**Infringement 16.x (Vista)**

Missy Byron was. . . not having a good day. Good week. Really the whole *month* had kinda sucked. Year? Well, January had been okay.

Things just kept getting *worse.*

It’d started about two months ago, with the ABB bombings, which had led to Gallant and Glory Girl getting back together. Oh, and also deaths. A *lot* of deaths. But really, her and Dean had finally had a patrol together, and things were going so *well*, and then Oni Lee decides that he’s gonna stop holding back and just blow up *everything*, and then they almost *died*, and then apparently Miss Militia attacked the guy that saved them so she couldn’t even *thank* him, even if he did look kinda villain-y, and she stayed by Dean’s bed and everything but then *she* came back and it was like Missy might not even have existed!

And then, Leviathan attacked!

And she almost died, *again,* but she got saved by a giant bird, which was kinda cool, but Brockton Bay was *gone*, including her room, and then they got moved around, until they were finally told to set up in an underground base, like a *villain*, or like Vejovis, so she guessed it wasn’t villainous, only she guessed it was now?

And then there was this week. It was an open secret that they’d arrested him, but no one knew *why*, but then they’d been told to say they *didn’t* have them, which just wasn’t hero-like at all! She’d been told she couldn’t see him, and the one time she’d try to go anyway, the officers had been *really* mean.

They’d picked up a few more teammates, one in the Wards and two for the Protectorate, but none of them wanted to spend any time with her, and Francine, the girl who’d been an independent hero from a nearby town, looked sad all the time, so Vista had tried to cheer her up, which just seemed to make things *worse*.

And then there was today.

“What do you mean Dean’s *‘gone’*?” she demanded, hands on her hips, in the Wards’ ready room.

Dennis sighed, “I mean he’s resigned. Left. Thrown in the towel. Beat feet. Got while the going wasn’t good. He was, in fact, not too legit to quit. And what’s worse, if we see him, we’re supposed to take him in.”

“What?” Missy asked. “*Why?*”

The time-stopper sighed. “Don’t until you’re officially told, but we’re supposed to take him in for ‘Master/Stranger’ testing. Probably why he quit by phone call, instead of doing it in-person. Didn’t want to end up disappeared like Vejovis,” he pointed out, tapping his foot to indicate the lower level.

Missy frowned, wanting to say that the new Director wouldn’t do that, but she didn’t know the man. He *was* a Director, though, so he couldn’t be *that* bad, right? They wouldn’t let people like that be in charge. People said bad things about Piggot, even Dennis, but the woman *did* care, and while it was frustrating to be held back, she understood that the Director didn’t want them getting hurt.

She’d seen first-hand what happened if you went in under-prepared, even if she didn’t think the answer was sitting around and not doing *anything*.

“And he’s not the first,” Clockblocker chimed in.

“What do you mean?” she asked, wishing that people *told* her things, instead of keeping them from her, because she was *young*. She had more experience being a hero than any of the other Wards here, after all!

“Dauntless and Velocity are gone too. Transferred, instead of quitting. Triumph too,” he added, dropping more metaphorical bombs. “They tried to throw Rory into Master/Stranger, but his dad made a stink, so he’s out. *They* at least got to keep their pay.” Missy gave him a questioning look, and he explained, “You know how almost all of pay’s held until we’re adults?”

She nodded. She didn’t really *like* it, but it’d been explained to her, and it made sense. However, for him to mention it, “You mean?” she gasped.

“Yep. Taggy ‘confiscated’ it, to ‘protect’ him until they’re sure he’s not ‘Mastered’,” Dennis said, with air quotes. “And he’ll do it to any of us that try to leave.

Fracine, who’d been off to the side, gave a bitter laugh. “That’s not all he’ll do,” she commented, voice sad, and angry, as it almost always was. Her long blonde hair, which was showing dark roots, hung limply around her face, making it hard to read her expression.

“What do you mean?” Clock asked intently, but she just shook her head.

“I can’t. . . just. . . don’t,” she said, shuddering slightly. “I-”

Before she could finish her statement, alarms went off, lights flashing in their ready room. “Attention,” A voice called. “Parahuman Prisoner is escaping. Lethal force is authorized. Repeat, Parahuman Prisoner is escaping, and lethal force is authorized. All authorized personnel are to prevent the prisoner from escaping. Warning, Master power confirmed. Repeat, warning, Master power confirmed. Lethal force is authorized.”

The three teens looked at each other, not sure. They didn’t *have* any prisoners, as far as she knew, except for. .

The door burst open, without even the warning to mask up, and two officers stepped in, though the first thing she noticed is that they didn’t have containment foam sprayers, but assault rifles. “Come with us,” One of them barked, as he saw the three still-seated Wards. “What are you doing? You're needed.”

“To fight who? *Vejovis?* I’d rather not die today, thanks,” Dennis replied, only for the officer to lift his rifle, and point it at him. “Are you fucking *serious?*”

“If you aren’t doing your job, you’re Mastered,” the officer almost sneered, though it was hard to tell through the helmet. “So are you Mastered, or are you coming with us?”

“*Please,*” Francine asked, already putting on her helmet, as she whispered, “*for your family.*”

“What?” Clockblocker asked, saying what Missy was thinking, before his eyes widened in realization. “Oh you *bastards.* *Fine,*” he spat, understanding something she didn’t, grabbing his helmet and standing up. “Come on Vista, we need to go to prove we’re not ‘Mastered’.”

She didn’t know what he was talking about, as if there was even a *hint* they were supposed to be Mastered, then the procedure was to con-foam them and keep them isolated, not to bring them *into* a fight, where, if they *were* Mastered, they could do a lot of damage.

“Smith, Clarkwell,” Dennis noted as they were being escorted down the hall. “You guys new? Where’d you transfer from?”

They got into the elevator, and the one who talked nodded. “Madison.”

“Director Tagg’s last posting?” Clockblocker nodded. “Lot of Mastering problems there. So, we’re going to be fighting Vejovis?”

The doors opened, to the sound of screaming and gunfire, the man’s answer lost. At the end of the hallway were half a dozen PRT officers, behind a hastily made barrier, firing assault rifles down the hall. The two troopers that were with them started running forward, even as a long brown tentacle lashed out, piercing one of the troopers shoulder, and dragged him, screaming, down the hallway. The others held their fire just for a moment, the missing man’s rifle still going off, before a wet, tearing sound could be heard, and they opened fire once more.

“Yeah, *no,*” Clockblocker noted, hand shaking as he hit the ground floor button, only for a chime to sound a lock symbol to display itself instead of a number. “Well, *shit.*”

From the wall behind the officers, an odd form pulled itself out of the wall. A woman made of wood, steel, and stone who, as she stepped out, attracted the attention of two of the officers, who turned and opened fire, wood splintering, metal denting, and stone chipping, but her hands lengthened and wooden claws shot forward, sinking into one officer before she *pulled,* tearing the man in half with a now familiar sound.

Blood splattered in every direction as the man, not quite dead, screamed, weakly firing his rifle even as he was tossed  at another trooper, a third pierced by another wooden tentacle from the other direction, another wet sound echoing down the hall, the light coming from the wall suddenly red.

Dennis tried to hit the door close button. It didn’t work either.

The troopers finished gunning down whatever was down the hall, turning their guns on the Case 53 behind them, who didn’t seem to care as she physically ripped apart the troopers, eventually losing cohesion as she thrust a hand through the last troopers chest, taking him down with her, leaving only silence.

“What. The. Fuck,” Clockblocker swore, as Missy, shaking herself, ran forward. “Vista, wait!” he called as she moved over to one of them, the one that'd forced them here at gunpoint, and tried to see if there was anything she could do. He deserved to be reprimanded for violating protocol, or fired, or something, not. . . *that.*

But he was dead. They were *all* dead.

Looking down the hall she saw the entrance to the stairwell, where she could hear the distant sounds of more gunfire. An explosion went off somewhere above her, the walls shaking, but over everything, quietly, but with an odd piercing quality to it, she heard a single set of footsteps.

They didn’t stop, and almost sounded like they were everywhere, but she could tell they were coming from below, though she didn’t know how.

Clockblocker and Francine, *Flow* now, both moved up behind her. He stood next to her, staring, while Flow, shivering, put a hand up. Some of the blood around them, which was spreading in pools, swirled up into a sphere before her.

“Wait, I though you could only do that with water?” Dennis asked, glancing over at Francine.

“Liquids, actually,” she said, shaking, eyes facing forwards as she got ready to fire it. “I just like water. Feels better.”

Clock laughed, though it was strained. “Wait, you can control blood, and your name’s Flow? Damn, that’s *almost* as good as my name.”

“Wha-*ewww,*” Vista shuddered. “Clock, that’s *disgus-*”

The three of them froze, the sound of the footsteps getting, not louder, but seemingly closer. Another of the wood-women pulled herself out of the wall, turning towards them, only to be hit in the chest by the blood ball, which forced her back, freezing solid as it stuck her to the wall she just emerged from.

The Case53-no, that wasn’t right, Missy thought. The woman didn’t seem to be *there* in her sense. The *projection* started to wave an arm forward, fingers extendinging, but they stopped after only a couple of feet as Clockblocker stepped in front of both girls, hands out, ready.

The construct looked at them, head tilting in confusion, before it seemed to ignore them. “Um, what?” Dennis asked, as the not-a-woman looked down at the crystalline blood on her chest, flexing, and cracking it.

Flow raised another basketball-sized blob of blood, but Clock put a hand up. “Wait,” he said, as the construct broke free, shattering its bonds with seeming ease, picking red bits of ice off itself, and looking down the stairwell.

Missy frowned, watching, hoping to get a sense of who was coming, but, as far as she could tell, there was only one person in that direc-now there was no one. She shivered, never having felt anyone *die* with her power. She’d *seen* people die before, it was just something that happened when you were a hero, but never so clearly through her power. Then again, before she started training with Vejovis, she’d never really focused on that aspect of her power before.

However, the footsteps continued to come.

Looking around, she tried to figure what to do. She could grab one of the guns, the one that Vejovis gave her having been confiscated, but she’d practiced with a pistol, not a rifle, and they looked *huge*.

And it wasn’t like it’d helped them.

Warping space in the hallway, stretching it out so it was over a thousand feet long, instead of a couple dozen, she waited along with the others.

The steps came up the stairs, and, turning, *Vejovis* stepped through the doorway, costume spotless.

Flow launched her sphere, but, lengthened as the hall was, Vejovis had more than enough time to step back, letting it splatter on the wall next to him. He turned, slowly, to look at Francine as she pulled together two more balls, one in each hand. “No, *don’t*,” Clock commanded her, and Missy saw both Flow and Vejovis stop, turning to look at him, the sound of *stepping* stopping as well.

*It’s him,* Vista realized, as Clock turned back to look at Vejovis. “If we don’t fight you, you won’t hurt us?” he called. The sound shouldn’t’ve carried all the way to him, lengthened as the hall was, but the hero nodded. “Okay,” Dennis agreed, stepping back and putting his hands down.

Vejovis turned to look at her, his expression bland, and the white blank spaces in his mask that his eyes seemed to bore into her. It took her a moment before she realized he was waiting for her to let him through. She un-stretched the space, wondering how he knew, and he calmly walked towards them.

The wood-woman nodded to him, turning and heading back down the stairs, where the sounds of distant gunfire still sounded. As he picked his way through the bodies, his steps sounded, stopping once more as he came before them.

“Dennis, Missy, person I don’t know,” he commented, and it took her a moment before she realized he’d used her *real* name.

“Dude, not cool,” Clockblocker replied, only for Vejovis’ head to snap over to him in an instant, with the same calm, somewhat amused expression.

“Not cool is being arrested on trumped up charges, tortured, isolated past the bounds of the law, attempts made to unmask me, drugged, and then having my teammates and family threatened with death if I didn’t submit,” the man commented, smiling, even as Flow shivered. “You too? Don’t worry, he’s in *no* shape to follow through with them anymore.”

“What shape *is* he in?” Clockblocker asked, unsure.

Vejovis chuckled good naturedly. “Oh, he seems to have lost his head. Then again, with his tendency to threaten those he should be protecting, that’s *hardly* unexpected. Now, Dennis, I’ll offer you the same choice I made Hannah. Ah, ‘Miss Militia’,” he corrected. “Stand aside, as you did while *I* was in need of assistance, and I shall not harm you. Fight me, and you will be an enemy combatant, and treated as such.”

“Enemy Combatant?” Missy asked, confused at the odd term, one that tugged at her memories.

“You have standing bases, uniforms, and so on. Your organization has ambushed me, tortured me, *threatened my people,”* he said, for a moment his calm face shattered and she could almost *feel* the *rage* pouring off him, before it was gone, like it never existed, and his expression was placid again, “Well, if that’s not a declaration of war, I don’t know what is. But, unlike your organization, I do not threaten noncombatants. So, which one are you? I think I already know what *you’re* going to say, Missy, but I’d like answers from you two.”

“I-” Dennis started to say, when the far door slammed open and three PRT officers opened fire with rifles on them.

Glowing blue hexagons appeared before her, Clock, and Flow, even as Vejovis grunted, and Vista twisted the space, sending the rest of their shots to the side. She looked to see the flattened bullets drop from his costume, even as he politely requested, “One moment please,” and tapped his arm.

Typing on something she couldn’t see, just like when he flew that aircraft in the Zones, he nodded. As he was doing so one of the PRT officers tossed a grenade, which bounced on nothing at all, and rolled back towards the men. She expected Confoam, but took a step back as *fire* exploded outwards, even as the men tried to dodge, an explosion, larger than a grenade should’ve been able to make, billowed out, flowing along her bent space and hitting the wall.

When the flames cleared, the hallway was a smoking ruin, the remains of the officers hard to make out from the scorched blackness of the rest. Vejovis turned his head and murmured something, the floor rippling as metal grew up to support the partial destroyed wall.

“Kaiser?” she asked, looking around, recognizing the power.

“Dryad,” he corrected. “Similar power, but she isn’t as. . . *limited* as he was.”

“They. . . they tried to kill us?” Clock asked, shocked.

Vejovis nodded. “Tagg’s orders. I’m to be treated as a *permanent* Human Master, like Heartbreaker, or the Simurgh, despite having no such power, so anyone around me is treated as a lethal threat. Found that out when I stopped and asked an office-worker for instructions. Just be glad that, while I favor the Golden Rule, I’m not a hardliner in taking it to its logical conclusion.”

“What?” Missy asked, confused. Looking around, she saw she wasn’t the only one.

The hero smiled, and it was not a very nice smile. “If you are to treat others how you want to be treated, and you wish people to respect your choices, then, *obviously,* you must also treat others as they treat you, or else you are not holding them to the same standard you’re holding yourself to, not treating others as *you* wish to be treated. Thus, to start with, if you want to be treated kindly, you treat others kindly, but if they treat you harshly, they are treating others as they wish to be treated, so to maintain the golden rule you *must* do so in kind.”

Clockblocker held up a hand, “I’m. . . I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works.”

“Only because the Golden Rule is not used as an *actual* philosophy, but as a way to chain others by demanding they follow it only when you want to, as a *leash* around their neck while the accuser, who does not do so themselves, tries to *force* you to do what they want,” Vejovis commented,” and, for a moment, the walls *buzzed*, seemingly in response to the anger in his tone, even as his face remained calm, though it was becoming more and more obvious that his expression was a mask, just like the rest of his helmet.

There was a moment of silence, “But, now’s not the time for philosophy. I was leaving, and, since you are not trying to stop me, I wish you a good day.”

He took two more oddly echoing steps, before Vista followed him, calling, “Wait!” He paused, though he didn’t turn around. “If the others don’t fight you, will you let them go?”

“I *said,* I would, Missy,” he chided, annoyance creeping into his tone. “*Repeatedly*.”

She didn’t want to, having those officers shoot at her, officers she *thought* she could trust, was, *scary,* but she had to. “Then I’m coming with you!”

At this Vejovis *did* turn around, looking at her inquisitively, but it was Dennis that asked, “What? *Why?* Vista, they just tried to *kill* us!”

“You said Miss Militia knew you’d do that, right?” Missy pressed. Vejovis nodded. “But the others don’t know that! If I come with you, I can tell them!”

The hero stared at her for a moment, before he chuckled. Unlike before though, this one didn’t carry the same harsh sound, but was amused. “From the mouth of babes,” he commented, ignoring her ‘I’m thirteen!’. “Apparently poor communication isn’t something that’s only a problem for *my* team. All right, just be aware I am only giving that opportunity to parahumans, and office personnel. Uniformed combatants will be treated as such, and given the ambushes they’ve pulled, even if I was so inclined, they are receiving no such quarter.”

She nodded, her heart beating quickly, and stepped forward, only for Clock to grab her shoulder. “You don’t need to do this, Vista,” he whispered.

“I *do,*” she told him. “And you should too!”

“Dennis prefers to try to fix a broken system from within, and coming with me might go badly for you, Missy,” Vejovis observed. They could hear the distant pounding of feet from around the corner, and Vejovis looked off to the side, only for gunfire to sound, followed by screaming and explosions. “Though I will do my best to keep you safe, it’s what happens *after* I leave that he’s concerned about, which speaks well of both his foresight and his character.” His mouth quirked upwards into a half smile. “And if you ever wish to switch teams, Dennis. . .”

Clockblocker looked at him, then gestured to the death and destruction around them, reminding Missy who’d focused on the Hero of what they were standing around, the smell of iron and burned flesh heavy in the air. “Seriously dude? *No.*”

Vejovis shrugged, “Until you act against me and mine, like Hannah has, the offer’s on the table. Now, Missy, I’d believe it’d be best if we leave, before they try something more *drastic*.” He turned, and slowly started to walk away, towards the sound of gunfire and screaming, though it’d been tapering off.

“Vista, he’s a *Villain,*” Clockblocker whispered, and Vejovis’ step faltered for a moment, before he kept going.

“And if what he’s said is true, *so are we,*” she shot back pulling away from him and running up to the man. “You, um, you said you were *tortured?*”

He nodded, and they turned the corner, where another battle had taken place, the remains of several PRT officers splattered across the area, the remains of another wood woman leaning against a wall. A door at near the end opened, a man in a shirt and tie peering out at the carnage, and at Vejovis and Vista, before quickly closing it again.

“You know the Protectorate cape with the paralyzing touch? The one that makes you cramp up?” he asked, and she had to shake her head no.

“Um, people have been transferring out, like Velocity, and we’ve gotten a lot of new people,” she explained. “We haven’t gone on patrol.”

He nodded, as they headed to a doorway, taking the stairs up to the next level. Security panels having slammed into place to stop them from just going up to the ground floor, meaning they’d have to keep criss-crossing back and forth to go up, unless they could override the elevators.

Vejovis paused, motioned for her to stand behind him, and slammed a fist into the door, which flew backwards as an explosion went off, but it didn’t touch them. Two doors opened, and gunfire poured out, only for Vejvis to point to one, then the other, firing something that caused the attack to stop.

Then he kept walking.

“Well, they paralyzed you by making every muscle lock up. Worse for Brutes than normal people, probably. And I was kept in that state, near constantly, for days,” he commented, as if he didn’t care. “If I didn’t also have enhanced healing, which they didn’t know about, I’d likely need medical attention, and it was after that that I was drugged with Tinkertech truth serum, interrogated, and my team threatened. The last was the last straw,” he added, unnecessarily, as they turned another corner, only to see several people in office-wear stuck to the walls with wood, all of it connecting to another Dryad.

He gave the wood-woman a questioning look, and she nodded to the pistols and rifles on the ground. “Ah,” he nodded, not breaking stride.

“What?” Missy asked, not understanding.

“I asked her, them, *her,*” he double corrected, “to eliminate the enemy combatants, but, lacking the uniform, she merely captured those people. They’re either noncombatants who tried to fight, which is possible, or PRT thugs that realized I was only attacking those in uniform, so took them off, which is probable. And also, I believe, a war crime, but when has that stopped the PRT, right?” he shrugged.

Glancing back at the people, who were all glaring at *both* of them, she had to ask, “What are you going to do to them?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “I’m not sure they were complicit, so they can just enjoy being trapped, now that I have an ally who can do so. I just don’t know if *they* knew, and thus are not worth the effort.”

“Everyone knew,” she replied, before, slapping her hands over her mouth, wondering if she’d just gotten them killed. “About you being here. Not the, um, torture.”

“I’m aware,” Vejovis nodded, and she breathed a sigh of relief. They went up the next set of stairs, only two left, and he added. “I’m surprised you’re taking this as well as you are.”

Vista hesitated, thinking of the bodies she’d been passing. “I’ve. . . I’ve seen worse,” she told him, trying to sound braver than she felt. “Lung would burn people. And Kaiser would leave them impaled. And Hookwolf. . .” she trailed off. “And, when Leviathan attacked. That was worse.”

They reached the next level, and he stopped, sighing, and raised his hand, pointing it at the heavy metal door, while he tapped the air in front of him. From his forearm came metal spikes, which he fired, one after another, through the door, the metal cycling around his limb like a revolver. Gunfire started to hit the other side, but while whatever Vejovis was using punched right through, the bullets couldn’t, and then it was quiet again.

Opening the door, there were six headless bodies in the hall, each one wearing body armor, the kind that would go under the PRT Officer’s uniform, and with rifles and grenades. Six ruined helmets were at the far end of the hall. “So they’ve figured it out. Dryad, change of plans. Eliminate anyone wearing the uniform, or,” he paused, “a helmet and bulletproof vest. No, leave the ones you’ve captured alive. Thank you.”

The sound of gunfire came from above them.

“Yes, Leviathan was worse. If only I hadn’t trusted the PRT, we could’ve stopped him sooner,” Vejovis sighed, turning to look at her. “Thank you for your help, by the way, Mi-*Vista.* Without you, it would’ve been much, *much* worse.”

The sheer sincerity in his voice made her look at him, as well as the *sadness.* “Um, you’re welcome?” she asked, not sure how to respond.

He shook his head, “If you need a favor, you may ask, though I might not say yes.”

“Um, can you stop killing people?” she immediately responded.

“No.”

She couldn’t help but pout, “But you *said-*”

“I said you can ask. I will not treat those that go after me and mine with kid gloves, just because you don’t know how bad they are,” he told her, shaking his head.

She thought, hard, as he started to walk again. “Oh, if we come across any heroes, even if they attack you, can you give me a chance to talk?”

“I’d argue the Protectorate, unlike, apparently, the Wards, *has* no heroes, at least here,” he replied. “But accepted. They attack, and I will defend. If neither of us are injured, then you can say your piece, and if they attack again, *then* I will treat them as combatants.” He reached into a belt pouch, and pulled out a little featureless, seamless metal sphere, with a wooden button. “Press this when you want to talk. It won’t hurt anyone, I promise.”

They went up the second to last set of steps, and, looking at the metal barrier, she had to ask, “Couldn’t you break through that?”

“I could,” he nodded.

“Then. . . why don’t you?” Missy questioned.

“Because this isn’t about escaping, Vista, this is about sending a message,” he informed her, as they walked through another set of hallways, and through another battlefield, the blood that’d pooled on the ground not showing on his red boots as he walked through it, practically the same color. “They attacked me when I was with friends, without warning, and in a way that could’ve easily hurt others. Even if I can stop that method from working again, they took one of mine and threatened to kill her if I wouldn’t cooperate. This is merely informing them, and others, of what happens if you do so.”

“Oh. I’m, I’m surprised we haven’t seen anyone,” she commented, trying to change the subject. “Any heroe-any Protectorate,” she clarified, trying not to upset him. He seemed calm, but she knew that wasn’t real, and he was like. . . a snowball filled with razor blades, where if you held it right, you were fine, but if you weren’t, you’d get cut.

“That’s because they’re waiting for us in the lobby,” he informed her, which ended the conversation.

They walked up the last stairs, and he paused for a moment, form blurring twice, before he grit his teeth in pain. She started to ask if he was okay as he held his hand up to his head, but he shook his head. They walked down the hallway, pausing at the door. “You ready?” he asked.

She took a deep breath, nodding. “Remember-”

“First volley doesn’t count,” Vejovis nodded back. He looked through the door, probably using the Tinkertech in his suit. “Small guy, blue and green costume covered in holes. What’s his power?”

Vista hesitated. She said she wanted to talk, but did she give him info? She *wanted* to say he wasn’t going to win, but some of what she’d seen, it wasn’t like it was with the heroes, or the villains. He didn’t talk, *okay, he talked a* ***lot,*** she corrected. He didn’t *stop* to talk, he was just killing his way through everything. Even the Villains would talk, after they ambushed you, but he didn’t, he just kept going. And, if what she’d heard was right, and he was the one who’d finally taken out Leviathan, then. . . he might not win, but he *was* going to kill a lot of heroes on his way out.

And then there was Dryad, who’d fight too. Vista wasn’t sure how her power worked, but she seemed to be in different places at once, so the heroes- *the Protectorate,* might not even have numbers. Maybe if she told him, he could take them down *without* killing them? And Panacea could help heal them after. . .

*Oh. Panacea. Who was on his team.*

Missy’d been so used to Panacea just being *around* that she’d assumed she still would be. But that meant-

“But hedgehogs don’t have bone spikes, they’re keratin, like hair,” Vejovis said, seemingly to no one.

*Oh, he was talking to someone else,* she realized, blushing in embarrassment. “Um, you said they took one of your teammates, and threatened to kill *her,*” Missy said. “Who was it? If you don’t mind me-”

“It was Amelia,” he told her, offhandedly, the bottom seeming to fall out of Missy’s stomach at the casual declaration. “Said he’d kill her and frame the Elite to justify going after them. But he threatened every one of my teammates and their families. He had her in holding, before we extracted her.” He looked back to the door. “Okay Overwatch, he can grow and shoot them. Do they explode or anything? No? *Good.*”

Letting out a deep breath, he looked to her. “Sorry ‘bout that, unknown capes need to be taken account of before I do something dumb like let them get a free attack off. Ready?”

A bit off balance, having been ready a *minute* ago, she nodded, looking sharply to the side as Dryad stepped out of the wall next to him. “Protect her, not me,” he commanded the wood-woman, who nodded, taking position on Vista’s other side.

Opening the double doors with a wave of his hand, he walked out, and Missy had to take a second before she followed. The lobby had been cleared, and PRT officers were arranged in a semicircle on the far end of the wall, by the door, forty feet away in the wide lobby. Guns were pointed at them, a *lot* of guns, and, at the center of the formation, was Miss Militia and the other Protectorate members.

“Halt!” Miss Militia commanded, and, with a moment of hesitation, where he almost seemed to be fighting himself, Vejovis did. “Vejovis, you’re under arrest for the murder of nearly a hundred federal agents. Step away from your hostage, get on your knees, and put your hands behind your head and you will live.”

*Hostage?* Vista thought, looking over at Vejovis. *But she’d followed him!* Vejovis laughed, “So *now* I’m informed of what I was arrested for? Cute, Hannah.” he commented, and Miss Militia flinched at the use of her name. “And *this* time you ask me to surrender, instead of shooting me in the back? But it’s your favorite technique! How about this? *You* step aside, and I won’t *kill every single one of you for what you’ve helped ‘protect’*?” he demanded in turn, voice almost dripping with malice

Gunfire was their response, as metal and wood sprang up between them, blue hexagons appearing, and, *somehow,* space warping, as if she’d used her power. Explosions went off, and the sounds of powers being used could be heard, and after a few seconds Miss Milita’s yelled commands of “Hold your fire!” finally were obeyed.

The metal in front of them, shot through with wood, snapped as portions opened up, letting her see the others. “That was your *one,*” he stated, “Now, I believe *Vista* had something she wanted to say.”

“She’s Mas-” was as far as one of the PRT goons got, before she pressed the button of the Tinkertech he’d given her, plunging the entire area into complete silence.

“Um,” she said, flinching as the sound rang out. “I’m *not* Mastered,” she offered, wincing, as that’s what she’d say if she *was* Mastered. “And I’m not a hostage! I *followed* him! Officers took Clock, Flow, and I to fight Vejovis, and almost shot Clock when he said no! He’s not lying, if you let him go, he won’t do anything, and if what he said was true, *we’re* the bad guys! Director Tagg was *torturing* him, which is probably why we couldn’t see him,” she said, connecting the dots. “And we were *all* told not to tell anyone that we had him! Does that sound heroic?” she demanded, trying to get them to understand.

“And, um, well, he told me he’d already told you he wouldn’t fight if you did, Miss Militia,” she added. “Did he?” The woman started to respond, but was silent. “Oh, sorry,” Missy said, letting go of the button, sound rushing back in.

“He did,” the camo-clad woman admitted, “But he’s also killed-”

Missy pushed the button down again, Vejovis giving a snort of laughter that was cut in half as everything went silent. “PRT officers tried to kill *us* just for standing next to him, when we were talking to him!” she shot back. “He just wants to leave! If he’s bad, then go after him later. When you’re ready! That’s what you always told me we had to do with the Empire, and the ABB, so, if he’s a Villain, why don’t we do that here too!”

It was a desperate hope, but she’d *seen* how bad things can get, and, even if she got mad at her sometimes, she *didn’t want anyone to die.* Miss Militia was like a cool Aunt, and Battery was like an older sister to her. Assault was always funny, and didn’t really want to hurt anyone, and the others. . . well, she didn’t really know them, but they joined up to be heroes. That meant that *had* to be at least a *little* good!

Vejovis motioned for the device, and she handed it to him, keeping the button pressed. “Hannah, I’ve been tortured, drugged, and Tagg threatened to kill my teammates and their *families* if I didn’t bend the knee. I’m not asking for you, for any of you, to help me. Merely do not do the bidding of evil. You stood aside when Brockton Bay Burned, now do so again. As I told you, the time would come when you’d have to make a decision. That’s now. Oh, and Ethan?” he said, looking over at Assault. “Ask your wife about how she Triggered. She had a *witch* of a time. Just remember, Battery, no proper nouns. The walls have ears, *and knives*. Now, make your choice.”

He let go, and sound rushed back in, and he waited. Assault started to say something, but Battery, who’d gone white when Vejovis had mentioned witches, for some reason, grabbed Assault’s arm, pulling him back. He looked at her, and she shook her head, the both of them stepping back.

Vista watched, looking at Miss Militia, hoping she’d let him go, thankful that she’d thought to ask Vejovis to let her do this. She had a feeling that, had she not, they’d all be dead, and that shook her.

Miss Militia looked to her, then the others, who were looking to the Protectorate Leader for what to do. Sighing, she lowered her power-made rifle, the black and green energy moving down to holster itself on her hip. “Fin-”

“Mastered!” one of the PRT Officers yelled, and the troops turned their guns on the Protectorate, pulling their triggers. Vista watched in horror, expecting to see her friends gunned down But metal plates shot up from the ground, even as she felt something like her power flex, directing the bullets into them.  A moment later wooden tendrils came up from below, each one piercing an officer simultaneously. Then, with a reverberating, wet, tearing sound, they ripped each person apart, showering that half of the room in blood and core, the metal walls only partially protecting the capes from the splatter.

There was a moment of silence, the only sound the dripping of blood.

“*Oh god*,” Vista whispered in horror, sick to her stomach at the sight, provoking a rueful laugh from Vejovis.

“I’m glad you think *this* is bad,” he told her, smiling. “But stay out of the Zones, at least the Red and Yellow ones. Trust me, *it’s worse*.”

The smile dropped as he looked at the others. “And now, I’ll be leaving. And Hannah, consider your offer of employment retracted.”

The metal in front of them pulled back even further, and Vejovis, steps resounding, started to move forward once more. Vista, without even thinking about it, followed him, as he stepped around the group of heroes, pausing as Hedgehog grew a spike of bone. As the cape stepped back, hands up, Vista quickly explained, “He can’t completely control it!” Vejovis nodded, and finished walking out, exiting through the front doors, and sighing as he looked up and around.

Just outside of the city, like they were, there were the walls of the compound, and trees all around them, the tops of buildings could be seen past them. It was away from other people, which, Vista wondered, might’ve been why Tagg had done what he’d done. She hadn’t wanted to think the director had, but from how. . . *unsurprised* Miss Militia had looked at Vejovis’ accusation, he probably did do what Vejovis claimed.

Closing his eyes, Vejovis slowly nodded, turning to look at her, not even glancing at the others behind her. “I tried to be a hero, but that doesn’t mean the same thing in this dimension as I thought it did,” he told her, sounding tired. “I’m done.”

“You’re from Aleph?” she asked. That. . . made sense, actually. From what she’d heard, no one had been able to tell who he was, or where he came from. If he was from another dimension, then-

“No,” he said, “I’m from. . . what’s the hebrew version of Omega?” he asked, only to nod after a few seconds, laughing. “It means *what?* Oh, that fits. A little *too* well, actually.” Looking back to her, he said, “I’m from Earth Tav, where we have a. . . *much* different ideas of what heroes are supposed to be. The lack of Endbringers probably helps,” he shrugged.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked, looking around.

He shrugged again. “Be a hero, and stop holding back because I’m worried about what others will say. See you around, Vista,” he said, nodding as he tapped something on his arm, and vanished with a pop.

Looking back, at the bloodshed, at how *little* he cared about killing, Vista wondered exactly what kind of hero he was going to be, and worried about the PRT’s response. She wasn’t sure if he was worried for him, or for the people that were going to be sent after him, but more people were going to die, and she didn’t know what she could do to stop that.