**Infringement 16.9**

It was only a few hours later, but it felt like days. The base had been evacuated of non-essential personnel, and I, or rather Dryad, had helped repair the base, and cleared the area of danger. Whatever poison gas the spy had made, which caused almost immediate cell death, had dissipated from the office, and the melted portions of the hallway had been replaced. There was more damage done, but Quinn reassured me that he’d take care of the rest.

Now, we sat down Mouse having gotten take-out from a nearby town, and looked over the damage. Canary was looking after Dinah, and there was only a skeleton crew of staff in Eclipse. I’d suggested removing them, but Overwatch had explained why that would do more harm than good, and I ultimately left the decision up to him.

I felt drained, and it was a bit before I realized why.

I lost.

Every other time, no matter how bad things had gotten, I’d managed to win, somehow. I might’ve not had everything work out, I *rarely* had things work out, but there was always *some* kind of win I could claim. I’d stopped Zerchidna from flooding out and destroying New England, or more. I’d fought Leviathan, fought him off, and managed to save the hundreds of thousands of people that had evacuated. I’d killed Oni Lee, and Herb had defeated Lung. We’d been hurt, and we’d not been able to save everyone, but we’d never lost one of our own.

Part of me wanted to say the employees we lost ‘didn’t count’, that since we’d not lost any of the PD, we hadn’t suffered any losses, but that was wrong. Hell, if we hadn’t had Panacea *right there,* we would’ve lost Victoria, and with how Amy hadn’t left her side, I couldn’t blame her. Vicky at least was letting her, just as shaken as her sister was, thankfully not reacting badly to the fact that it was a copy of her sister that’d taken her down in the first place.

Amelia had been able to keep Vicky safe, as well as the other woman, but that was all. I’d told her it wasn’t their fault, and I hadn’t lied. It wasn’t their fault they had died.

It was mine.

If I had noticed something wrong, if I hadn’t been so reliant on my power, just like I complained about others being, I could’ve discovered the spy earlier. That would’ve started the fight early, yes, but every time had been away from people, and we could’ve thrown down, dragging her out with Strider’s power if need be, and destroyed part of Brockton Bay, or some wasteland in the middle of nowhere instead.

Overwatch, with Zilla’s help, had started to build a timeline of what the spy had seen. He was only able to find out the times that they’d impersonated one of us, as he was keeping tabs of when we were and weren’t in the base, but after that things got a bit difficult.

Any time there were two of the same person in the base, he was notified, but the spy was often taking the form of someone who had stepped out, only trackable by people who entered bathrooms, never to come out, or people who exited them, not having gone in. On one hand, not having cameras in the bathrooms made sense. On the other, it would’ve been *damn* useful right about now.

We were able to track and view some of the interactions the spy had had, but many times they approached one of us in our offices, in the cafeteria, or other places that weren’t being actively recorded.

I took some small solace in that I hadn’t been the only one fooled, that ‘Amy’ had gotten Vicky to talk about Dean, and my offer for him to join the PD, that ‘Mouse’ had gotten a Tinkertech taser from Theo, that ‘Herb’ had apparently flirted with Mouse, only to get soundly rebuffed, eliciting an apology from the heroine for her comments later, the man telling her not to worry.

Then ‘Purity’ had approached me, and I realized what had happened, my conclusion spoken without me meaning to. “Oh, it must’ve been her that kissed me instead of Kayden.”

There was a moment of dead silence.

“What,” Kayden asked, and everyone stared at me.

“Well, I was working on integrating a new bit of Tinkertech into my style, the one that you suggested I pick up, Lady Bug,” I nodded, and she looked confused, before nodding, understanding.

“The density manipulator?” she checked.

“From Toybox, yes,” I continued, lying smoothly, glad that, despite telling everyone of what I’d seen, of the secrets of Cauldron, Scion, and what was waiting for us, I hadn’t talked about my ability to copy powers openly. All the spy would be able to get is information that *their organization already knew*, as opposed to something truly damning.

Except for the fact that I could destroy Washington D.C. in several different ways.

Fuck.

Okay something damning, but not ‘dear god burn it with fire’ bad. Hopefully. We’d see. There was a reason we’d evacuated, after all.

Continuing my train of thought, I recounted, “Well, I was testing it, and Kayden, the spy, really, came in. She wanted to know what I was doing, so I told her, and we ended up sparring. I didn’t think anything of it, because, well, when I looked at her, I saw Purity, powers and all,” I shrugged, embarrassed, nodding when Herb subtly pointed to his eyes, a motion that only Quinn seemed to catch.

“And?” Kayden demanded.

I thought about the spar, something I’d pushed out of my mind. “I didn’t really think of it, but, well, she fought better than you do. She actually led fire, which Boardwalk is *still* complaining about you not being able to do. And she used the Light Wave you two developed, but not the melee attack he had you develop. Actually. . .” I trailed off, making internal connections.

Purity was nearly impossible to look at normally, my own powers the only reason I could see her clearly. Her regular attack was *incredibly* flashy, and the Light Wave was, if anything, *worse.* Her. . . Burning Touch, or whatever it should be called, however, would be nearly impossible to notice normally.

Being able to *See* her, I could see how, even to my own vision, her hand filled with Light beyond her initial luminescence. However, if you were an outside observer, you’d not be able to tell the difference. At least, not before she put a hand through your chest, my own resistance to Light being the only reason I hadn’t been hurt that badly when she’d tagged me, slagging the ruined streetlamp I’d, *Boardwalk* had tossed her into.

“*And?*” Kayden demanded, even more forcefully.

“Huh?” I asked, getting a better handle on the spy. It wouldn’t be an instinctive knowledge dump like Herb’s power gave him, but not the ‘sucks to be you’ copy that I had either, so it-

Kayden was getting red in the face, *“What about the kiss!?”*

“Oh, that? Yeah, so I pinned not-you, and she tried to french me, I said no, that you were with Herb, which was news to her, which is why I thought you two had had a fight, and I didn’t want to be some kind of rebound or pawn, so we stopped there,” I explained, still thinking on power mechanics.

“I, I, I’m not with Herb!” Kayden sputtered.

I looked at her, eyebrow raised, “So, what’s the problem that I kissed her?”

“She was pretending to be me!” the other woman complained.

“I’m sure she’s not the only woman who’s ever done that,” I shrugged, getting more stares, but not giving a shit. We *all* had better shit to worry about than her getting her panties in a twist because the spy tried a seduction ploy, and it failed. Or had it been the fact that it’d failed that upset her? “You were Kaiser’s wife, at *least* one of the Nazi peons probably wanted to role-play.”

“Um, dude, you okay?” Herb asked, unsure.

“Should I be?” I asked back, “Or am I supposed to be all apologetic for something that both wasn’t my fault and I put a stop to when, according to her, had it actually *been* her, there wouldn’t have been an ethical issue when we’ve got *better shit to talk about*?” Glancing over to an angry Kayden, I informed her, “Also, sorry, you’re not my type.”

As the ex-nazi sputtered angrily, Mouse asked, “So what *is* your type?”

“Not racist is a pretty basic starting position,” I offered. “As is someone who doesn’t get mad at me for things I *didn’t* do.”

“I’ll only get mad at the things you do do, and my best friend’s middle eastern!” the heroine offered with a grin.

“You’re best friends a *bitch,*” I shot back, “but, fair enough. So, other than the spy knowing about our Tinkertech source, that’s all that really happened,” I told Overwatch, who added ‘Toybox Contract’ to the list of compromised secrets.

“Yo, add her and me,” Herb called to the lawyer, who looked, to the woman. She remained silent, and ‘Break/Purity relationship’ was the newest entry.

The fact that Overwatch and I apparently micromanaged, or at least directed, things had apparently worked to our advantage, as most of the ‘hey, what are our plans’ type questions the spy had asked had been answered with a request to ask either of us. I hadn’t answered those questions, not really *having* a plan, and Overwatch’s information had all been very specialized, in a ‘go here and do this’ manner.

It was. . . more than I wanted people to know, but information that would hopefully not blow back too hard on us if revealed. The layout of the base was compromised, but not its capabilities, as we were *still* getting everything up and running. The existence of Accord’s City Plan was leaked, but the plan itself seemed secure, not that it really mattered that much, the multivariate nature of it making it harder for anyone to guess what we were going to do next until we’d already built half of the damn thing.

“Was the spy ever Dryad?” Theo asked, from the end of the table. “Shouldn’t we ask her?”

Quinn shook his head, “Dryad has been in the base thrice since we were infiltrated, during the initial hiring surge, and has always been present while the spy was someone else.”

It was exactly what I’d feared would happen, when we first opened the doors, I’d just underestimated how *bad* it would be. Still, the good we’d been able to do, the efforts we’d been able to coordinate with the, was beyond what we could’ve done on our own. “Any plans to stop us from being re-infiltrated? Have we changed our security codes? Maybe our protocols?”

“I changed them the moment the spy revealed themselves,” Overwatch informed me. “Our old codes were used to try to log in seven minutes after they escaped. They entered a dummy network, and tried to upload a virus that would have crashed our systems, destroying our records.”

“So we couldn’t check the tapes,” Herb nodded, understanding.

“Speaking of which, when they changed forms, they hit some intermediate form. Have you been able to identify them?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” was the helpful answer. A series of images were brought on-screen, of a dark shape with a splash of white. The images were cleaned up a little, though they were blurry.

“Zoom and enhance?” I had to ask.

He laughed, “Not something that actually exists. However, certain algorithms can be used to predict details. However, the less they have to work with, the less reliable they become. Nothing that would hold up in court, but useful nonetheless.”

The images were somewhat sharpened, but still blurry, before they were overlaid onto a model, the contrasting parts flickering back and forth as the computer, or Quinn, decided which was correct. The image split into two portions, one from *before* I’d blasted half the spies body to chunky salsa, and one after.

The body shape of the two images was the same, a short, stocky woman. She wore a block body-stocking, covered with something, spaced out over her, like runes, or designs, the images just *didn’t* *have enough detail* to make it out. The second image showed dark skin, but that was the only difference. In both, she wore a gold and white masque, the only thing about her that was clear. The harlequin mask remained untouched, though her eyes were not visible, only dark lenses covering her sight.

“Anyone recognize her?” Overwatch asked, shaking his head at the silence that greeted him “Thought not. Every database I have access to has no one close enough for a match. The mask has variations used by several dozen, and six with the same general shape and coloration, but none of them have matching gender and skin tone.”

“So she’s not. . .?” Herb asked, trying to be subtle.

I took up the question, not caring. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she were a Cauldronite. She claimed to be protecting *everyone*, but that could be a statement meant to throw us off. It didn’t really fit with my question, so it might’ve been pre-prepared. She also acted like she didn’t know who Cauldron was, but the way she got away, there’s a chance she used their Gater to do so. I can’t follow people across dimensions, *yet*, but my tracking method dropped as soon as she dropped Mouse’s form, and it hasn’t come back.”

“Do we know she is, though?” Taylor asked, and I shot her a questioning look. “There are a lot of people out there. Maybe she worked for the Fallen, or the Elite, or maybe even the CUI or some other group like that!”

“Likely not the CUI,” Overwatch disagreed, Kayden of all people agreeing with him. He waved for her to continue.

The ex-E88 cape wilted a little under the attention, before she started to glow, making half the table look away. I just stared, waiting. “From when. . . *Kaiser* would talk, the CUI kidnap capes. If it was them, they would’ve taken someone.”

“And, with what I know about them, they’d *never* let someone that strong go. Imagine if they had entire squads able to instantly shift configuration, even if they were only at a fraction of the strength of the original,” I proposed. “The CUI would’ve acted differently. As for the others. . . I don’t know?” I shrugged. “The spy never showed up in the timeline we saw.”

Herb nodded in agreement. “Yeah. But someone that strong, it seems like it might be them.”

As far as I remembered from the original story, a memory that was increasingly fuzzy, they only had a dozen named members. That was. . . laughably small for a faux-Illuminati, doubly so know that I’d gotten a sense of *how many people* it took just to try to manage what *we* were doing, let alone running a global conspiracy. Contessa, the walking Deus Ex Machina, helped, but I had to wonder how it all actually worked.

Then again, the answer was sitting across from me. *Contractors.* Herb wasn’t one of the core members, he didn’t get involved in their meetings, but he nonetheless did wetwork for them. Then there were the Vial Recipients that had bargained down the inflated price in return for unspecified favors, up to and including *letting the Slaughterhouse Nine go.*

Which reminded me that, of those still at the ENE office, Battery was still a Cauldron asset, and couldn’t be trusted. Which was just a wonderful way to live, constantly having to keep track who might, despite what you know about them, despite their natures, could turn on you in an instant.

It was things like that that were why I could never truly work for the Protectorate, or the PRT.

Or Taylor could be right.

There were a *lot* of groups out there. The low-sounding but actually high rate of Triggering meant there were several *thousand* Parahumans running around, and quite a few organizations that either were national, had national aspirations, or whose nature meant they could be attracted to the anomaly/lightning rod that was Brockton Bay.

I wasn’t sure about the Fallen, they didn’t seem like the type to spy and run, they seemed the type to attack when found, not to run, but to launch a full-on assault. Doubly so for the Teeth. But there were The Justicars, a Vigilante group that specialized in investigations then take-downs, The Syndicate, a Villain group that specialized in corporate espionage, and even Accord’s Ambassadors, who might be there to gather information so their titular leader could create a plan to capture Boardwalk and take the city, like he wanted.

There were just too many unknowns, and too many variables.

“I’ll look into it,” I sighed, asking the room, “anything anyone can think of right now?” No one had anything else. “Okay, let’s head to bed. Overwatch, if you get a double of *anyone,* contact me and I’ll take care of it.”

“Alone?” Panacea demanded, a sentiment that Taylor, Herb, and Karen all echoed.

“Alone,” I agreed. “The spy can turn into fucking *Alexandria.* We don’t know how, and we don’t know the limits of her power. If that happens, I can drag her out of the base to somewhere we can fight without casualties, *and I can take her.* Not enough to capture, but, if I see her again, I’m not going to bother with a capture unless I see the opportunity. Amy, you’re suits help, and against *non-Triumvirate threats* I’d ask you for assistance. I mean, I did so *today.* But, at that point, unless you’re a Brute seven or eight, you might as well not show up.” I looked to Herb, “Hell, I would be worried about *you* tagging along. She goes hard from go, and those overwhelming alpha strikes are what *you’re* weak to.”

He grimaced, but nodded in agreement. “She’d be crazy to come back, now that we’re waitin’ for her.”

“Agreed,” I replied. “Now, it’s been a hell of a day, so let’s go to bed and hope tomorrow will be better.”

That ended the meeting, effectively, no one else with anything to add.

However, when I tried to go to sleep, *tired* on a bone-deep level, but sleep wouldn’t come. That left me in my office, firming up another Vial. This one granted light-based abilities, and I was trying to figure out the right mix of Stranger and Blaster powers, the Mover coming with too many downsides, as did the Master and Shaker possibilities.

That reminded me of the *other* Vials we had, the ones with established powers, and the fact that we needed to find people we could trust them. *So much to do,* I thought, trying to figure out how to manage it all. So many things to figure out, knowing that, if I messed up *any* of them, I’d likely get *more* of my people killed.

*“Vejovis,”* Quinn’s voice called me, tense and tight. “*We have a duplicate.*”

*Fuuuck,* I thought, getting ready to fight. “Of who, and where are they?”

“*It’s Break, and he’s left his personal quarters, but from what I can tell Break is still in his room,*” the lawyer stated with urgency. “*How do you plan on confronting the spy?”*

That caused my feelings of anxiousness, the clenching in my stomach, to let go. Checking the calendar, I realized it was about that time. “That’s not the spy, it’s a ‘Cousin’ of Herb’s. Direct him up to me.”

There was a pause. “*While I won’t demand an explanation, it would not be unappreciated.*”

I considered it, but the Spy couldn’t be Overwatch, and there were too many things, too many *secrets* to juggle already. “Herb’s cousins aren’t his cousins, they’re clones he makes. They’ve got different personalities, but they all want to help, in their own way. Once I change their appearance, it sticks, but they all originally look like him, because, in a sense, they *are* him.”

“*And does he have a limit on the number of copies he can make?*” Quinn asked carefully.

“It’s like ten or eleven, and then all that will happen is that they’ll respawn if they’re killed, like most of them were during the Leviathan fight,” I divulged. “Just send him up and I’ll get started.”

“*He’s on his way,*” my Lawyer stated. “*This would have been good to know before he arrived.*”

I sighed, “Sorry. There’s a lot of things going on, and I forgot what day it was. Next one, as long as none of the others died, should be here in exactly a week.”

“*I’ll make a note,*” was the man’s only response.

Soon enough, Herb’s newest Replicant walked in. He was wearing my friend’s face, but his movement was. . . *off,* almost unnatural. Boojack had been slow, calm confidence. Like a bull moose who knows he can wreck his opponents, but didn’t want to bother. Curtis had been smooth, oily motions, almost slinking instead of walking, and with a quiet air of menace. Mike had been the definition of flighty, with nervous, hesitant motions. I hoped he was okay, wherever he was, as the Bird-shifter hadn’t been in contact with us after the Leviathan fight. Tyrone had been the opposite, strutting with his chest puffed out, with a rapper’s swagger and so much confidence that you could tell at least some of it was faked.

The newest Replicant’s steps were small, but quick, lacking any sense of internal timing, as he took in the room in an instant, focusing, almost unblinkingly, on me. It wasn’t until his Stand manifested that I realized what he reminded me of: *an insect.* His stand was shorter than he was, a first, maybe five foot six, a dark brown, and with a shiny, chitinous shell like natural armor, only vaguely humanoid, with two pairs of arms and fluttering wings held mostly tight against his body.

The Replicant walked right up to my desk, looking at the chairs, before promptly sitting in one, going from high-tension to complete relaxation in a moment. His Stand copied him, sitting in the other, and I had the strangest urge to get the chair cleaned after he’d left, despite *knowing* he was just an energy construct. Then the Replicant talked, and the sense of *wrongness* intensified, his words clipped, and spoken with odd emphasis.

“I’m *Mick.* This *is* The *Prick*. You *help* me. *I* help *you*. Or *you* gonna have *a* problem?”