**Revision 13.11**

“Who is she?” an angry voice demanded from the doorway.

I looked up from working on Mouse Protector in the cafeteria, fixing her facial features. She was using a mirror instead of just giving me a picture to work from, so I had to assume she was using the opportunity to touch up her features to her liking. She was an adult, and she’d joined, so I didn’t mind. Wished she’d ask, but this worked.

“Mouse Protector, meet Panacea and the Lady, Bug,” I replied, waving from Karen towards the two girls.

“What are you doing?” the healer demanded, still angry.

The heroine whose hand I was holding responded before I could, “He got done showing me his shaft, so now he’s inside me, and I gotta say, feels better than most guys.”

Both girls blushed at the crude innuendo, Taylor hesitantly asking “His shaft?”

Karen nodded knowingly, “It was a lot bigger than I thought. You two are lucky, gettin’ to ride it all the time.” I rolled my eyes and smacked the woman on the shoulder, who mock moaned, breathlessly begging, “Harder!”

“Stop teasing the teens,” I chided her. Both were turning red, though while Taylor’s seemed to be from embarrassment, Amelia was flush with anger.

“You woke her up on your own? Do you know how risky that was? Why didn’t you wait for me?” the girl castigated.

Mouse Protector grinned sultrily at the girl, though it had a mocking edge to it. “Didn’t know you were into threesomes, maybe next time.” I shot Karen a reproachful glare and started to let go. “Sorry,” she said glancing back at Panacea. “I woke up on my own. Even tried to knife the big lug, but he didn’t take it personal. It was kinda nice, since most guys get mad when the girl does the pen- tries to kill them,” she corrected before I could say anything.

“Shaft?” Taylor repeated more to herself, her emotions through our shared power a mix of Anger-shame-sadness.

“Shaft,” I echoed pointing out the window to the shining pillar of light that concealed an elevator shaft. “And it ‘feels good’ when I’m healing or modifying her features, which is when my power is ‘inside her’,” I told her. “That’s all.”

MP expression was a moue of disappointment. “Don’t explain the joke Vejy-table.”

“Vejy-table?” Panacea asked dryly, folding her arms.

MP grinned, “He’s a bit stiff, but he does a body good!” She obviously wanted to say something else, but held back, for which I was thankful.

I held up the mirror she was using. “This good?”

“Nose just a little smaller, and a tad bit more upturn,” she stated clinically, and I changed the structure slightly. “Perfect! Now aren’t I a cutie patootie!”

“Cutie Patootie?” I asked with a smile.

“Absolutely!”

Shaking my head, I gave her a quick burst of healing and stood up. “Okay MP, I have a feeling these two would like a word for me. We can talk later, and I’ll be making dinner.”

She glanced at the girls, giving me a knowing smile, which widened when I shook my head slightly to indicate that there was nothing there. “Okay, I’ll be in my bunk. Don’t do anything I would do!” she said, vanishing with a pop.

“Isn’t it ‘don’t do anything I wouldn’t do’?” asked Taylor. I gave her a look, and she blushed. “Oh. . . so, is she, you know. . .” she trailed off. I gave her a questioning look, not sure what she was going for. “Part of the team?” she asked after a moment, blushing.

“Yes?” I replied hesitantly not getting the blushing. “She’s a good person, even if she pushes limits a bit. If we’re going to reclaim the city, we’ll need people like her.”

“And that’s why you woke her up?” Amelia pressed.

“He didn’t,” Taylor told the other girl. “She woke up when he was with me and Overwatch.”

Amy redirected her anger from me to her. “Is *that* why you never showed up? You were goofing off with *him?*”

“Huh?” Taylor sputtered, as surprised as I was. “I wasn’t ‘goofing off’. Who even says ‘goofing off’.”

“Fine. You were fucking around with him?” Amelia corrected.

I had to interrupt. “Amy, what’s going on?” I asked, tamping down my own flair of anger that her yelling at Taylor sparked. “You seem really angry, and I don’t know why.”

She snorted derisively. “Oh, you saw *that* did you?”

Taylor stepped forward, but paused when I shot her a look, spelling ‘I’ll take care of this’ in the nearby swarm. Taylor shot me an angry look and stormed out, feeling hurt. *Fuck, I’ll need to talk to her later. Deal with the current crisis first.*

I sat back down, motioning for Panacea to take the seat that Mouse Protector had vacated. She stayed where she was, crossing her arms. “Okay, so your mad because I didn’t notice something,” I stated neutrally. “But instead of just telling me what I missed, you’re getting angry and hinting that I’ve missed something, and that I’m in the wrong for missing it. What, *exactly*, are you hoping to accomplish by doing so? Other than, maybe, making me upset that I’m being attacked for something I have no knowledge of?”

Her incredulous glare washed over me, as I’d realized that I wasn’t dealing with Panacea, the bright girl who wanted to help people, I was dealing with Amelia, who, despite being neglected, had apparently learned some habits from Carol. When I just blandly looked back at her, my expression blank, her glare intensified. “Don’t pretend that you don’t know,” she finally spat.

I had no idea what had brought this about, but I was going to get to the bottom of it. That didn’t mean I wasn’t getting annoyed at Amy’s apparent personality regression, or whatever this was. “I don’t need to pretend to not know whatever it is you’re mad at me for, because you have not seen fit to inform me,” I informed her coolly. “Until such time as you deign to inform me of whatever you have found me guilty of, we appear to be at an impasse, *Amelia.*”

As was often the case, reacting to an upset person with calmness made them *more* angry. If I had to guess why, they knew their behavior wasn’t acceptable, and while they could justify it at first, the longer it went on the more they were subconsciously embarrassed by their rudeness. If you got angry back, they’d feel justified in their own anger, even excuse escalating the situation. When presented with a calm façade, they tended to escalate to try to get you to get upset to retroactively justify their behavior.

As if on cue, she accused, “So you weren’t working with *Villains?*”

I smiled, knowing it would annoy her, but I was more than a little annoyed myself. I clapped once, opening my hands in thanks. “Ah, new information! Still somewhat vague, but progress nonetheless. So who was the Villain that I am supp-“

“Æonic, you asshole!” she practically snarled.

*I wonder how she found out? Did someone there tell or. . .* ***no. He didn’t.*** Thinking about it, Charlie would *absolutely* note that he’d had me heal Paninla, showing that we had a working relationship at best, and that I owed him at worst. He’d know that *I* wouldn’t care terribly, and not see the knock-on effects such a statement might have. Chuckles might be good at that kind of thing if he had time to prepare, but he still tended to only think two or three steps ahead.

“You mean the self-described villain who hasn’t committed any major crimes; the villain who is currently sending his people to help the church reconnect families who fled before the attack? Yes, I did help my little brother. What of it?” I asked archly.

“He’s, wait, *what?*” Amy sputtered. “He’s. . .”

“My kid brother, yes,” I nodded, smiling pleasantly. “And honestly as much of a villain as Herb is, maybe less. So is there something he’s done that makes it a mortal sin to work with, or was it just because he helps people using extra-legal community organizations?”

“He’s a *villain!”* she stated, as if that should be the be all and end all.

“So is Herb,” I riposted.

She rolled her eyes, “He doesn’t count.”

“And Charlie does because. . . ?” I questioned.

She unfolded her arms, opening them in a ‘how can you be so dumb’ gesture. “He runs a gang!”

“From a certain perspective, so do I. I just have filled out the proper paperwork.”

“No it isn’t!” Amelia denied. She hesitated, as if waiting for me to deny her denial, then pressed on. “Everyone here has powers! That’s not the same as grabbing random thugs!”

“One,” I said, holding up a single finger. “Are you saying that only people with powers can help fight crime? Two,” I continued, before she could respond. “Have you actually *met* anyone who works in Bell Tolls? They seem more like a new paramilitary organization than a street gang. Obviously new to the entire thing, but mostly trying to make it work.” The stares I’d gotten every time I’d visited their base had given away their newness. Professionals wouldn’t have stared, or at least been more subtle about it. If I had to guess he’d started treating them like they were professionals, and they’d fallen into those habits so as not to go against his expectations. It sounded like something Chuckles would accidentally do.

“And now you’re defending them!” the girl in front of me practically yelled, dodging all my points.

However, I would not be side-tracked that easily. “You still haven’t answered my question. Why the hate? They don’t get kids hooked on drugs like the Merchants, they don’t attack people based on their race like the E88, and they don’t practice *sex slavery* like the ABB did, before I *wiped them out.* What have they done?”

Now *she* looked hurt. “That’s not the point!”

“That’s *exactly* the point,” I shot back, mostly without malice. “Or to be specific, I’m waiting to hear *your* point, other than ‘they’re bad because the PRT doesn’t like them and they get normal people involved in keeping everyone safe, when that obviously should be the task of enlightened, empowered elites like us?’ That and what the hell this has to do with Mouse Protector, since you seemed mad either at, or about, her as well. *And*,” I added, listing off all the disparate points of contention that led us here, “You still haven’t told me what I’ve missed, as working with villains wouldn’t provoke a ‘saw *that* did you?’ comment, which is what seems to have *started* this entire thing.”

“How could you?” she demanded.

I blinked at her, trying to figure out how that was the answer to *any* of my questions. *Right, not a debate Lee,* I had to remind myself. Tensions were high, for some reason, and while Taylor was pretty good at managing her mental conflict generator her Trigger had installed, even though half the time it seemed she turned that in on *herself*, Amelia *wasn’t* Taylor. When presented with a great deal of new information, she didn’t start putting it together and integrating it, moving to what seemed the best course of action like Taylor or I did, or how Herb *seemed* to try to do, she got combative.

As amusing as the ‘oh I didn’t mention this secret before’ play was, that turned out badly when used too heavily on Panacea. A less than nice part of me probably prompted me to do so in return for Amelia verbally attacking Taylor and I, but I needed to be better than that. Amelia was also *sixteen,* and there were *many* reasons why I didn’t get involved with. . . *no.*

Oh god, arguments with people like her were rarely about what they were about, and I was a fucking *moron.*

She’d been annoyed when she walked in, probably for any of a dozen reasons, but it wasn’t until Mouse Protector started teasing her that she started to *really* get mad. Only was she getting mad at what MP was saying, or what *I* was saying, or more specifically, what what I was saying *implied.*

My first instinct was to say something like ‘Just because I recruited Mouse Protector doesn’t mean I value you any less’, but not only was that *far* blunter a statement than she was prepared for, I might be wrong, which would cause this entire thing to backfire.

*Think Lee, why is she mad?* She walked in mad, and was mad that Taylor was with me. She said because Taylor was goofing off, but if we assume that that was a smokescreen for her true feelings then she was mad at Taylor for some other reason.

A part of me wanted to suggest jealousy, but that was dumb. She couldn’t like me in *that* way. . . or could she? I hadn’t considered *Taylor* liking me in that way either, until she was about ready to follow me into my shower. Okay, different paradigm, and if I factored in Taylor’s presence then *oh god it’s a love triangle.*

I liked both girls, but hadn’t really considered *liking* either girl in that way because they were both young, and psychologically damaged, and it would feel like taking advantage of them. If anything, I wanted a more big-brother role, but, just like in war, the other side got a vote too. If they *both* liked me, which was just *weird,* then, when you factored in the pseudo-martyrdom that Amelia attached to healing, despite my best efforts to get her to see that as just a way to help people like any other, and thus something to make money from just like any other person, then Taylor’s skipping out on healing to spend time with *me* would be seen as much worse.

“Well?” the girl in question demanded.

I glanced at her, realizing that I’d been spacing out. “I think I *might* have figured out what’s going on, but I need a minute.”

“What do you mean you ‘need a minute’?” she asked caustically.

“I mean I don’t want to say the wrong thing, which is in ofiteself the wrong thing to say,” I said, talking over her as she started to respond, “and I am realizing that I *might* have overlooked something, which is a flaw we *both* know I possess, so instead of trying to throw out statements and see what sticks, possibly hurting you because I was being unclear in both my word and understanding, I need a minute to sort this. I will pre-emptively apologize, though this is probably something you should’ve talked to me about before it got to this point, though that isn’t really your fault. As much as we’ve talked about power use, and a bit on our respective philosophies of heroing and such, we haven’t really talked about things metacognitively, *how* we approach problems,” I explained.

“It’s been this weird mix of Master and Apprentice thing, with us switching roles back and forth, but very little discussion about *us,*” I sighed, and her flash of what was *probably* anger at the word ‘us’ meant I might be right, but also meant I was in *dangerous* fucking territory.

“I’m weird,” I admitted, and she gave a snort that said ‘that’s an understatement/. “so a lot of normal assumptions don’t work on me, which is easy to say but hard to implement, and I for the life of me can’t remember if we’ve ever talked about that, and it’s something I *really* should’ve discussed. So, yeah. Sorry, but I need a minute to puzzle this out.”

“Fine,” she gave, taking a seat, not where Mouse Protector had sat, but across the cafeteria table from me.

*Okay. Right. I somehow have* ***two*** *different girls interested in me, and both of them are types I’d refrain from doing anything with, both because of their age and emotional vulnerability. Actually, that seems in line with my normal luck*, I bemoaned internally.

So Taylor coming with me would be seen by Amy as both skipping out of her ‘duty to society’ or some malarkey, *and* be stealing a march on my affections, because *Taylor* sure as hell wouldn’t have told Amy what I’d told *her.* Then she finds out that I was helping a Villain, which normally wouldn’t be a big deal but now that I’m *spurning* her *and* giving Taylor attention, it is now a matter of contention. Kind of like how some people didn’t care if you had an idiosyncrasy, like tapping your foot, until they didn’t like you, and then it annoyed them to the point that they yelled at you for doing something that had previously been okay.

Then she gets back and sees Mouse up and active, and so thinks I did something *without* her that I really should have done with *her,* so she gets upset. However, Amelia jumps to conclusions faster than her sister can fly, and so starts to get mad at me, and when she finds out that she was *wrong* she just doubles down on everything *else* she could hold against me.

I hadn’t really considered Amelia romantically, but *damn* if this wasn’t souring any prospective relationship. *Cut her some slack, she’s a neglected teen,* I reminded myself.

So she storms in, full of spit and vinegar, which I sometimes found endearing, but this was a bit much. However, Mouse Protector, possibly seeing *everything* that was going on, decided to fan the flames like the chaos magnet she was. There was also a distinct possibility that she was just messing with the pair, and would’ve done the same thing if Vicky and Kayden had walked in instead.

Either way, I couldn’t find it in myself to get mad at Karen. This little blow up was short circuiting some *seriously* potential problems down the line by dragging it into the light. Assuming I was right about *both* girls liking me. I could check, but that’d spark an argument no matter if I was wrong or right, and I needed to work through *everything.*

So Amelia possibly likes me, for *some* reason, and sees Taylor as a rival, not realizing they’re *both* benched for the next two years, because she hasn’t *said* anything, because her emotions are so obvious to *her* that it must be obvious to *me* as well. Because that’s how individual thought works.

Then MP is teasing them, and flirting with me, even if she obviously doesn’t mean anything by it, and I’m kinda flirting back for the same reason, and that is *obviously* a betrayal of the love that dare not speak its name, which was news to me, since it never piped the hell up, and I’ve been *busy.*

Through that lens, everything that she said makes perfect sense. She’s mad at Taylor, and mad at me for allowing Taylor to skip out, only to find out that I *have* been healing, but not with *her.* Since she can’t just *say* that, that means she’s mad at me for working (healing) with Villains, which she’s been raised to believe is *eeeeevil*, and while she’s been getting better, as my dad would say, the old tapes are still playing in the back of her head.

Then she gets here and not only is MP up (more healing that I should’ve done with her, *spending time with her*), but I’m flirting more openly with this other woman then I really ever have done with her. Amy and I have had some friendly banter, but I’d been fairly successful in keeping the double-entendres to a minimum, while Mouse Protector was pulling out the triple-entendres transitioning into a somersault of willing miscommunication and sticking the landing. Which I was reciprocating.

No *wonder* she was pissed, even if it wasn’t fair to me to act on it in the slightest. *Point, Taylor.*

***No,*** I corrected myself, *I’m not buying in to this competition, especially since it* ***doesn’t exist.***

Ignoring the detour into the morality of ‘what makes a gang’, because that was the discussion I *thought* we were having, the ‘How could you *(treat me like this)’* made sense. Horrible, awkward sense.

“Amelia,” I said, her attention snapping onto me.

“You done ‘thinking’?” she asked acerbically.

I just nodded. “I believe so, as much as I ever get done thinking. I have to ask, do you like me?”

“Not right now,” replied instantly.

“I’m being unclear,” I said, more to myself than her. “Are you, Amelia Claire Dallon, romantically interested in me, Lee Elric?”

Whatever she’d been expecting  *it hadn’t been that.* “I. What. You. What does that have to do with anything?”

“So, is that a yes, or a no?” I asked her in turn.

“We aren’t talking about that!” she tried to deflect.

I just shook my head. “I think we might’ve been before, and we certainly are now,” I informed her calmly.

Her first deflection having not worked, she went on the attack, “How could I be interested in someone who works with *villains?*”

I looked at the girl across the table from me carefully. She was wearing her robes, with her armor underneath, but her helmet was missing so I could see her face clearly. She was obviously flustered, face flushed red, though with anger, embarrassment, both, or neither I couldn’t tell.

“So. . . you *are* interested in me,” I stated.

“I never said that!” she vehemently disagreed.

“So. . . you *aren’t* interested in me?” I asked.

She stood up and threw her hands in the air, not looking at me. “What does that have to do with you just deciding that waking up Mouse Protector and recruiting her in the same day, maybe even the same *hour?*”

I nodded slowly. “Ah. So you *do* like me. Right, I see the problem.”

“*There is no problem!*” she practically yelled. “*And I’m not talking about this!*”

I *wanted* to say, ‘Oh, would you prefer I just allude to it angrily like *you’re* so fond of doing?’, but that wouldn’t help. “Panacea,” I started, corrected myself. “*Amy*, as flattered as I am, I don’t date anyone under eighteen, full stop. That doesn’t mean I don’t find you attractive, but just as *you* have rules you don’t cross, *I do too.* They’re just not all power related. That *doesn’t* mean I’m going to not be your friend, but that *does* mean that, for the next two-ish years, that’s *all* I’ll be. When you’re older, we’ll talk, if you want to and we’re both in a position and a disposition to do so, but for now I’m *so* fucking busy that, even if you *were* older, I wouldn’t be able to spend the time that you’d deserve if we *were* to date.”

“I could make time,” she muttered.

I sighed, “Kinda missing the entire ‘too young’ point there Amy.”

She scowled; brows knit in thought. “And have you told *her* this?”

I sighed, harder. “There’s like twelve ‘hers’ in this base alone, and that’s assuming I’m not having some torrid love affair with Shadow Stalker. *That was a joke,*” I stated before she could respond. “If you mean Lady Bug, yeah, we had this conversation about two weeks ago. It was awkward for everyone, but it needed to be done, and helped clear the air between us.”

“But you still flirt with her,” the healer accused.

I shrugged, “I’d say ‘no I don’t’, but that won’t help. I don’t see it as flirting, but friendly banter. Like how I cheat when it comes to healing.”

She didn’t take the bait, or the out, depending on how you looked at it. “What about her?” Amelia asked, motioning towards the chair that Karen had vacated.

“Well age isn’t as much of an issue since she’s in her *thirties,* but I’ve also met her *today,*” I pointed out.

“That was enough time to ask her to join. You waited weeks to ask me?” Panacea countered.

I gave her an unimpressed look. “She has a track record as a hero that lasts over a decade, just lost her home, and is possibly *still being hunted by the Slaughterhouse Nine.* *You*, on the other hand, had just run away from home, had *very* strident views on heroism, had very little real world experience, and wanted to stick by your sister, who, early on, want you to rejoin New Wave.”

From her surprised reaction, I was likely spot on. “So, rather than force the issue, I trusted you as much as I could without putting you into a compromising situation. Joining for you was a potential shackle, joining for *her* was a potential sanctuary. Very different. There is, however, a *reason* I haven’t asked Raida to join. Ignoring her racism, I don’t think she’s actually ready for the responsibility. As messed up as Carol left you when you came to me, could you *honestly* say you were in the right state of mind to honestly join us, or did you need someplace to figure things out *without* expectations?”

Panacea looked at me, expressions an indecipherable mess, and I *really* wished I could just get a read on her emotions like I could with Taylor. “That’s not what I’m mad about,” she finally said, anger draining out of her, sounding depressed instead.

I couldn’t bite back my groan of frustration, and anger sparked in her eyes for a moment, before dying out. “Then what *are* you angry about, Amy? If you don’t tell me what you think I’ve done, I can’t explain my action or work to try to make it right.”

“Why didn’t you come with me to help?” she asked quietly. “Why did you and Herb hold back in the fight. *Hundreds* of people died, *Lee!* They wouldn’t if you’d actually helped!”

I let out a long breath. “Why didn’t you ask that to start with? If you mean help heal during the fight, I helped more by fighting. If you mean heal the last few days, I’m avoiding Alexandria, because I thought there was a one in ten chance she was going to kill me, and I was trying to figure out how to avoid that.”

Amelia seemed tiredly confused “Kill you?”

“Kill me,” I nodded, the anger I’d felt slowly fading now that we were really talking. “With my powers messed with, I realized I wouldn’t be able to fight as well as I planned. I didn’t know it was going to be that bad, Amy. I’d *planned* for worst case scenarios, but I really expected that to be as difficult as a normal Endbringer fight. In the Brute meeting, Alexandria was. . . she was so *shit* at explaining things. She was only working in generalities, not warning anyone of *what* Leviathan could do, so I spoke up. It painted a target on me, bringing attention I did *not* want, but I had to say *something*. I got told to shut up and listen to the more experienced fighters. I did too, hoping that I’d just jumped the gun, that she was starting with generalities before moving onto to *techniques*, like his water spears, but there was *nothing* about what he’d do, only vague ‘he’s fast and strong’ bullshit.”

I smiled ruefully. “I walked out of there, and some followed, so I tried to warn *them*. The ones I talked to survived, though two were badly injured. I checked yesterday. Then Herb and I got assigned to Alexandria’s group, and I tried to warn her again. Even outed myself as having future knowledge to warn her this fight might be worse than she expected, nothing I did worked. What it *did* do was tell her I knew a secret she might kill to keep quiet, and that I was a valuable source of non-renewable intel.”

“Herb saying they took his transformation well was good,” I said, waving in a generally South direction, “But both Alexandria and Legend want to have a discussion with me, both are members of Cauldron, and Alexandria wouldn’t hesitate to kill me if she thought it’d help her achieve her ends.”

“As to the fight itself, we kept expecting it to end,” I admitted, shaking my head. “We knew that Levi would try to kill Herb, Æonic, and myself before he’d leave. That all happened in the first ten minute, and we hurt him far beyond the previously established threshold where he should’ve run. Hell, in that last stupid attack of mine, I would’ve *killed* the asshole if I hadn’t missed and taken off his head instead. We kept going, kept escalating as fast as we could because that’s all we *could* do and I still have *no idea why we had to do that.*”

“***Fuck***,” I swore, “Eidolon, Purity, Legend, Alexandria, and I cut off his god-damned tail and all it did was slow him down and ground him! That should’ve been an immediate end of the fight but he *wouldn’t stop coming*. And then there’s the fallout. Have you seen what people have been saying about Break?”

“That he’s strong?” Amelia shrugged. She still seemed tired, but I’d managed to head off that conflict, *somehow*, so now she was just inquisitive. Hopefully it would last.

“That he’s the second coming of *Lung*” I told her, “improved in every way. Lung was so strong he was effectively hands off for the *entire city*. It was only his lack of ambition that let him work without people coming after him. Paired with me as he is, we aren’t going to have that luxury. There’s already a multi-million dollar bounty on his capture from the CUI, a dead or alive bounty on his head from the Fallen, and it’s been *less than a week*.”

Amy just looked at me, processing that. “But, if he’s so strong, isn’t that a good thing? People won’t go after him.”

“Except they think he’s the *second coming of* ***Lung***,” I reiterated. She was smart, why couldn’t she see this? “He’s been going along with my plan of hiding our strength, so he’s pretended his transformational abilities ramp along with his strength. *They don’t*, but that means every two-bit criminal bounty hunter is going to think that if they ambush and drug him, he’ll be easy to grab. He’s immune to drugs when he wants to be, and he’s got *dozens* of uses of his powers that he hasn’t shown, from apparent teleportation, to fucking *flight*, to the fact that he’s *actually* a short range-short duration power copier, but *that* just means he’s likely to turn any ambush into a *bloodbath*.”

I looked at her levelly, annoyed that I had to explain this, “Now imagine the furor that would break out if they found out *I* was a *permanent* power copier, as strong as *Eidolon* and *Glaistig Uaine* ***combined!***” I gestured around us, needing her to understand my situation, angry and hating that it was the situation I’d found myself in.

“Once people start thinking that way, it’s only a matter of fucking *time* until they start looking at *me* that way, and, while I’ve gone through some lengths to hide it, if your *looking* for it it’s ***fucking obvious!***” I’d done my best to hide my trail, to keep my secret, but if every *other* plan I had didn’t work, why should *this* one?

“It wouldn’t be that bad,” Panacea insisted, disbelief clear in her tone, her anger, which’d been banked, starting to come back. “You could’ve still helped people!”

“So you wouldn’t mind if I told everyone you could create custom plagues, but you’ll only use it to help, *promise?*” I asked her incredulously. “Panacea, if people found out what I could do, I could never leave the base, because as soon as people found out where I was I’d be under assault by the PRT, the CUI, and every other asshole organization that needed to control the powerful or have some kind of non-aggression pact with them. They’d all believe that, as a single person, they could take me, and to get them to back the hell off, I’d need to ***NUKE CHINA!***” I practically yelled. I was so *angry!* Not at her, it was a formless, directionless anger at the situation, but the parallels were *so clear!* Why couldn’t she understand the position I was in? I wanted to *grab* her and *shake* her until she *understood!* I . . wait, I didn’t want to hurt Panacea. She’d been bitchy, but she was a teenager, and we’d had this discussion before, so why did I want to physically force her to submit? More than that, why was I so *angry?*

Suspecting Cauldron might be making their move, I scanned the area around me with my eyes full of Power Sight, ready to spot any intruder. I didn’t need to search for long. Looking at the doorway of the cafeteria, I could see Victoria, beautiful as ever, the bitch, and Dean, both staring at me.