**Infiltration 16.7**

Once Mouse Protector calmed down, which only took a couple of minutes, we both walked into the warehouse, the insects around us were pushed to the side as I prodded them with Arthropod Control and Herb, mainlining Taylor’s power, stiffly made them move as one while he held Taylor in place, despite her attempts to use them to kill us all.

Walking into the darkened warehouse, I left the door open, the afternoon sun casting long shadows, and I pulled some Light to my chest, illuminating the hallway. In the middle of the warehouse we found Herb, his Stand in front of Taylor, who seemed to be frozen, mid-charge, stance low, baton out.

Stepping over to her, I reached down and carefully removed her helmet. Herb made an inquisitive noise, and I explained, “She’s gonna hurl, it’s part of the process.”

“Full detox? Shit,” my friend said, voice a little strained with effort, but undercut with with sympathy. “Had to do that enough times for my mom. That sucks. Sorry, Little Bug.”

I started to tell him he shouldn’t be sorry, but I recognized it was a sympathy ‘sorry’, not an actual apology. Leaning over her from behind, threading one arm around her stomach to catch her, making sure her hair was caught between us, I reached up with my other arm and half hugged her, hand resting on her cheek. I started to heal her, and she started to shake, but she was still locked up like a statue.

“Keep the bus still, release her,” I ordered, and the girl went limp in my arms, spasming before retching, a uniformly bright pink fluid pouring out her mouth and nose as she tried to vomit, cry, and gasp for breath all at the same time.

Keeping her bent to let her get it out, when she started to dry heave I pulled her to the side, letting her stand, still holding her face as I extruded a cloth to wipe her face off, the spasms slowly fading away. As soon as she could, she started apologizing, saying she was sorry over and over, how she was a horrible person, how she knew I could never forgive her.

Stupid shit.

“Hey,” I said, turning her head up to look me in the eye. “You heard what I told Mouse?” She nodded into my hand. “The same applies to you. I’m big on personal responsibility, but the reason I hate Mastering is because *it takes that away from you*, while still making you perform the motions.”

“But *she* didn’t kill anyone!” Taylor cried.

Mouse Protector went ‘Huh?’, but I remembered the ABB attacks, and what we’d done. I quick sense of the outside through our shared power told me she’d taken that to the next level. “Mouse, what were the Merchant Master’s orders?”

Karen twitched. “Protect everyone in a vehicle. Kill everyone else,” she recited dully. She paused, before letting out a low, *“oh.”*

“Yeah, oh,” I agreed. Only a half, maybe two thirds of the Merchants had made it back to the cars before Taylor had smothered everything in insects. Looking through the eyes of the Swarm outside, she’d followed her orders, killing them all, smothering them with biting, stinging insects that’d gouged flesh and crawled into every possible orifice, stinging and biting their way down.

There were a lot more corpses around us then than the ones I’d gathered here now.

“And?” I asked Taylor, smiling a little to show her I didn’t care.

“*And?*” the girl echoed, incredulous. “I *killed* them, Lee! It was *easy!*”

“And?” I asked again.

“And *I killed them!”* she repeated, starting to get hysterical, looking down and forcing me to twist not to break contact or force her head back up, which just felt like the wrong thing to do.

I stayed calm, knowing that getting angry that *she wasn’t getting it* wouldn’t help. “Why? That doesn’t sound like something you’d do of *your own free will*.”

“It wasn’t! She made me, and I *killed all of them!*” She repeated, and I projected feelings of *calm-acceptance-trust* through our shared power. Herb twitched, before adding his own hesitant, *understanding-sympathy-sorrow.*

She shook, blaring *self-hatred-worthlessness-despair. “No,* I don’t deserve it!” she almost screamed.

“Uh, did I just miss something?” Karen asked, before shaking her head, walking up to Taylor and I. Mouse looked at my hand, where I still held her, and mouthed ‘healing?’, Taylor’s sight hidden by her hair, which had fallen forward in a curtain, cutting off the rest of the world. I nodded.

Karen stood next to me, pulling Taylor’s hair back and tucking it behind her ear, showing the side of her face I wasn’t holding, causing the girl to flinch. “Listen, kid. I’ve been around the block. A couple of decades has taught me a lot-” she paused glancing over to me. “And I’ve been doing this since I was *seven* because *I’m only twenty seven. Vejovis,*” she stressed getting a somewhat choked laugh from Taylor.

“But, I’ve dealt with Masters. Not a lot, thank Cheesus, but enough,” Mouse Protector told the girl, unable to resist the pun, and I could feel Taylor’s mouth twitch to a momentary smile, though it dropped as soon as it appeared. “Everybody says ‘oh it’s not your fault, it wasn’t you it was the Master’, but most don’t mean it. They look at ya different, knowing what you *could* do, but don’t, thinkin’ there’s no difference. Those people? They’re *assholes.* Even the heroes. *Especially* the heroes. People don’t like Parahumans because of ‘what they could do’, and we deal with that shit everyday, but then you pin someone to the ground and make them sing ‘I’m a little teapot’ for two hours straight because some asshole Master got you and said ‘stop them’, and suddenly *you’re* the bad mouse!”

Taylor giggled a little, the sound wet from her runny nose, both from the vomiting and the crying.

“But this big lug, you know what he asked me to do?” Karen asked incredulously.

“K-kick his ass again?” Taylor asked, stuttering a little.

“Exactly!” the older Heroine grinned. “And think about how many people this guy’s killed. Bad people, yeah, but still people. You think he’s gonna judge you for that?”

“Judge her performance, maybe,” Herb offered, continuing in a faux-cultured tone that sounded *nothing* like me. “‘Oh, wasps and spiders everywhere? You have *tools* Lady Bug, use them with grace, not willy-nilly like some common *ruffian.* We have *standards* with our group that’,” his impression dropped, “Fights people who are tryin’ ta *kill ya* all the *god-damn time.*”

That got more laughter, and my, “I do *not* sound like that!” just got more.

“You do sometimes,” she disagreed, trying a bad posh accent of her own, “‘Use your scouts as scouts, don’t use flies to attack, that’s what the biting and stinging insects are for, Taylor!’ You’re helping, but, yeah, that, that’s you.”

“Hate. You. All,” I declared, shaking my head. “You okay on healing?”

Taylor hesitated, before nodding, and I pulled my hand back, manifesting a cloth as I leaned down and removed the splashed, bright pink sick from her shins and shoes.

Standing up, I let the rag fade, and floated Taylor’s helmet back to her. “Okay, so, that happened, and we. . . we didn’t get our asses kicked, but we got blind-sided. Mouse, new rule, we only banter with known quantities when we’ve got nothing better to do, and never with groups larger than. . . four.”

“Why four?” the woman pouted.

“Five or more and they might try something, or have a hidden cape. I tried the cops-and-robbers, kid-gloves bullshit like you asked.” And she winced, having talked to me about the need to ‘play the game when we can’. How if we did, they would too, and it’d make things better. It hadn’t. “Two of our own were mastered, and if it were three then. . . Herb, how long does a. . . I’m gonna say cocaine high last. It was a powder, but everything she makes is the same color. And I *really* don’t know drugs.”

“From snortin, like half an hour, tops, but, uh,” he motioned to the pile of bright pink sick. “That’s more than someone snortin’.”

“How did that even *work?*” Taylor asked, incredulous, the despair not quite gone from her tone, emotions like that tending to stick around, but slowly being replaced with confusion. “My *bugs* smelled it. How’d it get in *me?*”

I’d only caught a glimpse of the power *Drug Control* but it was enough for the basics. “Drug’s a targeting vector. To the power, you *are* the bugs you control, LB, just like how Gallant’s beams don’t actually mess with your head, they let his power pick out your brain to effect out of all the others.” I turned back to the one member of the party I knew had knowledge of this. “With that much of, well, *anything* in your system, how long would I be affected?”

“Shit man, this is weird power bullshit. I don’t know, two hours? Mind the smell though, ‘cause I’m pullin’ this outta my ass,” he offered.

“Okay, let’s say it was two hours,” I nodded, going along with it and thinking how I’d take those orders. “If I was affected I would. . . I’m gonna say depopulate the eastern seaboard. Maybe just all of New England if I could fight it, or maybe just every single person in a hundred mile radius if I could finagle it to let me over-focus. But If I slipped, it’d be the Big Apple-*sauce.*”

“You could,” Mouse added. “Kinda. That’s why I could fight you, and leave the little one,” she reached *up* and messed up Taylor’s hair, now that the girl was standing up straight, “alone. ‘Cause, don’t take this the wrong way kid, but I’da killed ya in about five seconds.”

“If that,” Taylor easily agreed. “I saw your fight.”

I sighed, “So that means my immunity to drugs of *any* kind is the *only* reason I’m not coming to in the wreckage of New York City, and getting myself declared the fourth Endbringer, after killing everyone I care about in this world. That’s. . . a level of lucky I’m *not* comfortable relying on. I need someone or something that can stop Master powers, and I need it *yesterday.* And if it’s shareable, yes, everybody’s getting it. Problem is, most of them are just another variation of ‘get Mastered by someone else’.”

“So, existential crises aside, what’s with the caskets?” Mouse asked.

I blinked, “Oh, I thought it was obvious. We’d planned to construct a mass grave/memorial/park for all those who fell during the Leviathan fight. I know we can’t get them *all*, or even most, but I’ve been working to try to grab as many as I can.”

“How many did ya get?” Herb asked, looking at the rows upon rows of floor-to-ceiling caskets, several stacks deep.

“I don’t know, I didn’t bother to count,” I shrugged.

Taylor frowned, and I could feel the bugs outside dancing around, even as a majority of the Swarm left to go back from where they came. “Several hundred,” she stated.

I shrugged again, “Sounds about right.”

“How long have you been doing this?” Mouse Protector asked, an eyebrow raised behind her helmet.

“Three or four hours-” I started to respond.

“You did *not* do this in four hours!” Herb objected.

I shot him a ‘duh’ look. “*As I was saying*, three to four hours *a day*.”

“For how many days?” my friend asked apprehensively, which didn’t make a ton of sense. It was just something I needed to do, and I really didn’t understand the sudden inquisition.

I thought about it, but everything had started to slide together, the days no longer having the crystalline quality they’d had before Leviathan had attacked. “You know when I asked Quinn to make the facial scanner?” I got a nod from the group. “He got it to me pretty quick. I think the same day. Since then.”

“*Dude,*” he said seriously. “That was *weeks* ago.”

I winced, “Yeah I know. I’m racing putrefaction here, and I’m losing, *badly*, but I can’t stop helping everyone else to focus on it. *This* bullshit is a really good example of why. If I wasn’t strong enough, or if everyone else wasn’t as well trained.” I shuddered.

“Dude, *let me help,”* Herb told me.

“The only reason I can do it is that I can screen the air. The smell is. . . *bad.* Even with that. Besides, to recover the bodies nowadays, you need Dryad, and you can’t use her powers,” I told him. “And it. . . dude, it *sucks*, and I wouldn’t wish that on *anyone*.”

“But you’re doing it?” Karen asked.

I shrugged, not really knowing what else to do. “Yeah? I mean, if I was a better fighter, or just not as *dumb*, we could’ve kicked Leviathan out *before* this happened.” Mouse frowned, not finding any flaws with my argument, and Taylor just looked sad. I could empathize. Herb just looked constipated, but I honestly didn’t know what he was thinking half the time.

“You three go back to base and wash up. Mouse, if you could grab Kayden, Theo, and Amy, I’d appreciate it. We’re gonna have a meeting after dinner on what to do about. . . *this*,” I announced, pausing as I realized I wasn’t using all my resources. “Actually, *Overwatch?* What happened to the Merchants after they left?”

“*They drove to the wall, and Skidmark made a pad that launched their vehicles over it. Other Merchants with trucks were waiting, and the vehicles that didn’t survive the jump were behind left, while the others moved to the getaway vehicles,”* he summarized. “*Panacea was able to stabilize the wounded, and return them to perfect health. Do you know what happened to the Anomaly?*”

That. . . was a good question. I looked to Taylor, and she shook her head. Feeding her a bit of power, her range expanded, and I piggybacked the connection, finding it. “It’s back in the Yellow Zone. Looks like it decided discretion was the better part of valor. If you see it cross the wall again, tell me and I’ll kill it.”

*“I will. Should I inform the others of the team meeting, and approach Toybox about anti-Master measures?*” he requested.

“God bless you,” I smiled, having not thought of them. “Yes to both. I’ll make sure to have you look over anything before I use it, in case there’s any. . . *backdoors*. Then maybe a joint project with Bell Tolls to see if there’s any way we could adopt it for mass production?”

*“I look forward to it,*” Quinn informed me.

It was a nice feeling, having others support you without asking, but without trying to manage you either. I didn’t mind supporting others, but it all seemed so one-way sometimes. Not that I *minded* helping others, but sometimes you just got. . . *tired.*

And I was *so* tired these days.

“Okay,” I clapped, startling the three around me, getting my head back in the game. “You guys, head back. I’ll take care of the trash. Oh, and get a sample of the thing’s blood for Amy. Can’t forget that.”

Taylor nodded, while Herb and Karen traded looks. “You gonna, you know,” the other man asked, miming a box. “Crate ‘em?”

I laughed at the idea. “*Why?* They’re attackers, who shot their way in, injured our own, tried to steal from us, and then tried to make us kill each other. No way in *fuck* are they going with those who lost their lives fighting the incarnation of watery death, knowing they’d likely perish but standing anyways to protect others. No, I’m going to do what you do trash.” I created a blood-red sun over my upturned hand. “I’m going to *incinerate* them. Shouldn’t take more than an hour, I think. I’ll be joining you guys for dinner, and then the meeting. If one of you could tell Victoria to make it I’d appreciate it.”

“I, I can help you,” Taylor offered, but I shook my head.

“You’ve had one hell of a day, or at least one devil of an hour, Lady Bug. I can heal your body, but minds, they take a bit more. Go back, take a shower, wash your suit, take a nap, and be ready for dinner and the meeting. *Okay?*” I asked her, kindly.

She hesitated, slowly nodding. “Okay.”

Karen and Herb looked hesitant as well, but, while I left the small star to light the space for them, I teleported back to the submerged dagger, pulled it out of the concrete, wiped it off, and got to work taking out the trash.

<AB>

Dinner was nice, the cooks making my favorite pizza: chicken, broccoli, and bacon with a white sauce. It was one of many they put out, and I was lucky enough to grab a couple slices, the first slices, actually, leaving the rest for the others. I hadn’t had time to take a shower, but forcing my costume to cover every inch of my body, and to run through my hair, cleaned me just as well.

That and a nice sweet tea was pretty calming. Disposing of trash was, in it’s own way, meditative, but there was a certain smell that you couldn’t really ignore, even with powers, that ruined it.

But it was a chore, just like any other. If it were fun, others would do it.

Then it was time for the meeting.

“So that’s what happened,” I laid out to those gathered. “Panacea, if it’s okay with them, can you double check my work? If you’re a biological Michelangelo, I’m Gallagher using a sandblaster that shoots healthiness.”

“You’re not exactly wrong,” she giggled, getting a raised eyebrow from her sister, which she didn’t notice.

They gave their permission, and were looked over by the expert. “Some definite damage to their brains,” Panacea commented, and as she saw me stiffen, she quickly added, “all healed! Your power puts people back together there where I can’t.” *Won’t* went unspoken. “It’s like Sherrel was after you healed her, but not as bad. I can only tell because I know how *your* power works.”

“So they’ll be fine?” I asked intently.

She just rolled her eyes, “Better than fine. They now have practically inhuman resistance to addiction. Not immunity,” she added, “But a single shot of heroin won’t get you addicted like it might some. *Don’t do heroin!*” she commanded them both.

“Oh, but I was gonna *totally* try that junkie lifestyle!” Mouse whined melodramatically. “Look how well it worked out for Squealer!”

“Don’t call me that!” the woman snapped.

“Mouse, that was uncalled for,” I reprimanded her, calmly.

She grimaced, “Sorry Tinker-tits. It’s just your ex that tried to make me take off Vejy’s noggin. I’m supposed to be givin’ *him* head, not removin’ it!”

“Which *isn’t her fault,* and she went cold turkey rather than stick around,” I reminded the older woman, before turning to look at Sherrel. “I don’t blame you for this,” I stated, with absolute honesty.

“Thanks,” she smiled, though it turned to a grimace. “I just wished I coulda helped.”

I nodded, “I appreciate the sentiment. Unfortunately we needed to move fast, and you don’t have anything really combat capable and *small,”* I specified, as she was about to bring up her truck-o’-death, the one that we’d put several hundred pounds of gold into. “That said, after we deal with this, if she thinks they’re ready, we might have something that could help. Though you’d need to train how to fight to either my or Mouse’s standards.”

I didn’t glance at Amy, but she knew what I was talking about. She looked conflicted, but gave me a slight nod all the same. “So, you said we’re gonna do something about the Merchants?” Victoria asked. “What is it? Do we even know where they are?”

“We do,” Overwatch stated, throwing up video on the table’s display. “The Merchants have, previously, been able to *literally* disappear to avoid detection. Without that ability,” he nodded to Sherrel, who looked a mix of ashamed at helping them and pleased that her contributions were recognized, “they can be followed. With no other traffic to blend in with, and having to avoid anomalies, it was quite easy.” The fleeing Merchants were shown, diving into the yellow zone, through one of my warning gates, down the remains of the Boardwalk, edging close to the red at one point, and out through another of my gates into the green, to their main base of operations. From there, and from the shift in color, a few hours later, the cars moved out to a few other locations, two leaving the city entirely.

“I lost them after that, when they joined traffic and I wasn’t able to jump satellites,” Quinn announced. “However, we’ve located half a dozen strongholds.”

“So, we gonna hit ‘em?” Herb asked.

I considered it, but shook my head. “No. No this needs to be decisive, but,” I looked around. “It can’t be us.”

“‘Cause of Tagg?” Herb asked.

“‘Cause of Tagg,” I agreed. “No, I was thinking of contacting Boardwalk. He’s been cooling his heels for a bit, and he owes me some favors. Not that he might consider this a favor.”

“What?” the shapeshifter asked, eyes wide. “No!”

Taylor added, “Isn’t doing this alone a bit much for. . . *him*?”

“He ain’t exactly known for bein’ subtle,” Herb added. “Just look at what happened with Oni Lee!”

“That’s not his fault, there was no way he could’ve known he was there. Or that that serial suicide bomber would start attacking cops!” I defended myself.

“But still, he’s kinda loud, ‘specially when he’s on his own. Maybe not the best idea,” Herb cautioned. “‘Sides, once he starts, the others’ll just run.”

“That. . .” I started to object, before I realized what he was saying. I was so used to using Boardwalk as a catspaw, except for the fact that he was *me*, that I forgot my other options. Prowler would be good for silent takedowns that could be known by the public, but that wasn’t going to help me here.

Shadow was an assassination specialist, and I didn’t need to kill another corrupt government or nuke another Master. I mean, I kinda *wanted* to both kill Tagg and nuke Snowball, but I’d promised the others to be hands off until he crossed the line, and Theo had re-worked the lightning gun into a chain-lightning taser, and I wasn’t gonna demand he make another low-key WMD again.

Dryad had the problem of being aligned with us, which wasn’t much of an issue as she was a pacifistic personality, a Rogue for our team of Heroes and self-proclaimed Villains (that were also heroes).

A Man of Wealth and Taste offered his. . . *professional* services in the back of my head, but that was a hard no. Both because this was *trash*, not *Evil*, that needed to be dealt with, but also because that persona. . . unsettled me. I hadn’t done any more work on it, but it still sat there, not *quite* in it’s little cubby-hole. And it sometimes made sense, which it *really* shouldn’t.

No, I needed to dust off my *Dark Wind* idea, or whatever the hell I’d called her. I had Grue’s power, which was the base, and I never really used it. Hell, I wouldn’t even have the issue of accidental overlap, as he was Gnomon now, and his darkness hadn’t pinged on my sense of his old power.

*That* reminded me of my need to find a parahuman-capable therapist for him, and maybe a few others on both Charlie’s team and mine. God knows they needed them, and while I’d have to be careful, more than one mental health professional having used their position for personal gain, it’d be helpful if I found one I could trust with the other’s well-being.

“Vejovis?” Quinn verbally prodded, and I realized I’d gotten lost in thought.

“That’s actually a very good point,” I told Herb, who looked surprised, along with half the table. “He has them, sometimes,” I told the rest reproachfully. “He’s just normally bad at explaining them. No, Boardwalk is all wrong for this. We’ll need to find another way.” I considered it. I had an idea, but I needed a distraction to throw others off the trail.

“Maybe your cousins?” I asked Herb, to show that when something happened, the others could truthfully say it seemed like it wasn’t my plan to act that way. “They can make themselves immune to poison, if they wish. That means we’ll all be able to no-sell their Master, and take them all down. Hmmm. . .”

Herb nodded, playing along with the ruse he’d suggested by turning down Boardwalk. He really was good with these multi-layered things, more than I gave him credit for sometime. “I’ll ask them, but they’ll probably say yeah. We’re all here to help. Even Curtis, in his own fucked up way.”

“Oh, right,” I said, bringing up a picture of the replicant. “This is Curtis, everybody, Break’s cousin. He’s kind of a. . . psychopath. Don’t show fear and you’re fine, and if he threatens you, remind him that I will *not* hesitate to follow through on *my* threat. Break’s got, like, a dozen cousins. They mass-Triggered, don’t ask, and they all have variations of the same base powers. The others are. . . out there, somewhere, but they’ll all eventually make their way here. Some of them are good people, if a bit course, but others, like Curtis, are. . . *not.*”

“Should you be telling us his name?” Victoria asked skeptically.

I shook my head, “He doesn’t *have* a cape name. Doesn’t see the need. Curtis, and his brother, who just calls himself ‘The Hurt’, are just as close as Boojack and Jackhammer, or Break and Enter, and the brothers are all a bit. . . odd, with a weird teleportation power. I don’t really know where the brothers all go when they’re not here, and they aren’t talking.”

“You’ve got an odd fam, Break,” Victoria observed, and the man in question just nodded solemnly.

“Either way, they’re not going anywhere any time soon, not with how we bloodied their nose. Or with how they bloodied their own nose. Whatever,” I deferred, turning to Amy. “So, your floor. Or would you rather I talk about your project?”

“I’ll talk,” she smiled, though the expression fell slightly. “But, before that, who’s Tagg?”

“What?” I asked, not understanding.

She looked between Herb and I. “You said you had to be careful ‘because of Tagg’. Who’s Tagg?”

“James Tagg,” Taylor told her, just as confused as I was. “Director of the PRT ENE? Kind of a dick? We talked about this last week.”

“Uh, no, we didn’t,” Amelia disagreed. “Wait, is that who you were complaining about?” she asked Glory Girl who nodded. “Yeah, first I’m hearing about this guy.”

“Panacea, we had a meeting,” Quinn told her, confused as well, but with an undercurrent of dread starting to creep into his tone. “You were there. We have *video*.”

“This is the first meeting I’ve been to in *weeks*,” she disagreed. “I’ve been busy working on my trees.”

“Trees?” Vicky asked. “Oh, those things! They done?” Amy nodded. “*Nice.*”

Overwatch frowned, eyes going distant. The screen on the table showed Panacea, in her robes, walking down the hall and entering the meeting room, the date of the meeting at the bottom. The perspective switched to what was obviously Quinn’s point of view, the smalltalk we had before the meeting playing over the speakers, shutting off when we got started, our lawyer not having recorded the more. . . *delicate* things we’ve talked about.

“See. . .” I started to trail off, Panacea white as a sheet.

“That. . . That wasn’t me,” she stammered, looking up, eyes wide in terror. *“That Wasn’t ME!”*

“I, you, she had your power. What do you mean it *wasn’t you?*” I demanded.

She turned to look to me, eyes darting back and forth, not really seeing me. “I’ve been in my lab. I’ve been in my lab! Fuck! I’ve been fucking *living* there! I had meals delivered, and the only time I wasn’t was when I was sparring with you, or sleeping, and sometimes I slept there too! I. . . *FUCK!* I haven’t even worn that stupid fucking robe in *ages!* I don’t even know where it *IS!”*

As she talked, things started to click into place. Conversations that didn’t connect. I’d assumed that my ability to See powers had been a way to ferret out Strangers, but if they could *have the person’s power too.*

“Kayden,” I said, panic welling in my own chest. “I know it might be embarrassing, but I *need you to be honest here.* *Have you ever kissed me?*”

*“WHAT!?”* she squawked, an expression of embarrassed, bewildered outrage on her face. “How could you *ask* me such a thing!?”

*“****ANSWER THE QUESTION!***” I commanded, brooking no disagreement.

“I, no, I’ve never, I’m,” her eyes flicked over to Herb, then back to me as I stood up, having *no* time for her fucking *pussyfooting*. “I have not, nor would I kiss you, Vejovis!” she declared.

*“FUCK!”* I swore, starting to pace. “We’ve got a fucking infiltrator. One that can *copy of the fucking powers of the person they’re impersonating!* You showed up Kayden, and wanted to spar, so we did, while I was trying out a new piece of Tinkertech, and then you started making out with me out of fucking *nowhere*, so I pushed you off and told you no. I just thought you weren’t saying anything because you were *embarrassed* which is what she, or, fuck it, *he*, wanted!”

“Oh. Shit. That means when I talked to you ‘bout powers?” Herb asked. I held up a hand, miming a vial, and shook it. He nodded.

“If it’s the one where we asked Overwatch over, no, that was me,” I told him and he relaxed, but I remembered what we *did* talk about in the meeting Faux-Amy. “Fuck, *fuck,* ***FUCK!***” I swore. “Zilla, base-wide sweep. I want to see if there’s two of the same person *anywhere* in the base!”

It only took her three seconds. “Robert Collins is on level three. Robert Collins is also on level sixteen.”

“*Fuck!”* I swore, feeling like I needed something stronger to say, but not willing to take the time to think of it. “Why didn’t that trip any kind of alarm!”

“Due to the nature of Parahuman powers, the ‘doubling of persons’ alert status is disabled by default,” Zilla calmly explained.

“Okay. Okay we’ve got the spy here. Damn. Fuck. Overwatch, have they ever been *you?*” I demanded a plan forming.

He shook his head. “No, if they had been, their travel through Eclipse’s systems would’ve left a very obvious trail.”

I nodded, “Okay. I can work with this. Overwatch, time to live up to your name. You’ll stay here, and we’ll break up into teams.” I reached under the table and started pulling out thin metal plates, emblazoning one side with my Mark, and tossing them, one at a time to Mouse, who figured it out instantly, putting her Mark on the other side, and started passing them out.

“Keep these on you. Mouse will be on one team, I’ll be on the other. I don’t know if they can replicate our gear, but even if they can, they might not be able to replicate active powers. And, hell, even if they can, a new Mark popping up will be a flag all it’s own,” I told them, pissed at myself that I’d missed it, so *sure* that I could See through any deception that I’d missed *all* the warning signs.

“Mouse, take Panacea to her lab and let her get suited up. Sherrel, you’re here with Overwatch, and if we see you out of this room there’s a good chance we’ll shoot you, as we’ll think you’re the infiltrator, even *with* a Mark. Zilla, status on the doubles?”

“They are both operating within normal parameters,” The Virtual Intelligence, and she *was* a Virtual Intelligence, stated. This would’ve been something an AI would’ve noticed *long* ago.

“I’m sorry. I-” Quinn started to apologize, but I waved a hand his way.

“Shut it, you’ve been just as busy as I’ve been. You aren’t an AI, you can’t sub-process yourself to spread out like they can. *This isn’t your fault*. I *knew* opening up this place would be inviting spies, I just didn’t think that, whoever the fuck did this, would send a fucking *power-copying Stranger.* God-damn, how many of those are there even *out there?*”

I had another ‘click’, as things continued to fall into place, little events that I’d been so busy, or worried, that I hadn’t given them any mind. “Vicky, you didn’t come into my office, asking to help, and I suggested sword lessons, did you?”

“Sorry, no,” she said. “I mean, MP’s helped me out some, but it was kinda outta the blue.”

“You floated in through the door, you *never* do that anymore,” I said, more to myself than her. “But ‘you’ were *using your power,* which made me not think anything of your questions. *Fuck,*” I swore, trying to remember that conversation in detail. I didn’t *think* I’d said anything damning there, but *I couldn’t remember.*

Karen returned, Panacea in armor, and Herb, Vicky, and Sherrel all swore, each of them taking a step back and, in the first two’s case, taking combat stances. Theo and Kayden had already dealt with her like this, as had Mouse, I knew about it, Overwatch was the all-seeing eye, but apparently Taylor had spied in on Amy as well. Or just asked. That was equally as likely.

“Panacea’s developed biological power armor. She has a set for all of us. It’s awesome. *Surprise*,” I told the three quickly, so we could get this asshole before he, or she, disappeared like a fart in the wind. “Now, with our squishy healer able to headbutt a *tank round*, let’s go hunt ourselves a *spy.”*