**Infringement 16.5**

It was a nice Cafe, in a small town, a good meeting place. The only thing that would be better if the staff would stop staring.

“Ya think they’d never seen heroes before,” Mouse Protector smiled, sipping her chocolate milk.

“It’s not the city,” I observed. “They might not see them that often.”

A waitress, maybe fifteen, came up to us. “Um,” she said, looking nervous.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Can I have your autograph?” she asked. I blinked, not having ever had that asked of me before. It was a little humbling, but I *had* helped in the fight against the ABB aaaaand she was asking Mouse Protector, who signed it with a smile, asking for the girl’s name and what she wanted written.

“Ya aren’t that public, Vejy-mite,” the heroine reminded me teasingly, after the girl had scurried back, prize in hand. “Not sayin’ ya haven’t done stuff worth it, but no one knows ‘bout what you’ve been doing. Or how ya stopped Nilbog Two: Monstrous Boogaloo.”

I shook my head, “You and your *logic.*”

“Didn’t expect that, did ya? That’s what makes me so unpredictable,” she winked, and went back to sipping her drink, the face of her power-created Balaclava having a zipper, at her request, to let her eat without unmasking. “Now look sharp, Millie’s the type to be *right* on time.”

Nodding, I prepared myself for the fight, the fact that it would be a verbal one not comforting me. With the knowledge that Tagg was still taking over the ENE branch, despite the changes, I’d wanted just to kill him and be done with it. It would be easy, too, and since he hadn’t done anything to me, and I’d worked, if not *with* Piggot, then around her, I wouldn’t be a credible suspect.

The others hadn’t been as. . . *accepting* of my plan as I’d hoped. Quinn hadn’t vetoed it, knowing that, while I’d listen to him, he didn’t have that power over me. Amy’s “You can’t kill someone over something they haven’t done!” had been just as predictable.

“The PRT, and by extension the government, is apparently *just fine* with going after people for what they *could* do,” I’d told her, and she winced. “Or is there some *other* reason you hadn’t come out about your capabilities earlier? This is not a ‘he might try something’ or ‘the chances are good he will’, not enough has happened and I *know* how the man works. He’s every part the thug that people accuse those in power of being, thinking might makes right, and that the American Government is the strongest thing out there.”

“And you think you can take on the government?” she’d asked incredulously. I thought about it, and she’d looked at me in disbelief. “Seriously?”

“I could destroy D.C.,” I’d offered easily. “Depending on the powers and Tinkertech they have, they might survive it, and maybe the next attack, but I’ve literally got five different ways to wipe a city off the map, Panacea, and I only need *one* to work. But I *don’t want to go that far*,” I stressed.

“What’s one?” Taylor had asked, curious.

I’d picked the easiest, and one of the harder to defend against with Shaker powers. “You know how we sent one of Mouse’s Marks to the *moon*?” she’d nodded. “With the proper calculations, I can do the reverse, and dropping a several ton projectile of solid steel on a city from space will hit like a nuke, only without the fallout. Hell, you can *throw* something out of the Moon’s gravity well, so most of the speed will be retained, and the Earth’s gravity well will just make it hit *harder*, so as long as I’m *close* it’ll still be gone.”

“Just to be clear, you are not, in fact, planning on destroying our nation’s capital?” Quinn had queried.

I’d shaken my head, “*Hell no.* Mind you, they try to nuke us, and I mean that both figuratively *and* literally, and I might be inclined to return the favor. But *that’s my point*, I need to remove Tagg *before* he pushes things that far. Because, if everything I know about him is correct, *he will.*”

It was Herb who’d disagreed next, surprisingly. “He hasn’t done anything else. This Tagg couldn’t be like the other Tagg,” he’d said, and I’d taken a second to translate his ‘couldn’t’ to not mean ‘is impossible to’ but literally ‘could not’. “Things are starting to change. It’s a different situation. Ya can’t minority report his ass. Don’t be a murderhobo.”

I’d sighed, “But is it different *enough?* Also, I very much *can,* and I’m not a Murderhobo if I have a house, and I very obviously *do,”* I’d opened my arms for effect waving around the room. “Lady Bug, what do you think?”

I had been able to feel the indecision she felt through our shared power. Part of me had wanted to push on her a little a bit through it, to show her that I was *confident* in my assessment, but I’d ignored that, waiting for her response.

“Will he start with nukes?” she’d asked.

I’d wanted to shake my head no, but I *hadn’t know that.* “In the original timeline, when you and the undersiders became de-facto Warlords because you were taking care of people after the government pulled out, he sicked Dragon suits on you, tried to ambush you at school in your civilian identity, and then, finally, when you gave yourself up to try to stop things from going too far, after you’d saved the city twice over when the PRT and Protectorate hadn’t, he got the Protectorate to be his *literal assassins,* and threatened to kill your friends, one every ten minutes until you gave him what he wanted.”

“Was it truly that dire?” Quinn had asked Herb who winced.

“He remembers it better than I do,” he’d deflected. We’d talked, and after Leviathan he’d started to. . . *skim,* barely reading everything after the Timeskip. We’d talked about what happened, but it was mostly me telling him what I remembered, which had been. . . *unfortunate.*

My memories of what had happened were fuzzy, so much complete bullshit and horribleness that, while I hadn’t skimmed, I hadn’t exactly been invested either. I remembered the broad strokes, the bits of information about the world, but the particulars I’d read, what felt like a lifetime ago, were indistinct.  “This was after you’d already gone against the Slaughterhouse Nine, Lady Bug, *and won*. He didn’t care. You wouldn’t submit, so killing others, even in their civilian identities and when they weren’t committing any crimes, was perfectly fine with him. Is *that* someone you want to give a chance to?” I’d asked her seriously.

Her indecision, if anything, had worsened. “But, isn’t that what you’re thinking about doing?” she’d asked, but continued even as I’d felt the anger spark at her false equivalence, “No, I mean, it isn’t. If it were someone else you wouldn’t but. . . wait,” she’d suggested. “If he does something, then go for it, but. . . give him a chance to be better.”

“And if that chance means you’re hurt? Or killed?” I’d prompted, staring at her.

She’d grimaced, feeling my concern, and, if I was being honest, my fear. “I’ll be careful. And, if I do, then it’ll be better than punishing someone for something they haven’t done.”

On a moral level, I applauded her commitment, but on a personal level, “*Your life isn’t worth his,*” I’d told her quietly. While she was still fifteen, and there was nothing romantic between us, I *cared* for this girl, in a way I hadn’t cared for someone in a while.

She’d nodded, as if I was telling her something she’d already known, “Then don’t, not yet, *for me*.”

Her earnest, pleading look had hit hard. *“Fuuuck,”* I’d swore, hating being stymied by this, *knowing* I was right. I technically hadn’t *said* I’d follow what they suggested, just that I’d talk to them, but what was the point if I didn’t. “You guys *do* know that if I remove him *after* he tries something, the suspicion is going to fall *directly* on me, right? And they might not care about little things like *evidence* if they think they *know* it’s me?”

“Dude,” Herb had said, “Ya can still make it look like someone else did it. Just roll up and ‘ratta-tat-tat, I got my gat!’ Dude’s gotta have pissed some people off, and ya can disappear like a fart in the wind in a hurricane!”

“Thanks for that comparison,” I’d snarked, but had looked at them all. “You guys are in agreement about this?” They’d nodded. “Fuck. *Fine.* Okay, but if Brockton Bay gets *literally nuked,* I’m not going to let *any* of you forget it!”

And that had led me to talk to Karen, who was still talking with Hannah, who’d apparently wanted to talk to *me,* but MP had been telling her no, until I, to the. Speaking of whom. . .

The front door opened, and Miss Militia nodded to us as Mouse Protector waved in greeting. The Turkish parahuman walked towards us, pausing and saying something to the waitress. I’d worry, except I was the one who picked this place, pretty much at random, only giving her two hours of warning. If something happened, we’d survive it, and be gone in an instant.

“Nothing,” Quinn’s voice chimed in my earpiece, his monocle under my mask, telling me she wasn’t wearing any Tinkertech, or at least none he could detect. That’d been a stipulation, as I hadn’t put it past her to wear a shield and let this place get hit to take us in. The wait-staff would be ‘acceptable casualties’ to the woman’s who’s motto was ‘I was just following orders’.

Predictably, when those orders would put *her* in danger, *then* suddenly she grew a ‘conscience’ and refused to follow them.

With her not having a shield, they wouldn’t hit us indiscriminately, which would give us enough time to teleport out. “Miss Militia,” I greeted, as she hesitated, taking a seat next to Mouse Protector. I’d want the two of us to sit on one side of the table, and Hannah on the other, but Karen had poo-poo’d that idea.

“Vejovis, Mouse Protector, it’s good to see you,” she replied, and she *seemed* honest, at the very least. “There’s something I need to talk to you about.” She paused, accepting the coffee from the waitress, and waiting until the girl was gone before continuing. “It’s our new Director.”

She hesitated again, and I stomped on the Tattletale-like urge to smugly respond ‘Tagg?’ We waited, and, reaching some kind of decision, Miss Militia continued, “His name is James Tagg, and he’s. . . not Director Piggot.”

“Oh?” I smiled falsely. “He’s willing to work with people instead of pulling the ‘only we can do things’ card? That’s a relief. There’s not that much to do in Brockton Bay, on the hero front, but I’d be happy to help elsewhere if-”

“*No,*” the Protectorate member cut me off, with a vehemence that made Mouse Protector’s eyebrows raise. “No, he’s not different in that way. But he’s also not willing to. . . *play defensively*,” she stated, picking her words carefully.

I blinked in mock surprise. “Oh, well, that’s disappointing. I’ve heard the Fallen have started to poke around, with some of the people who are still near the west end spotting them, but their base is out of the city. If we get the location do you want us to pass them along?”

Apparently I wasn’t being as subtle as I thought. “Why are you being so friendly?” Miss Militia questioned. “I was under the impression you disliked me.” Mouse Protector looked similarly suspicious.

I smiled, and it wasn’t a good smile. “Oh, don’t get me wrong, you, as a person who calls themselves a ‘hero’, disgust me. You and the other Protectorate members, and that’s what you were, *not* heroes, sat back while your city fell to gangs, crime, and filth, all because your boss didn’t want to rock the sinking ship. I’ve done my research, I know *why* Piggot was the way she was.” *Or rather*, I added mentally, *Taylor pointed it out when I was talking to her.*

Putting someone who lived through Nilbog’s emergence, where they didn’t have *nearly* enough people on hand to deal with the crises, in charge of a *city* was *dumb.* At least, if you wanted her to do her job. She kept her people held back unless she had overwhelming force, so she could step in and stop a Nilbog if he showed up in her city, but by not putting out the little fires, she’d let entire sections of the city catch, requiring so many people that she didn’t have enough to stop something when it *did* start.

Exactly as Cauldron planned.

The parahuman bristled under the, *completely true*, deprecation upon her character. “I was doing my best. We were ordered not to intervene.”

I shrugged, “And my disgust, because ‘I was following orders’ stopped being acceptable when Feudalism ended, and the individual became more important than blind devotion to king, country, and the church. That said, if you have someone who’s *actually* willing to go after the complete monsters like the Fallen, then you’ll presumably follow their orders too, and we can all go back to trying to make things better for everyone who *isn’t* a complete asshole. Which, I’d like to believe, is most people.”

“He’s going after *you!*” The woman stated, frustrated, to which I had only one response.

“What.”

Mouse Protector added, “Um, Millie? Vejy-table’s kind of a square, but he’s one of the good guys. I woulda kicked his tight ass and brought him to justice if he wasn’t.”

“I’m a hero, both in action and officially,” I argued. “Have the paperwork and everything.”

Miss Militia shook her head, letting out a long breath. “He’s had your status revoked.”

I blinked, “I wasn’t aware that such a thing was possible.”

“*It isn’t,*” Quinn’s voice chimed in my ear. “*To do so requires a hearing, of which there’s no record. It’s one of things I’ve been on the look out for. A Director can’t unilaterally revoke Hero classification unless the person in question is caught committing a crime and is currently in holding.*”

“It is,” Miss Militia informed me, “and it has.”

I shook my head, “You misunderstand me, I wasn’t aware that such a thing was possible without a court date being set, or without you actually having proof that I’ve done something, which you don’t, or else we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Now it was *her* turn to look confused. “I don’t know the particulars, but you’ve been reclassified as an independent, and he’s stated that, as soon as he can, you’ll be officially classified as a Villain.”

“*He can claim that,*” Quinn noted, tone mild yet frosty, “*but actually doing it is another matter.*”

“But, *why?*” Karen asked, confused. “What does he get out of that? What’d we do?”

She sipped her coffee under her bandanna, letting out another sigh. “Trespassing.”

“Are you *shitting* me?” Mouse Protector asked, actually angry, which took us both back. “*Everyone* ‘Tresspasses’. Even you! You can’t be a hero without doing so!”

Miss Militia looked down, not meeting her friend’s eyes. “The area has been declared a disaster area and a crime scene. Just because we don’t prosecute others does not mean it isn’t a crime, Mouse.” It was *obvious* she didn’t believe what she was saying, but was towing the party line, like a good little soldier. Or a serf.

“*There are over a dozen legal precedents for why this is illegal,*” Quinn informed me, *“But if he uses that as a pre-text for further actions, and only claims it’s true? Law Enforcement has a long history of lying to get what they want.*”

“And if he arrests us for it, and we resist, because it *is* gold-plated bullshit. . .” I trailed off.

“Resisting arrest is also a crime,” she nodded.

My expression soured, “And if something gets slammed through, and I get *Birdcaged* because of false charges, oh, well, too bad, so sad.”

The PRT lackey scowled, “You aren’t going to be Birdcaged. Don’t exaggerate.”

“Ah,” I nodded, “Right, my apologies, I’m sure I’ll be killed ‘trying to escape’ instead.”

“Now you’re just being *paranoid,*” she scowled.

I shot her look which, I hoped, *screamed* derision. “You mean like you tried to murder Boardwalk for resisting arrest after he *saved your Wards?* Or did they not count as yours, because they were Armsmaster’s so they *technically* weren’t *your* child soldiers?”

“He was resisting arrest!” she shot back hotly.

I returned fire, “For *what?* Trying to stop Oni-Lee from killing cops? For daring to fight the villains *you* refused to?”

“He was a Brute, he could take it,” she deflected, *not answering my question.*

“No, *no he wasn’t!”* I insisted. “He could just use his power to *deflect bullets.* Did you know that, without my healing ability, he would’ve *died* a few hours after your bullshit? His ribs had been broken, he had internal bleeding, and his *lung* had been pierced.”

And god knows I’d heard about *that* from Panacea once she’d learned enough about how my healing had worked to realize how I’d been hurt, with Taylor filling her in on the details from that explosive night. She’d assumed I’d used my power on myself, not realizing that it had been my own passive healing that’d carried me through the day, so high off the battle that I hadn’t realized how hurt I was.

“. . . I couldn’t have known that,” the self-described hero finally stated.

“And if that was an *excuse* you accepted from *others*, I might *give a shit,*” I informed her.

“Guys,” Mouse Protector interceded. “That doesn’t matter. I’ve seen Boardwalk. He’s kind of a dick, but he’s fine. And if she saw him shrug off bullets, it’s easy to think he might tank an RPG.” she paused though, looking to Miss Militia, “But really Milli? A rocket launcher?”

“I was informed he’d been killing police, and was responsible for the deaths of thousands of others,” Hannah stated, unrepentantly, like that absolved her of all guilt.

I nodded, “And that’s why *I don’t trust you*. Because who *knows* what you’ll do, who you’ll stab in the back, or *shoot*, if someone in power lies to you. Hell, if you’re told the right things, without evidence, you might even shoot Mouse.”

“I wouldn’t!” she argued.

“The first time you met Boardwalk he was beat to hell, bringing two of your Wards out of a warzone. He was weakened, and went to you for help, and then you tried to arrest him, and, when he refused to be imprisoned, you tried to kill him,” I told her. “What kind of lie would it take for you to put your gun in Mouse’s mouth? That she’s refusing false arrest? That she’s Mastered? That she *has a secret you don’t want her to share?*”

That got a look from Karen, and a slight head tilt, which I replied to with the slightest of nods.

“Who do you think I am?” Miss Militia asked, scandalized and offended.

“He’s someone who was on the receiving end of a Thinker power. A strong one,” Mouse said quietly. “It’s how he knew to save me.” With my telling Alexandria of my foreknowledge, the cat was out of that bag.

“The Triumvirate knows, and enough things have changed that it’s mostly useless now,” I told the weapon-creator. “But it’s a pretty good indicator of character, Hannah. I’d hoped Tagg would be different, I’d hoped *you* would be different. Please, show me that I’m wrong. Tell me why you wanted to talk to me.”

Miss Militia was silent for a long moment. “You can’t judge me for what I haven’t done.”

“I’m judged for what I *might* do,” I shot back. “Boardwalk was judged by you for what someone *lied* to you about what he was doing, despite every piece of evidence you saw arguing against it. Judging you for what you *would* have done seems downright *equanimous* in comparison. But I won’t hold you responsible for the evils you’d commit while you ‘followed orders’, Militia. I will, however, use that knowledge to determine whether or not I should trust you. *Why did you want to talk to me?*”

“Told ya you didn’t want to talk to him,” Karen offered to her friend apologetically. “Why I offered to play messenger mouse.”

The Protectorate team lead sat there, in silence, and I waited. I’d asked her twice. I wouldn’t ask her a third time. I sipped my drink, and when I was done I would leave. Mouse very obviously wanted to say something, but either took my lead, or just didn’t know what to say.

“I came to ask you to leave Brockton Bay,” she finally professed. “Director Tagg has decided that it’s too dangerous to stay in anyone else’s hands.”

Quinn’s voice informed me, *“That’s not his decision to make.*”

Miss Militia continued, “That’s why it’s trespassing. Because you’re in the ruins of Brockton Bay.”

“And if we had permission from the owner to be there?” I asked.

Her head snapped up, “Then you know who managed to buy it? Who was it?” she demanded.

My cool stare was the only answer she got.

“Um, Milli?” Mouse Protector prodded. “Not really makin’ a good case for why he should trust ya with that.”

Miss Militia winced, looking back down. “You’re right,” she admitted, and I felt my own eyebrows rise. “The Director’s going after who owns it as well. They’re responsible for what’s happening there.”

“*You, in point of fact, are not,*” Quinn informed me. *“You’ve spent close to a million dollars on a legal team to make sure of that.*”

*Money well spent,* I had to assume, and a drop in the bucket of our funds. “And if we don’t bend the knee?” I asked, already knowing the answers.

“Then you’ll be Villains,” the woman stated, looking up at me, clearly conflicted, “And will be treated like Villains.”

I sighed into my hand, subvocalizing into the microphone *“That enough for me to move?*”

“*. . . I do not believe so. For all we know she’s being lied to. It has happened before,*” my lawyer pointed out, and I hated that he had a point. *“But if he gets you classified as a Villain, despite what you have done, I would withdraw my objection.*”

“I’m a Villain, when I’m trying to pacify the Zones,” I observed. “I’m a Villain, when I’ve done my best to save everyone. *I’m a Villain, when I’m trying to rebuild the city itself?*”

“Vejovis,” Mouse warned.

I shook my head, “If *that* is what a Villain makes, Miss *Militia*, ye whose entire power is the creation of untraceable deadly weapons, then I wonder what the title of *Hero* you hold really means. If push comes to shove, would you do what is right, or do what is *easy*, hiding behind your blatantly illegal orders? If your *commander* treats you not like a hero, or even a law enforcement officer, but a *soldier,* will you say no, or will you gun down whoever you’re ordered to?”

“I’ve always done what is right,” she asserted.

“Then we have very different definitions of *right,”* I returned. “Mine doesn’t cover shooting those who have just saved my own in the back when all they want to do is *leave.*” I sighed. “I *do* appreciate the warning, so I’ll say this: If he goes after me and mine,” I nodded to Mouse, “Refuse, and make sure the Wards aren’t involved. I try to play ball, but even though Boardwalk turned down my offer to join, we are still allied, and both he and Break would not take our people being attacked. . . *kindly.*”

“Is that a threat?” the woman asked.

I shrugged, “I don’t know, are Tagg’s actions? I’ve always found it *fascinating* how actions, done one way, like lying, are perfectly alright one way, but reverse them and then *suddenly* they’re not to be allowed. Really puts into perspective how removed from morality the system *really* is.”

“Vejy? Maybe tone down the supervillain vibes?” Karen asked, with a laugh.

“Why? I’m apparently a Villain no matter *how* many people I save. No matter what good I try to do. I’m not a slave to the powers that be, so I need to *submit,*” I sneered, and, at Karen’s look, I realized she might have a point.

Sighing, I shook my head. “Either you’re moral, and I can work with you, or you believe that might makes right, and *I can work with that too.* As far as I know, Tagg’s the second, while pretending to be the first. And, to a certain perspective, *so are you*. That’s why you joined the biggest, baddest group around, *the American Government.*”

“And you think you can fight that?” the turkish woman asked incredulously.

“Could Heartbreaker? Could Accord? Could the Triumvirate?” I asked right back. “They were all left alone, and they’ve done *truly* monstrous things. Yes, *even the Triumvirate.* I don’t want world domination here, or permission to rape, torture, and kill anyone that gets in my way, I just want to be left alone to help people and rebuild the city. Is that too much to ask?” I shook my head. “Hurting those who’ve done you no harm? Trying to set up people who’ve not broken the spirit of the law? Making them bow to your dominance because having them free isn’t acceptable? That doesn’t sound like the actions of heroes, that sounds like the E88, or the ABB, or any number of other villainous organizations. And, if I have to, *I will treat you as such.*”

It was the vigilante problem all over. Often times, the police would go after vigilantes, as opposed to the *actual criminals.* It was basic logic. Vigilantes didn’t want to hurt the cops, they just wanted to stop the criminals, and they were usually solitary, or working in small groups. The cops could go after them with minimal fear of retaliation. The gang-members, however, would not only *not* hesitate to attack and kill police, but there were enough of them that they could actually fight the police. Thus, instead of upholding the law and going after the large numbers of criminals, the police protected them to keep the status quo and protect themselves, breaking their oath, and telling themselves that the vigilantes were *also* criminals, so they were *technically* doing the right thing.

That worked, right up until the vigilantes couldn’t be taken in easily, and then things occasionally balanced themselves out, but usually escalated. The police had gotten *used* to the criminals, so could ignore them, but the Vigilante’s were new, and reminded them that they weren’t doing their jobs, so had to be removed.

And, when it came down to it, all non-government ‘heroes’ were considered vigilantes, no matter what they did. Acceptable if they assisted, but anathema to the system if they excelled.

Miss Militia stared at me. “You really believe that. You really believe we’re villains.”

“Walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, lays eggs like a duck, and gets roasted like a duck if it tries to bite me,” I replied.

“And the Wards?” she questioned, dreading the response.

I snorted, “I’ll do my best to try to take down your *child soldiers* softly, if you give me a choice, but I’d rather not have to fight them at all. If he asks you to attack us, you can just *say no*.”

“Then he’d find someone else,” the Protectorate team leader argued, parroting the excuse of lackeys everywhere.

“But then it wouldn’t be *you,*” Mouse emphasized.

Miss Militia glanced over, as if she’d forgotten her friend was beside her. “You’d back him?”

“Millie, *he saved me from the Nine,*” Karen stressed. “I was *captured.* I was *under Bonesaw’s knife.* And then he told me I could leave if I wanted. And he *meant it.* I might back him just for that but. . . He ain’t lying about clearing the city. Or about rebuilding it. We’ve fought things, *I’ve* fought things that are. . .” she shivered. “You remember the Nilbog tapes?”

Hannah nodded, despite herself, eyes questioning behind her bandanna.

“It was worse than that. A *lot* worse,” Mouse Protector shivered. “And then there was the thing that made all the thinkers spaz out? Millie, Vejy-mite had a camera for the first bit, ‘fore he got hit bad and it got wrecked. That was. . . they had a good reason to freak out. And he fought that alone, ‘cause they were infectious, and he was immune. Unless he starts to do the kind of shit the ABB did, the stuff which Armsy didn’t do anything to stop, and neither did you, I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

The veteren heroine, hesitated, continuing, “But, and don’t take this the wrong way Vejovis, bur he’s gotten used ta fightin’ monsters. It’s why, when the merchants tried to start some shit, while smellin’ like it, I had him let me handle it. I’m worried if ya try to fight him, he’ll fight you like he’s been fightin’ the shit in the Zones.”

“I’ll try my best not to,” I added, feeling the need to speak up, however she *wasn’t exactly wrong*. “But, well, isn’t responding to deadly force in kind *your* guy’s MO? And the cops? And the *law*?”

“*See?*” Mouse asked. “This ain’t gonna be a wham, bam, let’s do this next week ma’am, thing like I had with Ravager,” she hesitated, a pained look flashing across her face before she continued. “And it sounds like your boss either thinks it’ll be, or is countin’ on the guy who *spat in the face of the Nine to save me* is gonna act like most heroes even while *he’s* not holdin’ up the other side of things.”

“The problem with social contracts, like the one the Protectorate works under, is that both sides have to hold up their end,” I stated. “If your boss doesn’t act like the PRT should, and if the Protectorate doesn’t follow the rules it says it does, why should I be bound by the restrictions you’re flaunting? Why should I play nice, if he’s playing hardball?”

“Because people will die if you don’t,” Hannah stated, almost begging.

I just nodded, “Yes, people will die if *you* don’t. I’m not the one making the first move here, Militia, that’d be your boss.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” she told me.

“Do I even need to repeat it back to you, or do you get the point?” I asked in turn. “That said. . .” I hesitated, thinking about it. “If you ever want to jump ship, and you haven’t attacked us, you’ll have a place on the Penumbral Defenders if you want it.”

“Vejy?” Mouse Protector asked, surprised.

“I thought you hated me, why would you. . .” Miss Militia trailed off.

“Disgust, not hate,” I corrected, shaking my head. “And I’d *never* put you in a position of power, not without a *lot* of evidence that you’ve, well, grown up and can be trusted, but. . . While there are moral rubicons, lines that, once crossed, can’t be uncrossed, but, like you said, *you haven’t done that yet.*”

“I’m not joining you,” Miss Militia informed me, and Mouse Protector made a disappointed sound, trying to break the tension. It didn’t really work, but it helped, even if just a little.

“Offers open until you attack us. Boardwalk isn’t one of us, so doesn’t count,” I replied easily enough.

“I’m not stepping down from my position,” Hannah insisted.

I just shrugged, not having anything else to say.

“If you break the law, I will stop you,” she insisted.

“Whereas if you break the law, *nothing happens.* Funny that,” I mused.

“I wouldn’t break the-” she started to say.

I didn’t let her finish. “Boardwalk.”

“I thought that was a legal order,” she informed me, annoyed.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware that you said if I *knowingly* broke the law you’d stop me. I’m sorry, my hearing must be off,” I snarked.

“I came here to warn you,” Miss Militia stressed.

I nodded, “And you have, and I appreciated enough to offer you a place with us. I have also warned *you.* This is not a fight I and mine want to get into, and neither should it be a fight that *you* want you or yours to get into either.”

“I’m not going to be telling Director Tagg about this conversation,” Hannah stated.

Shrugging, I offered, “And I wish I could believe you. We’ll see how that turns out. I *do* wish we could work together, and go after the *true* monsters, but that’s just not how this world works, is it?”

Miss Militia stared at me, before sighing herself, taking a last sip of her coffee, standing, dropping a five on the table, and leaving.

“That coulda gone better,” Mouse pointed out.

I nodded, “I could’ve lied to her. Or I could’ve left her in the dark about what I’d do in retaliation.”

“Could you?” Karen asked, looking at me skeptically.

“Easily, I just. . . didn’t want to,” I admitted. “I’m happy with how the reconstruction is going but I’m just getting. . . tired. Tired of the power games, tired of the bullshit, just. . . *tired*.”

“Sounds like ya need some rest,” Mouse Protector observed. “*My* bed’s pretty comfy.”

I laughed, and it made me feel a bit better. “How ‘bout a spar instead? I feel like hitting something, and I’m still trying to figure out this entire ‘sword’ thing.”

“Gettin hot and sweaty, pounding flesh, and tirin’ you out?” she grinned. “I’m in!”

Rolling my eyes, I dropped a fifty on the table, accepted Karen’s hand, and she whisked us away, back to Eclipse.