, not explosive but *corrosive*, ate through a critical motor system on the man's exosuit and he cursed, immediately electing to eject from it. He did so cleanly, and clearly had some chrome even without the exo-suit, beyond just the speedware that had been synced with the suit.

Not that it mattered.

The breathing room only having to deal with *one* assailant gave her was enough for Alyssa to weave around his desperately speeding blade to launch a full-power starbolt directly into his chest. The bolt had enough power to launch him a dozen feet, and Alyssa used the completely unmolested moment to reach out and telekinetically *rip a chrome arm off* of one of Cyborgs opponents.

“Booya! Teamwork, bitch!”

Grinning as Cyborg started utterly taking his two enemies to the cleaners, Alyssa focused back on her own in time to sidestep a mantis blade from the man who'd ejected. He was barely *half* as fast as he had been with the exo-suit, and apparently couldn't use its oversized, magically-empowered sword without it. In other words, *he was no longer a*

threat. Something she proved an instant later by ungently snapping his spine with a blow to his back.

She winced inside just a bit at that, but said spine was *artificial* anyway, in order to link him fully with the exo-suit. Even if it crippled him for the moment, it wasn't *technically* crippling in the greater sense. That spinal-replacement requirement was why the suits weren't common, outside of the military, as they were a pretty serious chrome and training commitment. Disabling him that way was a certain way to remove him from the fight, even if the sensation of snapping a spine had been more than a bit disturbing.

Re-engaging with the other exo-suit pilot, whose suit wasn't working quite as well after being thrown by her starbolt, she doubled down her focus, determined to finish this quickly...

... ..

"Ugh. That was...a bit much. At least White Tiger was grateful?"

Even Alyssa had thrown herself into a chair, resting a cold drink on her forehead, as Talia made that exhausted-sounding comment. Nocturne had actually had the *least* nasty fight, it only being difficult because the asshole regular goons fighting her and White Tiger had kept targeting the kid to keep them from easily finishing the fight.

Said kid, Jade, was apparently a friend of sorts to White Tiger, and had been kidnapped to lure her in for a fight. The whole thing had been orchestrated not by the Ibanescu family, but by Mr. Bone. Who had, apparently, a bone to pick with White Tiger from her days as a thief, before she'd gotten the amulets that made her the White Tiger and turned vigilante.

"That's true, and she flat out told us she'll put in a good word about us with the Bats. Dunno how much good it will do, but having her contact information could help if we need to pass information to the Bat Clan at least."

Talia nodded, and Cyborg shrugged...then glared at his shoulder where the shrug had *hitched* for a moment.

"Damn it, I'm going to need maintenance, and working on my own arms is a bitch and a half. The shoulders are the *worst*, too."

Alyssa snorted at that.

"Give me five and I'll help you with it. Even if I don't know *your* cybernetics, I know enough about them in general to act as an extra set of hands fixing it."

Cyborg pursed his lips for a moment, seeming to consider it, then nodded and relaxed a bit.

“Thanks. Been a while since I had someone else that could work on any of it, but from what I’ve seen with the Aurora designs, you’re more than up to it. So long as you listen, of course.”

Talia perked up at the mention of the first product Alyssa and Cyborg had been working on for the factory upstairs to output.

“How is that going, by the by? I mean, I don’t know shit about the technical stuff, but it sounded like it could be a big deal, right?”

Cyborg’s tired expression shifted, energy suddenly perking up again at one of his favorite subjects.

“It’s going *awesome!* The ‘neruochip’ that Alyssa came up with is going to make the new line of cybernetic prosthetics *way* the heck cheaper for the average joe. You don’t need even a *fraction* as complex of interlink installations between the nerves and the arm that will be the first product, since the chip just *skips* all of that and takes input directly from the ‘ghost limb!’”

Alyssa smiled as Cyborg excitedly barraged Talia with the details, even if most of it was clearly going over Talia’s head. She felt a little guilty claiming the ‘neruochip’ as *hers*, since it was just dirt common tech taken from the Major’s memories. But Cyborg *was* right. The Project Aurora line of cybernetics would make a big difference for a lot of people.

Getting a fully-touch-sensitive, fully-functional replacement limb cost upwards of forty grand on average. You could slash that in half if you didn’t care if your senses through it were dulled, and slash it down to under ten grand if you *also* didn’t care if it was more ‘clunky robot limb’ than true replacement. But by their best estimates? A limb made by their automated factory upstairs would give you full touch, and damn near the same dexterity as a real hand, all for under ten grand.

Heck, they’d even make a profit on it, since insurance companies generally had to pay out for at least ‘basic’ prosthetics like the clunky robo-limbs. Since their design would be slightly *cheaper*, even with a modest markup to help fund the team, *and* make the insurance companies look better? They weren’t likely going to have any trouble selling the product line once it was ready. In truth, they’d probably have more trouble meeting *demand* for a while than anything...

... ..

“Oof!”

The breath left *both* of their lungs as Alyssa and Dinah hit the mat. Alyssa had managed a grapple, her only goal of the spar since the whole point was for Dinah to practice against someone stronger and faster than her. If Alyssa had allowed herself her full striking speed and skill set, the sheer difference in physical attributes would have been too much for her sparring partner to get anything out of.

Yet, for all of that, Dinah had proven just how *good* she was by instinctively driving an elbow into Alyssa’s stomach at just the right angle to rob her of breath on the way down to the mat. Against a human, that blow likely would have let Dinah slip free in the moment they were stunned from the hit. *Alyssa* wasn’t human, however, and technically didn’t actually *need* to breathe. The same had been true for Major Kusanagi, who she’d inherited most of her skills from, and thus her instinctive reaction hadn’t been to *release* Dinah, but instead to tighten her grip.

The result turned what had originally been a grapple with intent to *throw*, into a maneuver that brought them both down to the sparring mat hard. Alyssa’s shifted grip forced the air out of Dinah’s lungs as they landed, while she herself was momentarily befuddled by the speed which things had shifted. Then farther distracted by the fact she’d drawn Dinah’s body tight to hers, one hand on a bare stomach and the other practically groping a tit, even as their hips pressed together. A few seconds passed as both of them processed and tried to get air back in their lungs, Alyssa mostly by reflex from her past life, as the lack of air wasn’t causing her true distress.

Then Dinah, mostly recovered, stiffened in surprise...and rolled her hips, radiating surprised curiosity?

Oh. Fuck. The fireworks of pleasure that sparked behind Alyssa’s eyes as her sparring partner’s gloriously tight ass ground into her *erection* clued her into what had happened. Yet, it also stunned her for an extra second or two as Dinah processed what she was feeling. By the time Alyssa managed to release the boob she’d been holding and push Dinah away, the damage was clearly done, at least by the way the blonde and rolled with the push and was staring curiously at Alyssa’s deliberately-loose exercise wear.

Well, at least she didn’t look disgusted or angry?

“Huh. So that’s what Talia meant when she said you were ‘well-equipped.’ I admit, I didn’t get it at the time, and she was too out of it from one too many drinks to clarify. Assuming she even would have.”

Alyssa blinked. Wait, what? Since when had Talia...ooooohhhhh, she'd helped her get changed out of bloody armor after that first ambush, when Alyssa had been mentally reeling and needed a pep talk. Fuck. She hadn't even process that Talia must have gotten a 'good look.'

"Ah...this is all an awkward dream and you'll wake up any minute. Now hold still while I knock you out?"

It was a weak quip but snapped Dinah out of her staring as she snorted.

"No thanks, I don't need a free headache. Besides it's not a *bad* surprise, I just needed a moment to process. Is it...I mean...you aren't quite human, right?"

Well, at least she wasn't freaking out, and seemed more curious than anything. Now that *she* wasn't freaking out, Alyssa could even feel a mild amount of arousal from the blonde. That was...possibly interesting? Though more likely situational than anything. Best push that off to think about later, along with the sudden understanding that the spikes of arousal she'd sensed randomly directed her way from Talia might *mean something*. The fact that realization and Dinah's continued quick glances weren't exactly making her erection fade was enough 'awkward' to deal with for the moment.

"Not quite, no. My powers came with a lot of...physical changes. Including the one you keep glancing at, yes."

Dinah blushed just a tiny bit, but Alyssa could *sense* the moment the confident blonde decided to double down instead of retreat.

"So, did you get to keep the original bits too, or...?"

Blinking, taken aback a bit at the sheer audacity of the question, Alyssa answered without thinking.

"I have both sets, yes. Which is admittedly pretty fun."

Somehow, they locked eyes, heat slowly creeping into Alyssa's face as she realized what she'd just said and how she'd said it. Dinah's face shifted to a smirk...even as her own blush darkened just a bit.

"I bet it is~. Still, you might want to go *take care of that*, before one of the others pops in."

Refusing to squeak, despite her blush, Alyssa attempted her best regal nod, turned away...and returned fire with a comment over her shoulder as she flew off just a *little* faster than normal.

“Maybe you should too, I’m an empath, remember~!”

She could *feel* Dinah’s own blush go nuclear, even as a sharper spike of arousal shot through the blonde. Huh, Alyssa wondered if that...no, best not overthink it for now. It had been a weird, charged situation. The woman might not be so interested once the curiosity and the rush that always came with physical activity faded. Still, between her reaction and Talia’s *possible* interest? Alyssa had a lot to consider that she hadn’t quite been ready for...

... ..

“The last goblin dies and the figure on the throne stirs. You hear a rattle of bone as it stands, the scrap of a sword on stone as it lifts a glowing rune blade. As it finally takes a step into the light, you see a tattered cloak and crowd of gold atop a skeleton long absent its flesh. Glowing eyes meet your gaze, and you each have just moments to react...”

Crystal, looking far more *engaged* than Alyssa had expected in the ‘Team Building D&D session,’ was the first to pipe up.

“Am I still raging?”

Still bemused how *enthusiastically* Crystal was playing a Barbarian, Alyssa nodded.

“Yes. Standing and stepping forward was effectively the boss’s action for the round. So this is a direct continuation on the previous fight.”

Crystal’s grin was huge as she replied.

“Then I’m going to charge! There’s enough room for that, right? With nothing between him and me.”

Mentally referencing the rules, Alyssa was quick to reply.

“Yes. So that’s a +2 Attack Bonus, and -2 AC.”

Crystal nodded and opened her mouth...only to be cut off by a sound all of them had been expecting for the last week, but none had really wanted to hear. The Endbringer Sirens of Gotham were going off, as Solomon Grundy was sighted moving past the edges of Slaughter Swamp. The entire team froze for bare heartbeats, then all sprung into motion at once, dice and character sheets sent flying as they darted for their costumes.

It was time to see just how deep of shit they were in, and how well their preparations had paid off...

Chapter 26: Born on Monday

Despite all the corruption in Gotham, some of which contributed heavily to the fact that Solmon Grundy popped up almost as reliably as clockwork, not even the most corrupt of Gotham's upper class were *entirely* idiotic. Which was something to be thankful for as Star Knight, Gloom, and Laserdream raced toward Slaughter Swamp, each of them carrying another member of the team. The fact that even the truly corrupt didn't *want* the local Endbringer flattening Gotham was why the Sirens were well maintained and, more importantly, a *watch* was kept on Slaughter Swamp.

It had proven impossible over the years, despite a great many attempts, to keep either people or sensors *inside* the swamp. Even more than the already bad-for-people-and-electronics environment of a natural swamp, the *unnatural* aspects of Slaughter Swamp quickly derailed any such attempt. Sensors glitched, corroded unnaturally fast, or just up and mysteriously vanished wholesale. *People* also vanished, started hallucinating, or came down with mysterious illnesses that saw them whisked away by the CDC. Even attempts at aerial or satellite surveillance ran into weird phenomena and glitches that made such attempts much too costly to maintain.

The result was that the best that could be done, and surprisingly it really was *the best*, was to set up a number of watch posts just outside the edge of the swamp. These were, despite all the problems with Gotham, *well-maintained* and kept a close eye on. *No one* wanted to be caught napping while their local Endbringer covered the distance between Slaughter Swamp and Gotham itself. Doubly so since the reason Gotham was even *still standing* after so many assault by the Endbringer was the fact the entire city was an island.

Technically, it was actually a series of close-together islands, bordered by the Gotham River on one side and Delaware Bay on the other. There were three major bridges and six major tunnels that connected Gotham itself to the mainland, though only two of the bridges and five of the tunnels were pointed towards Sommerset, where Slaughter Swamp was actually located. Sadly, despite numerous suggestions to convert sections of those bridges to a bascule bridge, so that the connection to the island could be temporarily cut, it had never happened.

Such an idea was too massive of an undertaking for a city whose leaders constantly siphoned off the wealth needed for public works into their own piggy banks and back pockets. The argument against it was only made stronger by the fact the Endbringer *had* simply walked the bottom of the river to cross into the city away from the bridges during more than one incursion. The variants that had done was had ended up among the most damaging, due to the simple and obvious fact it was harder to *engage* Grundy underwater.

Thus, the bridges were legitimately the *preferred* place to engage the Endbringer, even if that seemed counterintuitive to some.

Thankfully, so long as he wasn't actively blocked from doing so, Grundy *normally* made for one of the bridges. Most frequently the New Trigate Bridge, which was closest to Slaughter Swamp. Perhaps unshockingly, it was the New Trigate Bridge because the Old Trigate Bridge had been so heavily damaged in a previous fight with Grundy that the city had once needed to close it down for a year for repairs. When they re-opened it, they declared it the 'New' Trigate Bridge and went on with life.

It was towards that bridge that they were moving, as Grundy had been angling in that direction. Thankfully, they were going to beat him to the mainland side of the bridge, which would allow them to try and stall him there. Less thankfully, they all had a feed from a patrol drone displaying on their visors and had already determined that 'stall' was **137% the plan**.

Why?

Because they were *definitely* dealing with an Overcharged Grundy.

Not only was he a full *twenty-five* feet tall, among the largest iterations of him ever seen, but he also...wasn't alone. Specifically, there were half a dozen twelve-foot tall *plant golems* arrayed in no particular formation around him. Worse, even as they watched, glowing green veins all over his body *pulsed* and yet another of those golems began pulling itself together from the nearby plants. Meaning that the longer this went on, the worse things would get.

Just as they passed the bridge, the Endbringer came into view for them, not yet at the bridge but in sight. Star Knight toggled her mic and did her best to give her orders clearly and calmly, despite the pressure and a bit of nervousness. This was a *bit* more than a mob enforcer.

"Alright everyone, we're going with plan 'Kite and Herd.' Nocturne, you and Canary are going to be the stars of the show. Get his attention and try to lead him north, along the highway. Cyborg, Gloom, you'll be setting up on top of the first overpass in that direction to prep for him as he closes. Laserdream, you and I are going to run a modification of the plan. Instead of hitting Grundy, we'll take our initial pass on whichever golems trail behind him...or the closet to Gotham if they don't follow him. We need to know how tough those things are. After that, we rejoin the main plan unless something goes tits up."

Being by far the strongest member of the team, Star Knight was carrying Cyborg, so she angled North and sped up to drop him off. She got a series of acknowledgements from the team regarding the plan as she did, with varying levels of certainty in each voice.

Nocturne had been riding the Staff of One with Gloom, and teleported to the ground several hundred meters to the north along the highway from where Grundy would cross in a minute or two. Laserdream angled to drop Black Canary off, even as Gloom flew on to drop on the overpass next to Cyborg. Grundy was closing fast, but hadn't reached their chosen 'ambush point' by the time Alyssa dropped her package off and looped back to get to the south of their 'ambush' point. Laserdream joined her quickly, even as Grundy closed the distance with huge strides.

Star Knight quietly crossed her fingers and hoped for the best as he crossed just a few hundred meters to the south of Nocturne and Black Canary. As he did so, Dinah let out the most potent Canary Cry she could manage, holding it for several seconds. More than long enough for Grundy to stagger, *roar*, and find her with his gaze.

“Solomon Grundy,

Born on a Monday.”

Alyssa grimaced as the raspy, dead voice that came from the giant as he finally had an *enemy* to focus on and began his famous rhyme. Yet, he also did what they wanted, rotating to face them and speeding up. Nocturne grabbed her teammate and, just as Grundy got within a hundred feet...teleported five hundred farther north. Black Canary unleashed another Cry, causing Grundy to stagger again and, more importantly, keeping his total focus.

“Christened on Tuesday,”

Grundy was moving much faster now, forcing Nocturne to teleport farther and faster...and also leaving his plant golems behind. Thankfully, they seemed to have lucked out and not gotten one of the *smarter* versions of Grundy. At the same time, less luckily, only half of the plant golems, of which there were eight now, shifted to follow him. The other four kept on toward the Trigate Bridge, and Star Knight highlighted two of them with her HUD. One in her own signature purple, the other in a bright yellow that represented a tag for Laserdream.

She didn't need to give an explicit order, Laserdream swooping in time with her as they began attack runs on the golems, sweeping opposite direction to not get in each other's way. It was a maneuver they'd been careful to practice, even if it had meant having to go out over the Atlantic to get enough flight space. Crystal had insisted on it, being the more experienced combat flyer by far, and the practice had paid enormous dividends in getting them in sync.

As they swooped down, both of them channeled their own forms of attack. A stream of starbolts for Star Knight, and a single continuous beam effect from Laserdream. Both hit their targets, causing them to stagger...but not fall or burn as the two Heroines flew past. Worse, the golems reacted, wines whipping out and launching some sort of sickly green fire. It didn't come anywhere close to hitting them, but it confirmed the golems as having more options than just brute strength.

As they both swiveled in the air to take in the result of their attack run, Laserdream was quick to ask the all-important question.

"Minimal effect, but they don't seem to be regenerating. What do we do?"

Gritting her teeth, Star Knight shook her head.

"I'll forward my suit's data to the Endbringer channel, then we head for Grundy. The golems are a problem, but he's a *much* larger one. Gotham *does* have other active vigilantes and *other* defenders. Hopefully they can hold the golems on the bridge."

Crystal didn't comment, but Alyssa felt a pulse of grim understanding from her. The golems were tough, but 'minimal effect' hadn't been 'no' effect. They could be hurt, weren't instantly regenerating, and weren't even a fraction as dangerous as the Endbringer himself. The Endbringer who was *actively making more of the golems*. Individuals like White Tiger and the Bats could likely deal with just the four golems, which meant they had to prioritize Grundy. Even the gangs tended to throw a few of their enhanced in if a threat like that got inside Gotham itself, so it *should* be fine to leave those four to others.

Laserdream followed as Star Knight banked north.

"Cyborg, sitrep."

Cyborg had brought enough hardware, courtesy of Alyssa's lift capacity, to set up a heavy, repeating plasma weapon. One that had mostly self-deployed, with only minor tweaks needed by Victor. With that out of the way, he'd be the only one not currently engaged, with Nocturne and Black Canary playing bait...and Gloom hopefully already starting a high-powered disruption chant with Cyborg guarding her.

"Complications, boss. Grundy got pissed after the fifth jump and glowed it up. Instead of the big-ass plant golems, he created a swarm of smaller flyers. I reconfigured and am shooting them down, but the girls can't keep playing keep away if he makes many more."

Fuck. Of course it wouldn't be easy. Doing a quick check of the Endbringer channel, Alyssa cursed again as she saw a notice that the main Avengers team had been entirely

deployed already for a disaster elsewhere. Which meant no fast reinforcement. Thankfully, as she watched, a second ping came in from Pennsylvania, indicating a partial response from the core X-men team.

It was one of the many, *many* oddities of this Amalgam reality that the X-mansion wasn't located in New York. Instead, they'd be coming from just outside Reading, PA. Which, thankfully, was still close enough that the ETA they'd just phoned in was only twenty minutes. Of course, depending on who was available for that 'partial' deployment, they might or might not be enough. Still, it was something. If they could hold for that long they'd at least have a degree of veteran backup.

At the speeds the two of them were capable of, they reached the overpass where their teammates were trying to contain an Endbringer in seconds. Taking in the scene, where Nocturne and Black Canary were teleporting back and forth, Star Knight assessed. Their 'distraction' effort was still more or less succeeding in keeping Grundy's attention and dodging the various flyers and plant golems at the same time. Yet, even as they arrived, Grundy stopped again and roared, green veins pulsing all over his body as the weak plant life still around surged with growth.

This time, it didn't become golems, but giant tentacle-vines that shot towards the teleporting pair, causing Nocturne to yelp and teleport farther away.

"Nope! No hentai fun, thanks!"

Snorting at the quip, but knowing that they'd just lost their distraction, Star Knight issued orders.

"Nocturne, drop Canary with Cyborg then hop back to base for the Plan Bullet Hell kits. Laserdream, I'm going to play distraction, take whatever shots you get to cut down those tentacles and golems. Hamstring Grundy if you get enough free space to make a shot."

Alyssa dove, not waiting for acknowledgements. Since Grundy was now looking around for targets, every second risked him spotting Cyborg and the still-chanting Gloom and deciding they were a threat. Powering up her starbolts to the maximum power she could currently manage, she dove at the Endbringer from behind and shot them almost point-blank into the back of his neck. He roared in anger and swatted at her, but he wasn't nearly fast enough to actually hit her as she wove past his flailing and fired two more bolts into his face.

They did damage, but it wasn't a lot. Enough to piss him off, but barely more than surface burns that started healing immediately, if slowly due to his weakness to heat-based

attacks. Deliberately letting one of his hands *almost* swat her, she punched out as hard as she could after it passed, using Grundy's own momentum and speeding it up. She felt her punch do damage, but knew it would heal almost instantly. More effective was the fact the extra torque caused Grundy to stumble and almost fall. A distraction she took full advantage of by targeting his face with an entire stream of starbolts, attempting to blind him.

He roared again and seemed to lose track of her, his wild flailing not coming close at all, so she supposed it had worked. The problem, of course, was that she wasn't managing to penetrate. Nor was she able to focus on him entirely as a pair of the flying golems still present made a run on her. The things looked like mutant green bats of some sort, and thankfully went down easily to her starbolts...but by the time she'd dropped them Grundy had regenerated enough to see again and lunged at her.

Diving between his legs and firing at his giant dangling balls was probably a questionable decision, but she did it anyway, and was rewarded with a far more high-pitched roar. Distracted by the incredulous thought that they might *actually* be a weakness, she also almost got blindsided by a plant golem, forcing her to pull up and away. As she did, she got a brief glimpse of Laserdream managing to slice through one of the tentacles that had been trying to reach into the fight.

The next few minutes were chaotic as Star Knight was forced to erratically dodge while trying to do damage. Once, she got brushed by the sickly-green fire from one of the plant golems and had to resist screaming as it *burned* in a way that had nothing to do with heat. Thankfully, the pain washed away almost immediately as her own form of energy seemed to *pulse*, denying *whatever the fuck that was*.

Even more thankfully, those same few minutes were enough for Laserdream to eliminate the tentacle-plants, most of the flying golems, and even one of the four original plant golems. With Star Knight pressing Grundy enough that he couldn't stop to summon more, the fight began to shift at least a little. It shifted a little *more* when Nocturne and Black Canary managed to set up the first two 'Bullet Hell' platform on the overpass.

Both platforms whirred to life and synched up with Cyborg's targeting data, with his own platform having reconfigured to match the two new *turrets*. Turrets which began spitting out high-energy plasma beams at Grundy. The battery packs would only last a few minutes and the damage they started doing to the Endbringer was little more than CHIP damage, but it was *something*. Slowly whittling away at his body with wounds that at least wouldn't regenerate immediately.

The distraction of the turrets coming online bought Star Knight a bit of space to attempt something else, having realized her starbolts just didn't have enough penetration. Instead, she pulled the paired swords from her hip and channeled the same energy she normally used for the starbolts into them. After their failure against the magical weapons of the exo-suits last week, Alyssa had sat down with both Nico and Victor to make a new version of her blades. Something beyond just good-quality steel alloyed with a few minor super-metals.

The result was a much more durable set of short swords that had both a magically sharp edge...and could *channel* the energy that made up her starbolts. Since *all* of her powers were, in fact, actually a single power, that energy was effectively a form of magic-adjacent stellar fire. The *heat* and *energy* nature of it was important in this case, since it being magically-adjacent was actually a downside against Grundy.

Thankfully, in this form, like in her starbolts, it wasn't magic-like enough to run into his extra resistance. Something that was proven as, when the Endbringer turned to lumber toward the overpass and the turrets, Alyssa zipped in and plunged both of them into the back of his left knee as hard as she could. For a moment, his incredibly durability *resisted*...

Then, finally, she did *serious* damage to the Endbringer as they penetrated all the way to the hilt and Grundy faltered. Seeking to maximize the damage, she risked staying close long enough to force more power into the blades, igniting them *inside* the Endbringer, doing enough damage that he actually fell to one knee with a stumble. Though that fall ripped him away from her swords, Star Knight barely managing to hold onto them so they didn't end up stuck in him.

Finally feeling like she'd done *something*, she cheered as Laserdream followed up with a massive beam to Grundy's face. The beam was attack she'd obviously been building up too, rather than a quick attack, and the Endbringer *howled*. Two more turrets came online seconds later, adding their fire and chipping away more at the monster's health...but objectively they still hadn't *really* made all that much progress towards disrupting him.

Something which changed seconds later as Gloom finally finished her chant.

A massive circle of magic lifted up from the overpass, spun wildly, then shot out a sickly-purple stream of magic that hit the kneeling Endbringer in the chest. This time, Grundy's scream wasn't a howl of rage, but of *pain*, as the disruption spell Nico had been working on tried to unmake the magic holding him together. It wasn't actually strong enough to do that so fully...but it *did* weaken him dramatically for long seconds.

Long seconds which Star Knight and Laserdream took full advantage of.

When she struck Grundy with her glowing blades this time, it was with intent to carve off big chunks of him. With the magic holding him together critically weakened, that action *worked*, the chunks of flesh she carved away dissolving into a gooey mess of inert swamp-mud. Laserdream focused her beam, panting but forcing more power out as she carved into the same shoulder that Alyssa was hacking at the back of. Between the two of them...Grundy's entire right arm came off at the shoulder.

Unfortunately, that was as far as they got before the disruption magic lost to the magic of the Green that had animated Grundy. His knee had apparently healed enough that he surged to his feet and punched out with his remaining arm at Laserdream a moment later, howling in rage and pain. She yelped, barely getting a shield up in time, weakened from the amount of power she'd already output in such a short time. The shield kept her from dying, but she was thrown well away from the fight.

Star Knight herself had to pull back a moment later as Grundy lit up with more green glow and more flying golems grew out of the mass of sliced-off plant-tentacles from earlier. Growling as she was forced abruptly into a dogfight with two dozen mutant bat-golems, she couldn't do anything as Grundy surged toward the overpass. What limited intelligence the Endbringer possessed had clearly, correctly, identified Gloom as the most serious threat. Ignoring the fire of the now *eight* turrets that had been set up, the Endbringer slammed his remaining fist down on the overpass, which was barely chest-high for him.

Thankfully, Gloom and Cyborg had already been moving, having known from the start that the disruption attempt would cause him to prioritize Gloom. She'd been drained by activating the spell, but Cyborg had turned his own platform on 'auto' and grabbed her, carrying her to the other side of the overpass. By the time Grundy struck out at them, Gloom had recovered just enough to get them both airborne on the Staff of One, carrying them clear. Cyborg immediately had to shift one arm to his sonic cannon to shoot down some of the flyer swarm zeroing in on them, but they at least hadn't been turned into jam.

Taking advantage of Grundy ignoring her and having cleared most of the flyers after *her*, Alyssa grimaced and used the distance to *accelerate* to just under supersonic speed, swords blazing with channeled power in front of her. Doing so allowed her to hammer into Grundy's back, forcing him to fold partially over the overpass, and buried the swords in his *spine*. Yet it also bruised and winded her. She pulled away to recover...

She was nearly blinded a moment later as *lightning* came down hard on the half-folded form of the Endbringer. Thankfully, her eyes were *built different*, compared to a human's, able to adjust easily to flashes of light. Which meant she got to see *more fuck-*

off-huge bolts of lightning raining down from on high. Just as importantly, she spotted the *who* that was doing it.

Storm had arrived and brought her namesake with her, massive thunder clouds rolling in and boosting the damage she was laying out.

Better yet, she wasn't alone. A beam of red sliced into the Endbringer as Cyclops fired...and a moment later the *earth itself* erupted as Magma drew up *her* namesake from the Earth's mantle. The X-men had arrived, the infamous Blackbird hovering in the background after having dropped them. Sure, only three of their core team were here, but *these three in particular* might as well have been handpicked to counter Grundy specifically.

Grinning hugely, Star Knight built up power and began launching a stream of the most overcharged starbolts she could manage, deliberately targeting places where Cyclops had managed to gouge into the Endbringer with his eye blasts. Dickish as at least *some* versions of the man might be (she honestly had no idea about this one), Cyclops was *competent*, and immediately realized what she was doing. He shifted to opening rents in flesh, letting her follow behind to bring the heat, even as Storm and Magma continued to rip into Grundy from up high and down low respectively.

Despite how tough the Endbringer was, it was over in under five minutes, the construct that was his body unable to hold together under the assault of so much of his weakness. His entire body returning to the swamp-sludge that made him signaled that this particular incursion by the Green was over, and Alyssa sighed in relief. This had ended *far* better than she'd feared, what with an Overcharged Grundy appearing. Better yet, she *knew* they'd accounted well for themselves, seriously wounding him before anyone else showed up.

She was also *seriously fucking glad* the X-men had shown when they did, though. She was pretty sure she'd been the only one with much left in the tank when their trio of fellow heroes arrive...

Chapter 27: Aftermath

"So, shwarma was a bad plan. We can agree this was a bad plan, right?"

Almost everyone nodded at Victor's dry observation...accept Talia.

"I actually sort of like it? But then, Storm introduced us to a lot of exotic African and Middle Eastern food. This reminds me of some of it."

Talia snorted as everyone else at the table looked at each other, then transferred their uneaten shwarma to her, all at the same time and without a word. Keeping her face as straight as possible, Alyssa looked at the others again.

“Tacos?”

Victor perked up at the suggestion.

“I was gonna say pizza, but it *is* Tuesday.”

Crystal nodded next to him, intoning her bit with the air of solemn ritual.

“Taco Tuesday should always be respected. We were fools to do otherwise.”

Without another word, five of the six at the table of the shawarma restaurant stood. Talia rolled her eyes, grabbed one last shawarma from her now over-full plate of them, and joined them.

“Fine, fine. We can get tacos. Just to satisfy all of you barbarians with uncultured palates.”

Alyssa dropped payment, with a large tip, for the restaurant on the way out. She was sure it was perfectly fine shawarma, and they’d been good hosts. It wasn’t their fault that shawarma sucked. Maybe the tip would help fund an expansion to their menu...

... ..

It was two days after dealing with Grundy, one day after Alyssa’s discovery that shawarma was not, in fact, the best food for after-fight partying (The Avengers had lied to her! On a movie screen! In a past life!), when the team came back together. After getting *tacos* to *properly* decompress with, they’d mostly split up to unwind in their own ways.

Crystal and Victor had gone on a date, their third so far. Crystal *had*, in fact, been serious on her first day. Though the two of them didn’t seem *serious* yet, as it were. Nico and Talia had wondered off together, though Alyssa didn’t *think* that had been a date, despite spotting some indications Nico might have wanted it to be. Meanwhile, she and Dinah had stuck together, with the native Gothamite showing Alyssa around to a lot of important places in the city. Both important to locals, and the handful she knew about that were important for *heroes* to know about.

Alyssa wasn’t entirely sure if *that* had been a date either, in retrospect. It had *sort of* felt like one, with Dinah giving off an air of a bit more interest than just friends. But if it could be counted as a date, it was a very low key one that neither of them had called as such. Alyssa still wasn’t sure the blonde was *interested*, or just...well...*curious* about *certain*

things still. Her empathy had been surprisingly unhelpful, making her think maybe *Dinah* wasn't sure yet either.

Ah well, she'd known 'she'd' signed up for a bit of a complication with her choices. Maybe something would come of it, or maybe it wouldn't. Which didn't even consider the continued glances from Talia.

Not the point at the moment, anyway.

"Alright, team. As I've already said several times but *bears repeating?* *We did awesome* against Grundy. Nor is my opinion an isolated one, as I'm sure you're well aware by now."

To match her statement, Alyssa flicked an entire series of articles and video clips up on the wall display of their meeting room. The room, one which they'd added in the expansion, was far more comfy than the clinical conference room some might have used. Instead of sterile tables and ergonomic office chairs, it had couches and comfy lounge chairs on three sides. All of them conveniently arranged so that they had good views of both a single long wall and a central sunken area for a holo-display.

At the moment, it was the wall in use, showing those articles and video clips. Not just from local Gotham newspapers and news stations, but from over a dozen national and international sources. Solomon Grundy might have been one of the weakest Endbringers around, but he was *still* an Endbringer. More, the version they'd fought was an Overcharged version that would rank significantly higher, and it was a *New Hero Team* that had kept the damages and casualties among the lowest ever recorded from any Endbringer.

There were other considerations too, of course. Overwatch, or at least Alyssa as Star Knight, had brought in multiple Internationally Wanted criminals, including one that had been on *Shield's* Top Ten Most Wanted list. Add in the presence of three members of the current generation Main Team of the X-men, and you had something of a perfect storm for the media. One which was doing *amazing* things for Overwatch's nascent reputation.

Of course, that was a problem as much as it was an asset.

"We need to go over our battle cams from the fight, of course. We're still *new*, so expecting all of us to have done perfectly would be stupid. We'll likely spot more than a few places we could improve, which we absolute *should* and *will* do. Yet, we have a bit of a more immediate issue to tackle first."

Victor and Dinah looked surprised by that comment. Talia, Crystal, and Nico did not. Which made complete sense, given those three had more experience. Considerably more with the world of Superheroes and Villains than Alyssa did, in fact. Alyssa, thankfully, had

enough of an understanding from Major Kusanagi's memories to have clued into the problem in question. Still, knowing she wasn't the most experienced in the room, she jabbed a finger at Talia, who caught her intent and spoke up.

"We painted a giant target on ourselves. Far more so than all of our previous raids combined. Particularly for the Costumed Crowd. We've mostly been leaving that side of things to the Bats, but they won't be able to leave us alone now that we've done something so *blatantly* 'Super.'"

Understanding flickered to life in Victor and Dinah's eyes, even as Crystal spoke up to add her two cents.

"The gangs will feel the need to double down too. We were already starting so seriously hurt criminal operations in the city. A flex of power like this will do us a fantastic amount of good with the common man...but that's *bad for business* for the crime families. If the common Dick and Harry on the street suddenly starts believing they might be able to get away with telling mob enforcers 'no?' That's *trouble* and *disruption* for things like protection rackets. They'll be feeling the pressure to make it clear we can't stop them everywhere. The only reason it hasn't kicked off yet is the Truce."

Alyssa nodded at that. She'd been surprised to discover that Endbringer Truces were a *thing* in this reality. They weren't an *official* thing like they might have been in Worm, but they *did* exist, though at a generally much smaller scale. At least at the local and regional levels, the vast majority of organized crime elements, and a significant number of Metas, honored a loose truce not to cause trouble during or immediately after an Endbringer attack. Some, though not all, would even participate in defense against such and generally weren't chased by the 'Hero' side immediately afterward if they did so.

It was neither official, nor universal, but it *was* a thing. Complete psychopaths or anarchists, like the Joker had been, didn't obey it of course. The same for individuals like Carnage, Anton Arcane, or Klarion the Witch Boy, who were all still around and active. That very fact, however, was part of the reason even other villains were rarely willing to work with such individuals. Very few villains were in it for the sake of mindless destruction. It was more than a little difficult to take satisfaction in ruling over a city or world that had been rendered a wasteland with no one living in it, and the villains knew it.

The majority of Gotham's *current* costumed villain roster, as well as all of the major crime families, *did* honor the Truce. Which is why the city had been fairly calm for the last two days. Of course, the downside to so little damage having been done was that it likely wouldn't last much longer. The Truce existed as much to facilitate cleanup and recovery operations as it did for any other reason, and very little of that had been needed.

“Dinah, you’re the only one of us local. Any opinion on who is most likely to break the Truce first and how?”

Alyssa’s question didn’t *quite* catch Dinah off guard. From the start, the entire team had leaned on her for local knowledge. Something which Alyssa knew had legitimately helped her feel like she belonged on the team, despite potentially being the weakest member of it. Now, she frowned and clearly considered for long moments, everyone more than willing to let her think as long as required. Thankfully, it only took her a minute or so to sort out her thoughts.

“Normally, it would have been Black Mask and the False Facers. They would barely have honored the Truce in the most token manner, and broken it almost immediately after. With them out of the way? Two Face is the most likely, no question. Scarface and Mad Hatter would both be even more likely on the costumed side, but both are currently in Arkham. Though someone might want to check on that.”

Everyone grimaced at that. Grundy battles were fairly infamous for being the time which escapes from Arkham and Blackgate were the most common, what with all the heroes distracted. *Hopefully*, Batman had already checked, but Alyssa made a note they should follow up on that idea with the new Commissioner, since they had a line to her.

“A few of the lesser villains, like Killer Moth or Vermin, are probably the next likely to pop-up. Killer Moth, in particular, might try targeting *us* to increase his credibility. Same with some of the ‘annoyance’ villains, like Riddler or Whirlwind.”

There were groans at the mention of the last two. Riddler was annoyingly competent but not *violent* for the most part, which made the locals file him as an ‘annoyance’ in comparison to most of the Gotham threats. Whirlwind was the opposite. Violent, but fairly incompetent, easily handled by any of the vigilantes in Gotham and a bit of a joke overall. That he might take a stab at them to increase his credibility was entirely in character. Even though she’d groaned right along with the others, Alyssa cleared her throat and got them back on task.

“That’s the costumed crowd side. What about on the organized crime side?”

Dinah hummed for a few moments, then nodded.

“Sofia Flacone. She’s much more of an erratic sociopath than the other crime family heads. Aside from her...probably Mr. Bone since we screwed up his efforts to get White Tiger. Those two or the foreign interests. You *did* start out by targeting those, and the Neon Dragons at least had some rumored links to The Mandarin. He might not be content letting their loss go.”

Ugh. Unfortunately, Alyssa had to confirm that. She'd not only found, but actively *manipulated* that link with false orders to pull off her raid. When she said as much, Dinah grimaced.

“Definitely add him to the list of potential future problems then. Assuming he figures out what you did, he won't let it go, if I have a read on his mentality right. Though don't quote me on that, he's not someone I've looked into in depth.”

Hmm. That was a thought. If Alyssa remembered right, one or more versions of Dinah would go on to become a psychologist. It might be good to encourage that idea, and maybe see if she could profile criminals for them? For that matter, what had happened to Harley Quinn? Or, more accurately, Harleen Quinzel. Alyssa hadn't seen any mention of 'Harley' when she'd looked up what happened to the Joker. Several versions of Harley had proven to be even better at profiling villains than *Batman*, so tracking her down might be worthwhile.

“Right. Well then, let's take a look at what we have on Two Face and Sofia Falcone first. Depending on how fast we can cover them, we might consider a few others as well. We'll also reach out to Commissioner Burns and find out if anyone escaped Blackgate or Arkham during the chaos...”

While no one exactly looked *thrilled* about the idea of doing their collective homework, Alyssa was gratified that no one protested. Hopefully, they could stay ahead of the next wave of problems.

Chapter 28: Viewpoints

Barbara floated in the middle of the Net space she performed her work as Oracle from. She was used to spending long stretches of time here, diving the Deep Net where Bruce couldn't go due to lacking the right cyberware. She was good at it, likely one of the best if she was forced to be honest about it, but today she found herself...distracted. Not that she hadn't gotten a fair bit of work done. She'd even managed to update the gang map she pushed out to select groups in Gotham for distribution.

The Truce had given the gangs a few days to settle from the recent upheavals and, while none of them had broken said Truce yet, they *had* used that time to spread out a bit into now-uncontested territories. There would be trouble over that once the truce caused by Grundy broke, and the map was likely to be outdated quickly as a result. But that was all the more reason to have updated it, since she'd highlighted the most likely areas of conflict for people to avoid.

Yet, despite a heavier-than-usual workload, Barbara found herself unable to lock in and focus as well as she normally could. She honestly wished she *didn't* know the cause of it, but she was entirely too self-honest for that. She knew *exactly* what the cause of her current distraction was.

Overwatch.

Bruce was, entirely too predictably, in a *mood*. He had been, really, since a full fledged Hero Team popped up in Gotham. Star Knight had been bad enough, to Bruce's mind, but Overwatch? Overwatch was a *solid* team. Six core members, three of which were some degree of genuinely experienced. Talia Wagner had been one thing, someone they already knew was floating around Gotham. But Crystal Pelham and Nico Minrou? Neither had been remotely on their radar, and their recruitment showed that Star Knight had been putting in serious effort to form up a team from the start. They were too well chosen to cover gaps for it to be anything but calculated.

Both of them were 'veterans,' with Pelham having been on a family team and Minrou having jumped around the various X-teams as magical support. Pelham had an actual *degree* in Public Relations, and Minrou represented magical knowledge that anyone who wanted to succeed at tackling Gotham was going to need. Bruce regularly reached out to contacts on the magical side of things, most frequently Zatanna but not *only* her, to help them cover that gap in their own capabilities.

Now the new team had brought in a dedicated expert to do the same thing.

Victor Stone and Black Canary weren't as notable in that respect, though were still noteworthy overall. Star Knight was clearly tech-capable herself, but Cyborg clearly brought a different sort of tech with him given the turrets seen in the Endbringer attack. Black Canary, meanwhile, was the token local. Both extremely useful, but not nearly as telling about the effort the group had put into covering core needs for a Gotham team. Taken altogether, at least on paper, Overwatch was exactly the sort of group that should have a *legitimate* chance of being able to help Gotham.

Doubly so after the showing they'd given against an Overcharged Grundy.

Barbara, Bruce, and Selina had linked up together and managed to take care of the four plant golems at the Trigate Bridge. Those hadn't gone down *easy*, and by the time they'd taken them out and headed for the main fight...they'd arrived just in time to see the X-men's Blackbird swoop in overhead. Bruce had, with grinding teeth, outright called them off as soon as Storm had started raining down lightning.

Despite having *some* countermeasures to *delay* a Grundy incursion, he'd known that they couldn't really add anything to the fight at that point. Not without breaking out the Batplane and unloading missiles on him. Something which they hadn't done from the start as they'd expected Grundy to be *in the city* before they could do so. The Endbringer was normally extremely hard to divert from his straight-line approach. Though they were now at least *aware* that sonic attacks apparently annoyed him enough to draw him off.

Because of the Canary Cry, of course.

Another reason for Bruce to be annoyed, given he'd never realized that was the case.

She was well aware that her adoptive father had expected Star Knight to cause a mess. To trip, fall, and fuck up all his efforts in Gotham. Being presented with a well-rounded, powerful team, one which had clearly done their research and covered their bases? Suddenly, Bruce was being forced to confront the idea that this new interloper might actually be *better equipped* than him to handle Gotham. Instead of someone who was rushing in foolishly, he was confronted with a team that could both take out major organized crime groups *and* stall out Solomon Grundy long enough for help to arrive.

Honestly, Barbara personally suspected the group could outright defeat a normal Grundy incursion. They'd done serious damage to even an Overcharged iteration, after all. Hell, she wasn't entirely convinced that they couldn't have put down the version they'd actually fought. It was a bit dubious, as some of them had obviously been flagging, but their heavy hitter hadn't seemed even slightly winded.

All of which meant that Barbara was floating in her little corner of the Net, wondering to herself if staying on with Bruce was genuinely the right move. Was Bruce still the best hope for Gotham? Or was this new team the way forward? If the second was true...then what, exactly, did that mean for her? Bruce would never consider joining someone else. She wasn't even sure he could bring himself to *work* with them.

Yet Barbara herself wasn't as much of a loner as Dick had been, let alone her adoptive father. She *could* work with others and often did so quite well, even outright preferring not to take a leadership position. Which meant she could *really* help Overwatch, by providing them the massive amount of intel and experience she had with Gotham. But would doing that be a betrayal of Bruce and all that he had done for her?

As she floated there in cyberspace, worrying and considering, Barbara hated that there didn't seem to be any clear answers to those questions...

... ..

“So tell me Ororo, you’ve met Star Knight twice now. Have you formed an opinion of her yet?”

The polite question came from Professor Charles Xavier, of course. Though Alyssa, had she been present, might have experienced a moment of dissonance as the man *walked* calmly from the side bar where he’d been making tea, giving the cup he’d prepared to Storm. The moment would have passed quickly, once she’d mentally rebooted and properly considered the differences she was increasingly adapting to.

The advanced cybernetics of this reality meant the sort of damage he’d taken originally was unlikely to have resulted in leaving Xavier wheelchair bound. Not to mention he’d had more than one healer on various X-men team rosters over the years. It would have been stranger to find him *uncured* than remaining the way she still instinctively thought of him.

Alyssa was absent of course, though her heroic persona was the subject at hand. A subject Ororo addressed once she’d taken a sip of the tea. Her favorite blend, of course. She was one of Charles’s most trusted instructors and he always kept it at hand just for her. He also, she knew, valued her input and ability to read people. Better, in some ways, than he could. He might be a psychologist and a telepath, but it was Ororo who had a better grasp of the *social* aspects of humanity, rather than the purely mental. The result of having lived such a wildly diverse life, from thief on the streets of Cairo, to ‘goddess’ on the plains of Africa. Knowing he’d take her input seriously, she gave her response careful consideration.

“She comes across as older than her apparent years. Possibly literally, since we don’t know how her powers work. That, however, is almost secondary to the odd dissonance between her skillset and visible experience. She acts *incredibly* well trained, yet I’ve noticed several indicators I’d expect to see in genuinely new heroines, rather than the veteran her experience implies she is.”

Xavier, who had taken the seat across from her, considered her response with a furrowed brow.

“A contradiction, to be sure. Do you think her duplicitous? A body snatcher of some sort, perhaps?”

Ororo instantly shook her head in the negative.

“No. To be honest, my impression of her on a personal level was entirely positive. More to the point, I checked with Talia’s mother to see if she knew anything, and Wanda admitted that her daughter had called her for a bit of advice. Apparently, Talia was caught

off guard by the contradiction as well, and found herself having to help Star Knight through an emotional crash. Specifically, a guilt crash after the ambush against her by gang elements, where a pair of civilian deaths occurred.”

Xavier’s expression smoothed out as he processed that.

“Genuinely new to heroics, or even other forms of violence then. Yet with a diverse power and skillset. An odd mixture, but I can see how it could have occurred. Particularly as I’m quite certain she is a telepath of moderate strength.”

Orooro blinked.

“She is? How on...Charles you didn’t try to...?”

Thankfully for Orooro’s peace of mind, her friend and mentor immediately shook his head.

“Of course I didn’t try to read her mind without more cause. No, in this case it was merely a matter that she wasn’t particularly hiding her psychic signature during the recent battle. Whatever she is, she has enough innate resistance to telepathy that I wouldn’t have noticed without focusing in her general area with Cerebro. But once I did, to scout out the situation with Grundy, it was obvious. I don’t believe she’s particularly strong, but I’d be surprised if she isn’t at least a bit stronger than Talia.”

A sudden noise of understanding came from Orooro as she put two and two together.

“Ah, so that’s why you jumped to the possibility of a body snatcher. It wouldn’t be the first time a physic entity possessed someone with powers.”

Xavier nodded, but also waved the idea away a moment later.

“True, and it was a thought, but not a very good one. Anyone that could overcome the innate resistance I noticed would also have the skill to hide their signature. It’s why I didn’t investigate more completely. It merely sprang back to mind when you mentioned the odd dichotomy she exhibits. To be honest, I’d have expected Ms. Minoru to notice any sort of possession as well, so it was barely a passing possibility.”

Orooro nodded acknowledgement, and Xavier shifted the subject.

“What about the team as a whole then? They did quite well against their first Endbringer, and you are, of course, familiar with Talia and Ms. Minoru.”

A small grin spread on Orooro’s face, surprising Charles.

“As a team, they seem to work well together. Their *team dynamics* might prove interesting, though. Ms. Pelham and Mr. Stone are clearly dating, and *both* Talia and Ms. Drake seem to be interested in Star Knight, something I don’t think Star Knight is quite aware of. Or perhaps she is? You did say she’s a telepath, after all. That Ms. Minoru appears to be interested in Talia in turn only makes things more interesting yet.”

Xaiver sighed. A sound that came from the depths of his soul. As a man who’d overseen *multiple* teams of teenagers, he was *thoroughly aware* of the disaster such things could sometimes bring. Unfortunately, he was also aware that his companion delighted in watching it all unfold, only ever stepping in if there was a risk of the fallout causing harm to team cohesion. Even then, it was often to nudge her favorite combinations in healthier directions.

“I take it you aren’t going to protest if I make you our point of contact with them, then? With two affiliates on their team and the depth of the problems in Gotham, I feel extending an offer for open advice is warranted.”

Oro-ro’s grin became an outright *smirk* as she responded.

“Oh, I’d be positively delighted to help advise a new team. Even if they aren’t directly one of ours!”

Xavier sighed again, then willfully forced himself believe he wouldn’t regret that...

... ..

Commissioner Allison Burns sighed and let her head fall back as she slouched in her office chair, her hands coming up to rub her tired eyes. She hadn’t exactly been working normal hours or getting proper amounts of sleep even *before* the local Endbringer, which was something she *hadn’t missed not having to deal with in Star City*, popped in for a visit. Now, she didn’t think she’d gotten more than six hours over the last three days and was basically functioning on energy drinks and willpower.

Coffee? Fuck coffee. That shit wasn’t strong enough. Not even the unholy sludge the Gotham Nightshift lived off of. Energy drinks were the way. Possibly mixed with alcohol if the job kept slamming her with one thing after another. A major shortage of manpower, coupled with a major power vacuum in the underworld, followed by the local Endbringer springing up.

Not that she wasn’t *incredibly* grateful to Overwatch at the moment, mind you.

Sure, they might have caused the first two problems, but in doing so they’d also given the GCPD a *legitimate* chance of cleaning itself up into a functioning police

department. Then, of course, they'd performed a near-miracle encore by keeping a 'Roided up Solomon Grundy *out of the city entirely*. Sure, the overpass and highway around it were royally fucked, but since it wasn't in the city, that was *the state of New Jersey's* problem. Hell, even the *state* wasn't bitching, since they'd normally have needed to shell out tens of millions or billions in relief aid.

The \$17 million that was the *total* estimated damage caused by Grundy this time was a *pittance*. Even by *normal* Grundy standards. The last time an Overcharge version of the Endbringer had popped up, he'd caused something like four and a half *billion* in the sort of damages to infrastructure that either the State or City was required to cover. No, the state was pleased, the Feds were pleased, even the damn *mayor* was reluctantly pleased, given the alternative.

That didn't mean the whole thing hadn't caused chaos that her department had to deal with, though.

While the 'Endbringer Truce' was a thing generally kept to by the majority of the Costumed Crowd and the *organized* crime families, the same could *not* be said for regular opportunists. Some assholes *always* came out of the woodwork and sewer lids to try their hand at looting or general B&E during Endbringer attacks. Which, with the GCPD *also* charged with pushing people to get to shelter and evacuate any areas the Endbringer might threaten, played *hell* on their manpower.

Manpower they honestly didn't have to spare at the moment, despite her best efforts to both accelerate training and lure in transfers from other cities. Very few people *wanted* to come to Gotham, cops even less than most. As for trainees...half of them were gang plants that had to be weeded out. Honestly, if such hadn't been so common and so *ignored*, Burns herself may never have made it through the academy. Restructuring it to *stop* that willful ignorance was its own special nightmare.

Well, at least Overwatch was proving itself.

She just hoped they and the Bats could handle the upswing in violent lunatics that were going to be swinging for them the moment the Truce broke. Grimacing at that thought, she forced herself to sit back up and take another look at the documents she'd been reading. Reports, as it happened, of several *out of town* problems making their way into or towards Gotham.

When it rained, it poured, and the various groups out there that liked picking fights with new Heroes had latched onto the lightning rod Overwatch had boldly raised in her city. Making a note to forward all the data they had to both Oracle and Overwatch, Allison

pushed the papers away to focus on more immediate local issues. Hopefully, by the time the dust settled, there would still be a city left to be Commissioner of...

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