**Infringement 16.13**

I woke up in a white cell.

There was a toilet to the side, and I was lying on a raised section of floor, a thin cloth mattress barely providing any comfort. The door was visible only as an outline, and a dark square was either a piece of one-way glass, or a screen.

Interestingly, I was still in my costume, which made *no* sense, right up until I realized a peculiarity of how I’d made it.

Namely, *it couldn’t be removed.*

It was a single piece, taken on and off by transforming itself, but that also meant it had no seams, no way to remove it without destroying it, and, as dimensional fabric pretending to be clothing, *good luck doing that.*

There *was* something latched around my ankle though, something blocky, almost looking like a 1980’s version of an ankle monitor, but overdone, like something from the Alien franchise. The original ones, not the prequels which somehow had better tech for no good reason.

It took me a moment before I realized that my main three powers, that is *Vejovis’* three powers, were all suppressed. I couldn’t fly, forced to feel the earth’s full gravity for the first time in over a month. I couldn’t feel the insects around me, not just not paying attention, but *literally* unable to perceive them. I assumed I couldn’t heal, but, given that was a power that only worked on *other* people, I couldn’t tell.

My *sixteen* other powers? From Aerokinesis, to Metal Projection, to Mineral Manipulation, to Tree Growth & Control, to Acoustokinesis, to everything else?

Working *just* fine.

I stood, and started to look around my new abode, only to notice that I had a *very* thin, and nearly invisible, bit of thread looped around my waist. It led directly into the door, and, giving it a tug, it seemed to be tied to something. Whatever it was, it was strong, and felt like it might be some kind of metal.

Hookwolf’s Metal Creation created metal I could separate out from myself, was the reverse also true? I shook my head, now *not* being the time to start to experiment, especially with powers I *wasn’t supposed to have*.

Before I could do more than wonder, I felt my body seize up again, and understood the purpose of the thread as I hit the ground, curled up. It let touch-based powers affect me without having to come in. On one hand, that was actually *really* smart, on the other, I was going to punch whoever did this. *Repeatedly.*

I waited there, expecting someone to come in. But no one did. For what felt like hours.

I jumped, or I would’ve if I could move, when a familiar voice sounded in my ear. “*Vejovis, are you there?*”

I tried to talk, but could only grunt, my jaw clenched tight and my tongue pressing against the roof of my mouth. However, I created a sound, and with *that* I could respond.

Capturing that with Acoustokinesis, I directed it back towards the ear that still held my commpiece, warping and twisting it, trying to communicate. “YeEEEeesss. SowwWyy. nnnnnnnnOOOO mmOOOOvvv. Haawk wifff peresss.”

There was a moment of silence. “*You are paralyzed and are using powers to talk?*”

My second attempt of “YeEess,” was a bit better.

“*You continue to surprise,*” my lawyer replied with his normal dry wit. “Y*ou’ve been taken to the East-North-East PRT headquarters. Panacea has been taken somewhere else, an unofficial holding area.*”

“Okaaaayy,” I replied, taking the last bit of sound from his own response and manipulating it into my own. “Mmmyyy coOosstuummme baAaAad. TAaak ssssseeeeemmm oooffffff.”

“*The costumes you create have been compromised?*” he asked, which I confirmed with a firmer “YEes.” “*I’ll spread the word.*”

“WiIll fffuull baak inn hhoowwrr,” I communicated, *starting* to get a handle on it.

“Yo*u’ll dismiss them in an hour? I’ll check in with the others to make sure they aren’t caught naked,*” he reassured me, somehow able to understand the near gibberish my clumsy attempts were creating. *I really don’t pay that man enough,* I thought.

“*They’re trying to jam communications, but the Tinker power I have makes it easy to punch through. It’s amusing,*” he mused, “*I know how to repair it because I built it, and because of my power to repair Tinkertech, and it’s two completely different methods. I’ll contact you again in an hour when everyone’s clear.*”

“Thaank yoou,” I replied, and was left alone once more. With nothing better to do, I played around with sound, making sure to keep it around my head, not letting any of it escape.

I waited, and waited, *and waited,* and wondered if something had happened. My body finally relaxed, and I picked myself up off the ground, lying back on the bed. I started to get comfortable, only for my sore muscles, having been tense for god knew how long to painfully cramp again, pulling me into that same fetal position.

Quinn got back to me, telling me everyone was ready, and I was able to clearly reply. Focusing, I dismissed every single costume except for mine. I overdid it slightly, uncovering my hands, quickly re-armoring them.

Following a whim, I tried to teleport out with Strider’s power, only to feel as if I’d jumped and slammed my head on the ceiling, pain bursting behind my eyes. Shifting gears I tried to use Mouse’s power, only for the same damn thing to happen as the door burst open and several PRT troopers rushed in, guns trained on me.

I just stared at them balefully, my eyes one of the few things unaffected, and, after quietly reporting in that I was re-armored, they filed out. One had a pistol with a wooden handle, and I tweaked it a little, growing a *tiny* amount. Not enough to do anything, not enough to control it by puppetting it, just enough to keep track of it.

I closed my eyes, tracking it, and using Mineral Manipulation to get an idea of where I was. It was underground, the hollow feeling telling me I was near the bottom of a pit, maybe another two or three floors below me, and six or seven upwards until I hit the ground floor.

It was a pitiful amount of intel compared to what I could gather with Taylor’s power, but it was a start.

I could also *feel* the sounds and the flow of air, but the information that provided was so esoteric, so *different* that it was effectively impossible to make heads or tails of.

Then again, all I had was time.

<AB>

So, I figured out I could read sounds from afar by replicating what I felt from afar within my own skull, but understanding the raw data to pick *what* to replicate out of all the noises around me was still *well* outside my capabilities. I also got a sense of the hallways from the movement of air, and while I had a *detailed* knowledge of the ventilation systems, I also couldn’t navigate them without either some heavy duty Space Warping, which would out me as a power copier as Vista was *in the base*, or without some way to shrink myself, so that wasn’t terribly useful.

Quinn checked in every few hours, which is how I knew I’d been there for over a *day* without so much as a peep. I had him trying to go through legal means to get me free because, as Quinn vehemently asserted, what was being done to me was *beyond* illegal.

The holding me without so much as saying a word, weirdly enough, *wasn’t*, but the repeated uses of power which, were it not for Peak Condition constantly healing me, would’ve left me a mess was legally considered torture, as of half a dozen court cases where heroes turned vigilantes had used them on captured villains to make them talk. Combined with the fact that it denied me the ability to use the bathroom, and I hadn’t been given anything to eat or drink, and it was the kind of case that Quinn would’ve *fought* to prosecute in his old job.

It was his confidence, as well as my direct command to try things legally, that was stopping Herb from assaulting the office head on and getting me out immediately. Glory Girl had come back, filled with rage at what her mother had done, and scared I’d kick her from the PD, and I’d had to reassure the poor girl that I, unlike *Brandish*, didn’t believe in that ‘sins of the father’ bullshit.

Even with that, though, I still had a *ton* of time, and, meditating, realized I had one minor slot free, and another about to unlock. Perusing the lists of powers, trying, and failing, to get a better understanding of their powers, I finally settled on a new one: *Golem Creation*

I’d actually waited until I was re-paralyzed before I slotted it. There was a five hour period where I was free of the effect, which I napped for, and then the effect started and I plugged it in, just in case I had a bad reaction.

Thankfully, I didn’t. If anything, the reaction was *good*, the power plugging in only for the Dryad Set (Metal Projection, Mineral Manipulation, and Tree Growth & Control) to all reach out and intertwine within it, helping it settle. I had *no* idea what it did, but I could feel the power ready to work, all I’d need to do is focus on a bit of material and summon one from it.

It was over twenty four hours from when I arrived, and during one of the few lulls between paralyzations, that the dark rectangle flickered with light, revealing itself to be a screen. On it was the image of a medium sized, but well-built older man. “James Tagg I presume?” I asked dryly.

“That’s *Director* Tagg to you, *Villain,*” the corrupt PRT Director sneered.

“Or what, Jamie. You’ll arrest me on trumped up charges?” I asked, working a sore shoulder. While I was healing, it still hurt to go through the repeated paralyzations, and I had to wonder just exactly what they thought would happen to a normal person under this kind of treatment.

Tagg’s expression darkend. “You’re not the only we have, Vejovis. Marquis’s daughter is with us as well. If you try something, *she’ll* be the one that suffers.”

I stood, glaring, “You *Bast-*” was as far as I got before I was reparalyzed, hitting the floor of the cell hard.

“You don’t seem to understand who holds the power here,” the man informed me spitefully. “We’ll try this again tomorrow, unless I have something better to do.”

I could hear the screen turn off, and, a moment later, Quinn asked, “*Should I continue trying things legally? That was almost certainly a bluff. Police are allowed to lie, though they’re not supposed to threaten. However this entire thing is, it’s. . . not how it’s supposed to be.*”

Taking the sound I twisted it, my emotions bleeding through to make the words harsh and almost metallic. “No. Keep trying. He won’t kill her. Too valuable. We’ll heal her. I’ll take it from his hide.”

<AB>

It was, in fact, *two days l*ater that something actually happened.

Two days without food

Two days without water

Two days without *anything*.

It wasn’t until Quinn asked about me using the toilet that I realized I hadn’t, *at all*, ever since I’d gotten here. I’d eaten, I’d drank, but it’d been all input and no output which was. . . *odd.* Maybe Peak Condition was metabolizing literally everything I consumed?

While I was a bit thirsty, and a bit hungry, it was ignorable. It’d been three days since I’d arrived, and I should be to the point that I’d been nearly dying of thirst, but I was only mildly annoyed.

I was tempted to contact Quinn and tell him to grab us, this entire thing having already crossed the Trunchbull Threshold, where if one accurately give an accounting of what happened it would likely be met with disbelief, the extent of the crimes by what should be an accountable authority figure rendering itself so beyond what most people would accept that it served as its own protection of the perpetrator if shared.

Even the constant paralyzation had faded to mere annoyance. My muscles, strained and rebuilding themselves over, and over, and over again had eventually been able to hold themselves for the full duration of the paralyzation without issue, and even when it was doubled up there was only mild discomfort afterwards, and then not even that.

As I’d laid there, curled up like a dead cockroach, my next slot unlocked itself. I’d originally been planning to pick up the Bonding FIelds I’d seen Terro use when I’d hunted him down during the roadtrip north. With it, I could’ve captured literally hundreds of people, if I wanted, able to actually have the capability to lock down the Merchants and do a more complete check as to how deep the Mastering had gone.

I hadn’t thought of it until I was looking over the powers, and I felt a small twinge of guilt at not having come up with it earlier, as I’d had the slot I’d used for Golem Creation open, but I was still the only one doing anything about the Merchants, and they were self-Mastering *junkies*, so it was *only* a twinge.

However, I held off, waiting to see what would happen. If I needed to tie down the PRT on my way out, it’d be a useful power.

But I couldn’t forget that they’d threatened Amelia.

And then they’d left me locked up for *days.*

When I gained the power of *Gouging Touch*, one of the dozens upon dozens I’d picked up during the Leviathan fight, it settled in peacefully, not interfering with the others. I could feel it, like a pair of gloves ready to be donned, but I waited, my body continuing to seize up in double sessions in futile attempt to hurt me.

It was near the end of one of those double sessions that the PRT burst into the room, heavily armed, and I readied an Hypersonic Disintegrator in case they opened fire. They didn’t, man-handling my paralyzed form, grunting at the weight of my metal-laced body and requiring four of them straining to carry me to a meeting room, tying my hands to the table.

As soon as the paralyzation ended, they shoved me down, pushing my hands, palm down, onto the *metal* surface, tying them down even tighter, doing the same to my legs, another metal rope around my waist.

I wondered what all this was for, and was a little surprised when I felt the doors open, and three people entered, their steps unlike that of the standard PRT troopers. I hadn’t been able to pull a Skitter, spying in on the entire complex, as I had no way to target my Acoustokinesis, having to instead pull up conversations at random. I knew the copier on B3 didn’t work, that Eddie and Bettie liked to have sex in the bathroom, and that Tagg liked his coffee with a single cream, no sugar, but *useful* intel was sparse.

Two of the three stopped, taking positions at the back wall, next to the two PRT troopers, while the third walked around the table, and I turned to see Tagg himself come and take a seat across from me, holding a hot cup of coffee.

He took his time, staring at me. I stared back. Waiting. Like I’d done for the *past three days*.

“Sorry,” he apologized, in a tone that said he was anything but. “Had to seal a few leaks. Surprised you haven’t sprung one,” he observed, taking a sniff. “Didn’t think your costume would have a catheter.”

Quinn explained quietly in my ear as I stared blankly. “*We’ve been trying to go public, but the PRT are denying they have you, and the media has been unusually unresponsive.*”

“So, Vejovis, here’s how this is going to work,” he told me, leaning forward. “I’m going to ask you some questions. You’re going to give me some answers. If not, we’ll have this discussion in a few more days. Understood?”

I nodded.

“Who owns the land the Brockton Bay ruins are on?” he questioned.

“Lawyer,” I replied.

He frowned. “I don’t think you understand your position here, *Villain*. You answer my questions, or you go back. Now, *who owns Brockton Bay?*”

“Not talking without my Lawyer,” I replied. “Or are we not even bothering to pretend to follow the law now?”

“*You* don’t get to talk to me about the *law*,” the PRT Director shot back.

I nodded, “You’re right. Want to know who can? *My lawyer*.”

He practically snarled, looking past me and nodding to someone. However, instead of being re-paralyzed, one of the troopers left, coming back with, of all the things, a glass of water. “It’s been brought to my attention you haven’t had anything to drink. Go ahead,” he prodded with faked kindness.

I looked at him, then the glass, then him, then the glass. How fucking dumb did he think I was? “And I’m going to drink this. . . *why?*” I supposed I was supposed to be nearly delirious with thirst at this point, but. . . *really?*

He glared at me, finally informing me, “Drink it, or we’ll make you drink it.”

I considered the seemingly innocuous glass, even as I could hear Quinn mutter, *“He did not just say that.”* I was immune to poisons, and acids, and likely bases as well, and even powers that used such things as vectors I could no-sell pretty easily, as evidenced by Snowball’s last stand, so I just shrugged, flexing my fingers slightly. “Can I have a straw?”

I was provided one, as Tagg stared at me suspiciously. It tasted like water, with a very slight aftertaste. Whatever the power was supposed to be, it didn’t activate, and I didn’t even feel the slightest bit of annoyance, well, of *unnatural* annoyance, so there was no Master power at work.

“Well, *that* hit the spot, so what the fuck did you just *make* me drink?” I requested, leaning back, the PRT officer taking away the empty glass and straw.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Tagg muttered, more to himself.

I rolled my eyes, “Yeah, drive me near insane with thirst, give me water laced with something, have me drink it. This is C-tier Villainy, dude,” I remarked, *done* with this bullshit. “So, what was it? Poison you only have the antidote to? Some kind of tracker? Truth Serum?” His eyes narrowed, ever so slightly, at the last one. “Fucking *really*? A *truth* Serum? You *do* know that taints literally *every* piece of evidence you get, making this *entire* thing useless, right?”

“This isn’t going to court,” Tagg informed me with a malicious smile. “At least none your lawyer will ever see. It’s also an amnesiac. As far as you’ll know, you never left your cell. Now tell me, who owns Brockton Bay?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, which was actually the truth, as I didn’t know if it was me, or Eclipse, or some shell company, or something else entirely. I did however, widen my eyes in outrage, as if I hadn’t meant to. “You *bastard!*”

He laughed, shaking his head. “You act like your untouchable, but you’re more vulnerable than anyone else. Did you know I used to be in charge of the Madison Quarantine Zone?” he asked, and I wondered what the fuck that had to do with anyone. “It’s why I was brought here. We had to shoot them, the ones who’d heard too much of the song. They’d *lost* something, they weren’t all there anymore. You know what I see when I look at you?”

“Someone being what you only pretend to be?” I asked, playing up the ‘Truth Serum’ aspect to fuck with this asshole.

He glared, then shook his head, smiling maliciously again. “No, I see the same thing. You aren’t whole, just like them. The worst of the victims are the ones with powers. They don’t stop, and they kill everyone in their way.”

“So your response to Mastering Victims is to *kill* them?” I asked, well aware that was my own response. The difference being that I was a *single person*, and they were the *United States Government*. I couldn’t capture, imprison, and try to help them, but they could, and had, apparently been doing this for *years.*

I wasn’t surprised.

“They’re already dead, they just don’t know it yet. There’s no way to fix them. I wonder, if we looked deep enough into your history, if we’d find you were exposed to the Simurgh too?” he asked.

I smiled, back, “You would.”

He paused, shocked, “You mean-”

“I mean you don’t give a shit about facts, so if you ‘looked’ for it, you’d find it regardless of proof,” I explained, flexing my fingers to provide the air-quotes. The fact that I’d seen her in person, and been unaffected, just made this entire thing that much more ironic.

He glared. “Have you been exposed to the Simurgh’s Cry?”

“Nope,” I said, popping the P. She’d been silent, though I knew that didn’t mean shit. Her reach was global, and she only ‘cried’ to announce she was there. If I didn’t know I was a giant blindspot to her, I’d wonder if she had a hand in *this* clusterfuck.

Tagg paused, taking a deep breath, and letting it out slowly, sipping his coffee. “You’re taking this well.”

“I am,” I agreed. The more I learned, about the kinds of people that were here, about how deep the rot had gone, the less I cared about moving carefully. I’d tried that, and it’d left me nearly dead a dozen times, Brockton Bay in ruins, and possibly even more hated than *Skitter* had been, given Tagg attitude, and the apparent lack of media attention.

Maybe it was time for a more. . . *direct* approach.

“*What are you doing in Brockton Bay!?*” The PRT leader demanded, snapping back to his previous demeanor, that of a drill sergeant barking orders.

“Rebuilding it. *Like I’ve said,*” I stressed. “Thing about truth serums, Jamie? They’re only a threat if you have hidden motives. I wonder what *you’d* say if you took a sip, you villainous piece of shit.”

He looked at me like I was stupid. “You’re wearing a *mask*, Villain. That means you’re hiding something. Tell me, who are you?”

I’d expected the question, so I just smiled. “I’m the bastard son of Alexandria and Jack Slash. My grandfather is scion, and my grandmother is *your* mother. *She’s kind of a whore*,” I whispered, before smiling brightly again. “So, *Uncle*, what else do you want to know?”

He stared at me for a long moment, his expression turning murderous. “It never affected you at all, did it?”

“What do *you* think, Uncle?” I smirked. “So are we going to talk about *all* the laws you just broke, thinking that getting away with it means you did nothing wrong? Because that is *literally* how criminals think. You know, *the people you’re supposed to be stopping?*”

“Fucking Tinkers,” he swore, looking past me. “Tell me the suppressor’s at least working?”

One of the PRT thugs stepped forward, kneeling down. “It is, sir,” the mook replied, stepping back to watch this incredibly illegal interrogation without another word.

Tagg sat back, taking a sip of his coffee. “Then we’re doing this the hard way.”

“Drugging and torturing me *wasn’t* the hard way?” I asked skeptically, even as I started to form my constructs with Aerokinesis. We were *well* beyond acceptable behavior, and quickly approaching something on par with the E88 or the Merchants, but a part of me was morbidly fascinated as to how *far* this would go.

“You have two options. Join up, or be Birdcaged. And before you think of escaping, with how you’ve gone after the Empire, there’s a good chance you won’t make it,” he informed me, barely bothering to veil the death threat.

I blinked. “I’m sorry, what the *fuck* makes you think I’d ever work with you assholes, even *before* you jumped me out of nowhere. What did you even arrest me for? It’s been days, and I *still* don’t know.”

“The murder of federal officers,” Tagg said simply.

Staring at him, I slowly disagreed, “I’m pretty sure I’d remember doing that.”

“A team was sent to recover the crystals in the Brockton Bay Quarantine Zone,” he informed me. “You killed them.”

“You. . . you *dumb motherfuckers,”* I swore. “I *told* you it was dangerous, and you sent people in? And how the fuck is that *my* fault?”

He snorted, “If an officer dies in the line of duty due to traps, it’s the responsibility of the landowner. That’s either you, or you’re abetting them. That’s if you didn’t just kill them yourself.”

“Do you even have a *shred* of proof?” I asked incredulously, the sheer illogical *gall* of that statement offending me.

“You have two choices. Join or die,” Tagg reiterated, ignoring my point completely. “As long as you cooperate, Marquis’ Daughter will be safe, but if not, her father had a lot of enemies. Even more than you do.”

I stared at him, anger sparking in a way it hadn’t before. “Where is she?”

“Not here. She’s been moved to a secure facility. That’s all you need to know,” he informed me with a smirk as he took another sip of coffee.

“You want my response?” I asked. “Go fuck yourself. Panacea’s too valuable an asset to threaten. You’d be lynched by the public before the week was out. Possibly *literally*.”

“I don’t think you understand,” Tagg repeated, arrogance oozing from every pore. “It wouldn’t be *us* that does it. It’d be the Elite. They’ve been sniffing around Brockton Bay, and this will give us everything we need to go after them. Like you said, whoever did that would be ‘lynched’?” he replied. “She’d still be dead, and so would you, but you don’t care about yourself, do you? Just like the Simurgh victims don’t.”

*“We have Lady Bug, Mouse, Break, Purity, and Break’s Cousin on standby outside Panacea’s location,”* Quinn informed me. *“They moved into position when you were removed from your cell.”*

I took hold of the last bit of sound, replying, *“Hit it. Get her back home safe. Weapons free. They’re willing to kill her.”*

*“Understood,”* was the entirety of his response.

“How the hell does a *Hero* organization account for blackmail, false flag operations, fucking *cold blooded murder of innocents, all of it?”* I demanded.

“You’re not innocent, and neither is she,” he shot back.

I looked around, “Not seeing a lot of fucking *proof*, Jamie, just a lot of accusations and *illegal threats.* Also, not answering my question. How is that heroic in the fucking *slightest?*”

“You’re going to lecture *me* about being heroic, with what *you’ve* done?” Tagg demanded, looking disgusted.

“Still not seeing how that answers my question,” I replied.

He glared, “We do what needs to be done. To protect the civilians from people like *you.*”

“Knock knock. Who’s there? *Not the answer to my fucking question,*” I told him. *”*How the hell do you call yourself *heroes?*” I repeated.

“The United States Government determines who’s a Hero,” the PRT Director shot back, “and who’s a Villain. Who helps, and who’s a *threat,* and *you’re a Villain* until ***I*** say otherwise! You’re guilty of dozens of crimes, and the only way you’re not going to be put into the ground, where you belong, is if you make yourself *useful.*”

“Are you even *listening* to yourself?” I demanded, looking to the other two capes, barely seeing them out of the corner of my eye. “Is *this* the kind of person you want to follow.”

The paralyzer spoke up, “He’s the one who’s stopping Villains like you.”

“The man *just* admitted that term means *whatever* he wants it to!” I objected, and she started to take a step forward, before stopping as Tagg shook his head, stepping back. I looked back at him. “*Fuck*, you’ve even got your own brainwashed lieutenants.”

Given they both were Vial Triggers, this had Cauldron’s fingerprints all over it. I still wasn’t sure if the spy had been then, wielding what had looked like an Abaddon Shard, but the two behind me were Eden-Enhanced through and through.

*“Got her,”* Quinn replied, and I focused on the man before me to not my relief show.

“Tell me, who was it that approached you?” I asked. “The woman in the Fedora? Alexandria? I don’t think *Eidolon* would lower himself to recruiting, but given I almost killed him the last time he tried to Master me, I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Tagg glared at me, but didn’t give the answer away this time, so I might’ve been completely off. “You’ve had your little tantrum, time to make a decision,” he announced.

“*What* decision?” I asked, incredulous. “The answer’s *no*, jackass.”

He laughed, and shook his head. “Of *course*. We’ll have this talk again in a day or two, and try again. You’ll break. Everyone does. But if you want to make it harder on yourself, that’s fine with me.”

Moving the hardened bits of air in place, and projecting the tiny bits of metal, I shook my head, calmly stating, “No.”

“No?” he asked, as if he didn’t understand what I was saying.

“No,” I repeated. “You’ve lost your bargaining chip. Panacea’s out. So here’s the *new* deal. You’re going to let me go. You’re going to stay out of Brockton Bay. You’re going to *never* get in my way again, and I will leave *you* alone as well, to go harass some *other* heroes you think are saving people wrong.”

“You think you’re walking away from this?” he asked, incredulously, putting the cup down to stare at me like I was insane. “You think if you somehow get away, that it’ll stop here? We know where you live. We know the members of your gang. We have hundreds of people to your, what, *eight?* You *aren’t* going to win this, *boy.*”

Sighing, I shook my head, locking everything into place. I *tried* to give him a chance. Hell, if he’d agreed I’d’ve probably kept my word and let him live, until he violated our agreement. However, James Tagg wasn’t even a Villain pretending to be a hero, the man was a mad dog. And he’d already told me *just* how he treated mad dogs.

One of the things I *did* learn with my random spying is that pretty much *everyone* knew I was here. The Wards were a mix of uncomfortable with it, not caring, and, in Clockblocker’s case, *fucking terrified.* I’d even heard him trying to object, only to be told, just like *I* was told by Alexandria, to sit down and shut up. The adult ‘heroes’ I didn’t have as much of a read on, but they’d all stood by and let it happen, passing the buck.

That made things, in all actuality, pretty easy to deal with. If they passed the buck again, not interfering, just like I’d asked Miss Militia not to, they would be treated as the noncombatants they were. If they fought me, they sided with Tagg, and he’d set the rules of engagement pretty clearly. ‘I was just following orders’ hadn’t been an excuse since the 1940’s, and, some dark point of me calmly pointed out, it’d be downright *rude* not to play the game the way he was insisting it be played.

“And this is how you operate,” I sighed. “Even the *Villains* at least *pretend* to follow the unwritten rules. You act like you’re untouchable, but you’re more vulnerable than anyone else,” I said, echoing his words.

Tagg looked past me at the paralyzer, and snapped, “Get him back to his cell.”

She tried to move, but her cocoon of air held her fast, her power not working on something that wasn’t directly connected to me.

Activating Gouging Touch, nothing seemed to change, but as I curled my fingers against the metal of the table, it parted as if it were nothing but air. “Funny thing about the way things like the unwritten rules work, *Jamie*,” I commented, both troopers raising their rifles towards my back, as he dived to the side,only for the bullets to hit the metal blockages I’d grown into their barrels, jamming them completely. “They’re for *your* defense as much as they are for *ours*.”

Pulling my hands back over my wrists, then down my sides, they didn’t affect my costume, either because it counted as ‘me’ or because of what it was bade of, but easily cut through my restraints. Turning, Dissipater, with his Impact Power Dampening, swung as hard as he could to punch me from behind, in what would’ve been a sucker punch, until I caught the blow.

Or I would’ve, but I still had Gouging Touch active.

His power, which diminished a Parahuman’s power in accordance with how hard he hit, barely brushed me, cutting off maybe a percent of my total power. There were a whole mess of rules to it, but I didn’t have the time to read them.

He barely brushed me, because, rather than impacting my hand hard enough to activate his power fully, my palm and fingers pushed through his flesh like it wasn’t even there, causing him to go down with a scream as his most of his right arm suddenly *ceased to exist*. Well, ceased to exist as anything more than jellied gore, except for a thin strip of flesh, devoid of any bone except his pinkie finger, hanging loosely as he bled all over everything except for me.

“Fun fact,” I said, as the other two PRT goons charged me, knives out. Twin spikes of metal lanced out of the floor, barely under my control, my power practically using itself, and caught them, piercing them through the chest and pinning them to the wall. A second pair of thin spikes pierced their helmets and went right through their skulls.

“Thank you for the assist, Dryad,” I commented to the air, *knowing* they were likely recording this, but not truly giving a shit. It didn’t matter what I did, *apparently*, as I was damned from the start. No matter how nice I *tried* to be, no matter what lines I *wouldn’t* cross, none of it mattered as I *wasn’t* in America, at least *my* America, and I’d been stupid to think I was.

No, I was in a reskinned Soviet Russia, where, if there was no evidence of your crimes, evidence would be found. Where if you didn’t attract official attention, you were safe, *unless* someone in power was having a bad day, or didn’t like the way you looked, or any number of things, and then it was a matter of if you were worth the effort of being framed, and refusing to lie down and follow the party line was a Cardinal Sin, a pride so great it could not be countenanced.

The only difference was that it wasn’t Party Affiliation that was the determining factor, but Parahuman capability and your degree of usefulness to the Cape-inati. Useful Villains could kill in broad daylight, ravage towns, or pull women off the street, rape their minds, and then rape their bodies. Ones that got in the way got taken down, with framejobs, Birdcaging, and even Kill Orders.

“As I was saying,” I said, turning to face Tagg, who’d produced a pistol from somewhere and fired directly for my face, a glowing blue hexagon appearing and stopping the shots. “Fun fact, the way this nation handles Parahumans *isn’t* like a legal system, where everyone agrees to it and follows common sense rules *or else*. No, it’s much closer to *international treaties*, where each side has conditions they need to uphold, and if *one* side stops doing so, the other side is under *no* obligation to either.”

I paused, “I suppose normal laws could work that way as well, only that the United States can escalate to the point that no single *unpowered* person could hope to win.” I shook my head as Tagg reloaded, firing now at several different parts on me, more glowing hexagons blocking his shots.

“No,” I said, dismissing the Projectile Protections. “Even the Geneva Convention only applies to the people who agreed to it when fighting each other, and is extended to other nations that follow it as a *courtesy*. No, it is not because of our agreements that we refuse to fight dirty even when the other side does, it’s because we can win regardless. But we don’t *have* to. ***I*** *don’t have to.*”

“I’ll see you dead,” Tagg snarled. “Your team dead. Your families and theirs *dead*, if you don’t get down on your knees and beg forgiveness.”

I looked at him, cocking my head, wondering if *he’d* been affected by the Simurgh somehow. I know he wasn’t there when she attacked. *I checked.* But his behavior was. . . *unhinged.* Then again, I remembered his behavior in the original timeline being just as bad, only he let Alexandria do the talking, without saying a word to reign her in as she casually committed murder, or at least was announcing she was in a way that Tagg had no way of knowing was a lie.

I turned my head to the paralyzer, who I now had at my mercy. I’d picked up *her* power as well, and *seen* what type of person she was, having been tortured by her for days. “Don’t worry,” I reassured her, “I won’t do what *you* did to *me*. It will be quick.”

With a snap of my fingers, I created a spark-sized blood red sun, which I arced over, as if it were thrown, even as I made a larger shell of air around her behind it. The intense heat touched the Air Prison, and set it ablaze, a muted explosion that I contained, barely, leaving nothing but ash behind, the splatter from the first explosion having instantly cooked, then burned, in that crimson ovoid inferno.

I looked back at Tagg, who was just glaring at me with a near insane hatred, and I just felt cold. I took no pleasure in this. Hell, I tried to *save* the PRT when I could. Lifting up a foot, I gestured to the ankle bracelet. “What even is this?”

“Two million dollars of uselessness,” he spat. “Didn’t stop your powers at all.”

“Oh, it did,” I commented genially, running Gouging fingers through it, causing it to spark and sizzle as I felt my Vejovis powers surge back into being. “You just *really* should’ve taken off my suit.

His eyes widened in realization. “Tinkertech.”

“It is a bitch, isn’t it?” I agreed, content to allow him, and whoever reviewed this later, their false conclusion. “Last question, PRT ENE Director Tagg,” I said, using his full title for the first time. “Would you *ever* stop, or would you just constantly attack me and mine when we have *committed no crime.* And I don’t mean whatever convoluted technicalities you come up with, I mean a *real* crime.”

“Your existence is a crime!” he spat, and I felt my eyebrows raise. I didn’t expect such a. . . *Piggot*-like answer. “That much power outside of control of the government is something that should never have been allowed to happen!” He yelled, the only reason he wasn’t physically attacking likely the fact that he knew he’d end up like his lackies. “You’ll die before you leave, and so will Panacea!”

“*Ah,*” I said, understanding. This was a man who, given his age, probably grew up in a world where the average person couldn’t stand up against the government, and things were, on a local level, seemingly peaceful. Then the monopoly on force was broken, and he *desperately* wanted it back, acting in such a way that showed *why* the monopoly of force could be a *very very* bad thing.

When I’d come here, in the fall of 2017, from a world without powers, corrupt police brutality was an issue. A fairly small one, all said and done, but still one that had been a growing problem, and had no signs of going away. However, here, with violence so common, and death so prevalent, the worst of those that’d break their oath and be protected by that ‘thin blue line’ in my universe got so, *so* much worse.

Once you added Cauldron pulling the strings, making sure reform *never* happened, and *nothing ever improved,* the better to incite Triggers, everything got *exponentially* worse.

I looked at the man, ***understanding*** him, ‘grokking’ him, to use that odd but useful concept, and shook my head sadly. “*Thank you*,” I told him, and I did mean it. He’d helped me understand things about Earth Bet that I was ignorant of. *Willingly* ignorant, if I was being honest. But ignoring a problem didn’t make it go away, and refusing to play the same game as everyone else, unless you were *supremely* skilled, meant you lost.

And I was many things, but supremely skilled *wasn’t* one of them.

“I have no more questions, I informed him, nodding to him once more in thanks, and turned, walking towards the door. Tagg tried to scream something at my back, but the sound didn’t leave his throat, and, with a negligent wave of my hand, I removed his head with a blade made of the very air he’d used to make his *very* last threat.