**Infringement 16.1**

It’d been a few more days, and that just told me how long this entire thing would take. I’d built another four shells of buildings, but the first was still being worked on. A *lot* of finnicky bits went into getting a building ready, and then there was the issue of utilities, which were going to be a pain to lay down. Thankfully, while we were building on the ruins of the old Brockton Bay, we could freely rip up anything in our way, closing down streets for as long as we needed to work on them, as we were the only ones around, and the only ones inconvenienced.

However, while everything *could* be done through normal labor, other than the construction of shells, that didn’t mean they *had* to be done through normal labor. Taylor, as Lady Bug, had started to become our premier electrician, of all things. With spiders, after all, one could do the impossible and ‘push’ cables through walls with ease, just sending them off while dragging the wires. It was a use I hadn’t thought of until I’d felt her doing it, and, upon asking her about it, learned that she was doing the work that would take others hours, needing to remove panels and carefully thread things at odd angles, in minutes.

I had to shake my head, wondering how peaceful the world might’ve been if people were allowed to use their powers commercially. I wasn’t stupid, the Conflict Drive would never let them be *wholly* peaceful, but a calmer world meant less powers, and thus less spins of the wheel for Cauldron as they tried to hit the Jackpot.

For now, we were looking at where to put the basics. Water. Power. Sewers. Things like that. There were possibilities, but they needed a *much* larger portion of even the Green Zone cleared before the uncertainties cleared up enough to line up with the plans, the web-like nature of utilities only able to flex so much before strands started to metaphorically ‘snap’, creating problems.

In a just world, steps would be taken to avoid that where possible, and the money would be spent to patch the problems that were created. In the real world, the cost of fixing those problems would be weighed the problems if they let them just be unpleasant, and the cheapest option was chosen.

There were a *lot* of benefits to being able to create materials, and thus wealth, Ex Nihilo. I knew it was going to mess with the economy, but, after what Leviathan had done, this was small potatoes, the value of an entire city lost in a day.

However it was going to be expensive, *ruinously* expensive rebuild the entire thing even without governmental ‘screw yourself for being different’ taxes and fees, which was one of the silver linings to how long it’d take, our revenue streams unaffected and able to continue pouring money.

Once Aeonic got *his* operation up and running, things would go even faster.

Until then, though, it was crawling forward on all fronts. I was taking at least an hour a day to train my own powers, as well as an hour to train Taylor and Panacea, the latter of whom had stopped complaining about her *own* training when she saw Lady Bug and I spar.

Several hours a day were spent collecting corpses from the cleared zones, and I’d started, *very carefully* going through some of the ones that Taylor hadn’t tagged with Break or Mouse Protector, tracking them down myself. It was grisly, but necessary, work.

Things started to settle, which was why I wasn’t *that* surprised, only annoyed, when Herb called me.

“Did ya hear?” he commed me, out of the blue.

“Did I hear *what?”* I replied, looking around, worried about an incoming threat.

“Did ya hear ‘bout Detroit?” he semi-clarified.

I dropped the air blades that’d sprung up around me, and turned back to trying to put the body into the metal box. Insect control let me remove the *hundreds* of insects that infested each corpse, which helped, *a little*, but I’d let the air-filtering drop when I’d gotten ready for attack and gagged at the smell. Scrubbing the air around me, I coughed, taking a few deep breaths of clean air, and responded, “I heard it’s a shithole here too.”

“Nah man, I mean yeah,” he agreed, “But it’s worse now. Way worse.”

Sealing the casket, I floated it out and stacked it on the skiff. The invisible creature that’d been stalking me for the last twenty minutes shifted to the other side of the street, able to be tracked by the movement of its breath. . . and the three flies I’d put on it. It’d been content to just follow me, but if it moved I was going straight up.

Floating into the next building, the body was half-covered in rubble, However, the pieces looked stable so I focused, creating iron bars to lift them up. “Because of powers?”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “But mostly the Nine.”

I paused the lift of the rubble. “I’m sorry, *what?”*

“The Nine hit Detroit,” the other man told me off-handedly, like he was talking about sports scores that he didn’t really care about.

Sighing, I asked him, “Could you *not* bury the lead?”

“What?”

“Why didn’t you *open with that?*” I clarified, starting to pull out the insects and prepping an air-platform to slide under it to pull it out. “What’s the damage?”

“Well, it *was* Detroit,” the Villain argued.

I stilled again. *“Was* Detroit? They *destroyed the city?*”

“Huh? No. I mean, *part* of it?” he asked more than told.

Groaning, I declared, “Okay, you’re not allowed to do briefings. *Ever.* Overwatch!” I called.

“Yes Vejovis?” Quinn’s voice chimed in on the comms.

“Slaughterhouse Nine apparently attacked Detroit,” I informed him. “Do you have details? Break’s report was lacking.”

“Hey!” the man in question complained.

“Am I wrong?” I asked.

There was silence for a moment. “I was gettin’ there,” he finally muttered.

Quinn didn’t comment on that, briefing me instead. “The Slaughterhouse Nine attacked Detroit last night. It was on the news, but I believe you don’t *watch* the news. As a public figure, that is something you should rectify,” he chided, which was fair. “Shatterbird began the attack by singing, and that was the cause of a large number of fatalities.”

“People wearing glasses, goin’ in their eyes ‘n shit,” Herb agreed sagely.

“Um,” I had to chime in. “Most glasses aren't made of glass. They’re plastics.”

My lawyer ignored us both. “They attacked several gangs, and one hero team. All but one of whom of the latter are dead, and the last is missing, A shaker who can control darkness.”

“Aw shit, they be recruitin’,” Herb swore.

“On a more positive note, Mannequin has been killed,” Quinn offered.

Now it was my turn to swear, “*Fuck.* I’d say lets jump them, but we aren’t ready.”

“If they are going to attack here, as you think they still will for some reason, would it not be better to have less members to fight?” the lawyer asked.

His statement showed that, while he was leagues beyond either of us at management, combat wasn’t his thing. “Would you rather go to court against a prosecutor that you know well with time to prepare your case, or one a little less skilled that you’re expected to go to court against in anywhere between an hour and a few seconds from now?”

“Ah. Point,” he acknowledged.

“Least we can still snip Sibby,” Herb tried to console. “And birdy’s gonna be goin’ bye-bye ‘gainst the cricket.”

I nodded, even though neither of them could see me as I sealed up the next body. Whatever the invisible creature was had started to close, and I decided to call it quits. “Fair enough,” I agreed lifting up, even as it realized I was getting away, trying to leap in for a pounce, but sixty miles per hour straight up meant I was long gone. I could sense it pacing through the bugs still on it, and ordered them to go into hibernation until they received further orders. The ‘tags’ would hopefully stay, and give Taylor or I a heads up if it got near either of us again, though that was no reason to relax as it might remove them. Or have friends.

“I’m sorry, can you explain that?” Quinn requested.

I laughed, glad to have it happen to someone else. “Make sure the comms are secure,” I commanded, continuing when he confirmed they were. “Translation: Siberian is a projection from an old guy in a wheelchair. Find him, and kill him, and The Siberian will be dispersed. And we have something that can cancel out sound that we’re working on, and with that medium no longer accessible Shatterbird is useless.”

“Ah. And you haven’t shared this information with the PRT because,” he started to ask, before finally catching himself, “Or do they already know?”

“Tippy-top’s in the know, everyone else’s fuckin’ shrooms,” Herb told him.

“Kept in the dark and fed fertilizer,” Quinn noted. “Of course. Would you mind if I spread the information around to others?”

That. . . was a difficult question. If someone killed the Siberian first, there was a chance they’d replace him/her with someone else, someone we didn’t know the secret to killing and someone that could blind-side us. However, the Siberian was *powerful*, Manton having drunk the same type of untempered Vial that’d given the *Triumvirate* their powers. I wanted to *See* him and get that power for my own, but with a limited number of slots, and the probability that it’d be a Major power, the equation had changed. “Break?” I asked, wanting his opinion.

“It’s a good fuckin’ question,” he replied, mirroring my own thoughts. “Shit man. I almost wanna say no, but I’m *not* lookin’ to fightin’ her, even knowin’ what she can do. Then there’s the people she’s gonna kill.”

I blinked, having, *somehow*, forgotten that the S9 were actively out there murdering other people even when they *weren’t* here, or not in the news. “Do it,” I commanded. “Cauldron might get pissy, but I don’t care. Without Manton, they lose a nearly invulnerable defense and offense. Keep it quiet, I don’t want people to know the info came for us.”

“But I thought you wanted-” Herb started to object, but I cut him off.

“Not worth the lives. Whoever they get to replace Manton, they won’t be nearly as strong,” I disagreed.

Quinn chimed in, querying, “Manton. As in William Manton, the founder of parahuman science?”

“Yep. You know that Vial you drank? That one was locked down, but most aren’t. There’s a sliding scale where the stronger the possible power, the more powerful the power you got. The one that Alexandria drank had a one in ten *survival* rate, but they all have the side effect of healing you of any fatal diseases or disorders. She had cancer. Manton’s daughter did too, and, against Cauldron’s advice, he fed her one.”

“And she became The Siberian?” The lawyer asked, catching himself. “No, you said the Siberian was a projection. She died, and he drank another one, didn’t he?”

I nodded, coming down over the warehouse where we’d been storing the coffins. It was almost full. “Like a familial Romeo and Juliette, only *he* survived, and went insane. Not sure if it was the power that did it to him, or the fact that it gave him a projection in the form of his dead daughter, or what, but either he found the Slaughterhouse Nine, or they found him, and they’ve been together ever since.”

There was silence on the line, “Then why is she naked? If that was my daughter. . .”

“Dude’s nuttier than a payday,” Herb offered, and I could practically hear the shrug.

“Considering that Manton’s the one that makes his not-daughter eat people, that’s not an inaccurate assessment,” I agreed, starting to lift and drop the boxes, the steel construction letting me do so up the ceiling without issue. “How’s Phoenix Point coming along?”

“Slowly,” was the response. “And we need to talk about defense.”

“Defense?” was *my* response. “Have they been attacked?”

Quinn put my fears to rest. “No, not yet, but it’s more than that. Our security scared away a group that was investigating it, and from the truck they came in, they were likely thieves. Accord’s plan does not take into account a staggered deployment of services, which is on me. We didn’t think about the time it took to build.”

“How ‘bout a fence?” Herb proposed, and I kept silent as Quinn considered it.

The lawyer considered that, slowly going, “That would work. Dryad could build it out of Crimson Oak. We haven’t had anything wander in from deeper in, but it’s a matter of time. I know you’re busy, but it’s the quickest way to manage this.”

“I’ll guard her,” I agreed, thinking of how I’d sell this. I’d already explained that Dryad was *very* shy, suggesting it was due to prior trauma, hiding away most of the time. I’d had her go out ‘alone’ in Eclipse a few times, puppetting her from afar, but her appearances were few and far between. “I don’t want to have to have her move it more than once a week, but she can extend it as we clear out the city. I’ll probably also put up a fence around the Yellow Zone.”

“Not the Red?” Quinn asked.

“No, the line between Red and Yellow is hazy, and the kinds of things in the Red Zone might cut right through it,” I disagreed, thinking of the silver worms and the cerberus. “Yellow Zone to Green that’s less of an issue, and it’ll also hopefully keep some poor soul from wandering inside and getting mulched. Also, figure out what kind of setup we need. I’d rather not do twenty foot tall battlements, Great Wall of China style. We could, but it’d take forever and be a cast iron *bitch* to move.”

“I’ll ask our team,” was his answer. “We’ll have the plans to you by tomorrow.” Huh, I didn’t know we *had* a team for that, but, having poked through the massive CYOA style program Accord had sent us, I could understand the need. “That brings us to utilities.”

“Scout the spots that have the most flexibility,” I ordered. “The northern Green Zone is almost a seventh of the city, and we’ve got some room to work with if we need to push outside of the previous city limits if we need them, though leave at least two hundred feet to stop jurisdictional issues,” I warned, “Or whatever the team suggests, but enough room that, if we needed, we could build a perimeter wall.”

“Do you think we’ll need one?” was the predictable, immediate question.

I considered that. “No, but we’ve got at least two different threats ‘in containment’, Nilbog and the Machine Army. If something goes wrong, I want the option for a perimeter defense.”

“Goin’ old school?” Herb asked, and I *could* hear his grin.

Parking the Skiff, I used created wood to bar the doors, twisting them through the handles. I didn’t think anyone would want the bodies, but with the discussion we were having, that might be an issue, and they might not even know what was *in* the boxes, just that there *were* boxes, so they should be grabbed. A *pull* and I was back in my office. “One more thing, Overwatch, Break, come to my office please.”

Quin stepped out of static, taking a seat, before holding his hand out. With a wet *pop* Herb was there too. “Huh, got it to work?” I asked the smaller man.

“I need their name and unobstructed view of their face in person to ‘call’ them,” He explained, having solved that mystery on his own. “I did not have the latter with The Lady, Bug. As you can guess, the restrictions make using it offensively a bit trickier. Something I’m *perfectly* fine with,” he added with a smile.

“So what needed us here?” Herb asked.

Taking put up a sound bubble, I unlocked my desk, pulled up the false bottom in the drawer, and pulled out the Mirror Vial. “This.”

“Is that one of the special ones, like mine?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, it’s an *un*-locked one. However, *I* can lock it.” I grabbed the paper I’d written down the possible powers on, along with the downsides. “Here’s *some* of the powers it could give, along with the mutations and side-effects that come with. I was thinking, once we find someone to give it to, we could let *them* pick their power.”

“Wha’? *No,*” Herb insisted. “Dude, I know you’re tryin’ to make it breezy, but that’s a *bad* fuckin’ idea.”

Quinn gave the Vial a speculative look. “From what I understood, that wasn’t possible. Can the people you get these from do that?” I shook my head. “Then, no. Furthermore, tell *no one else* you can do so, even Lady Bug, Panacea, or Mouse Protector. You seem to be getting close to those three,” he explained and my confused look.

“Okay, *why?*” I asked, not seeing the issue.

“Three can keep a secret if two of them are dead,” the lawyer quipped, with the air of someone delivering a quote. “Every additional person you tell increases the chances that your ability to keep it drops by *quite* a bit. I’d’ve suggested you hadn’t told either of us, if I could. What do you think the ‘capeinati’ would do if they knew you could do that.”

“Jack him, tie ‘im up, and fuck him up worse than Coil did Dinah,” Herb immediately answered.

Quinn just nodded, as if he expected the answer, and I had to admit that my friend wasn’t exactly *wrong.* “I thought so. No, Vejovis, pick what you think is best. I can give you some advice on what might be taken easier,” he stated, taking out a pen and crossing off the ‘Flip someone’s personality for five minutes’ option, which I’d only written down because it *was* an option, knowing I’d never lock it down in that manner’. “But it needs to seem random, and a ‘take what you get’ procedure. Word will eventually get back to them that you’re using the vials, which they’ll expect, but if people are given a *choice*, that will get back to them too, and we can’t allow that.”

“That said,” he paused, “If, in a few years, I ask for some for my family, I request that you help me choose. Hypocritical, possibly, but rank hath its privileges. I won’t tell them what they’re getting, but avoiding some of the negative effects,” he tapped the entry that would give someone reflective skin in exchange for the ability to turn anything, including themselves, invisible, “if at all possible.”

I didn’t really like it, wanting to let people get the powers that *they* wanted, but I could understand it, and even a guarantee that their power wouldn’t kill them or permanently handicap them was better than what they’d get from Cauldron. “Fine. Look over the list and tell me which one to go with. I might run some hypotheticals past you, but that’ll be it.”

He gave a nod and disappeared into static, leaving just the two of us as I put the Vial back. “Speaking of which, if you can grab more, it’ll be helpful.”

He chuckled, “I’m not exactly their fav right now, but I’m takin’ their trash. Even warned me they might kill some people with ‘im. Shoulda seen their look when I said I didn’t care. So, we doin’ movie night again?” Herb asked, changing the subject.

“Yeah, I was thinking Alien, then Aliens next time,” I replied, going with it. “Pose them as a primer for dealing with Red Zone creatures.”

“. . . Ya *want* to give them nightmares?” my teammate asked skeptically.

I shook my head, even though he wouldn’t see it. “No, I want them to, if something happens, be able to *fight Nightmare creatures.* If I wanted to give them Nightmares, I’d have them watch the copy of Event Horizon we have in our library. The *original* cut.”