

Six strangers came crashing through the skylight. Three men, three women, skintight costumes. The suits were mostly white and their heads and faces were uncovered, but for a hairband worn by one woman, a ponytail on another. Symbols in bright primary colors stretched over their left shoulders, a different symbol for each of them.

A seventh person barely reacted as the people came crashing into the sitting room of the manor. Thirty, long dark hair, no shirt, but a jacket, jeans and boots. He spoke in a smooth voice, not a tremor of emotion, "You could have used the front door."

"And give you time to reach an escape route?" spoke the largest of the men, lantern jawed, with highlights of navy blue on his costume, running up the sides of his legs and arms to a circle with what looked like a rook chesspiece.

"Mantower," the long haired man spoke, "Why would I want to escape? Even with you outnumbering me six to one, I'm confident. Annoyed that I'll have to move to avoid any future harassment, but confident."

"You're not that good," replied the woman at Mantower's side. The colors on her costume were purple, the lines up the sides of her arms and legs were dotted, for lack of a better explanation, with 'v' shaped gaps between each short line. The purple circle over her shoulder was stenciled with the letters 'LP'. She was the lady with long hair.

"I'm very good, Lady Photon," came the smooth reply, "Very very good."

"You're disgusting," was her only response.

"So," the long haired man spoke, "We're going to do this? Getting blood on the carpets will hurt the house's resale value."

"We're going to do this," spoke another of the women, her costume colors were white and gold, the symbol on her shoulder was a sword. As she held out her hand, a sliver of light materialized in her hand, more like a spear than a sword, but difficult to look at directly, "You're a monster and you need to be put away."

"Or put down," spoke the second of the men in costume. His costume colors were white and green, the symbol on his shoulder too hard to see with the angle he stood at.

"Fine," answered the long haired man, his voice now hard and just a little angry, "Don't say I didn't give you a chance to back down."

Springing to his feet, he strode across the room, away from the heroes. They moved into combat stances, wary, but simply watched as he closed the door dividing the sitting room from the hallway. He spoke, his words muffled, and the fight began in earnest. The walls shook hard

enough with impacts that pictures fell from their hangers.

After a moment of near-quiet, of murmuring between the strangers before a loud, "Get on with it!" from the long haired man, Mantower came crashing through the wall some three feet away from the door in the hallway. He picked himself up, dusted off the plaster from his costume, snarled and charged straight back through the hole.

Flashes of light flickered on the other side of the hole in the wall, and there were explosions, shouts, even a scream from one of the women. It was a few minutes before the noise stopped.

The door of the hallway opened. Spattered with blood, the long haired man looked down and muttered a swear word, "Come-"

He never finished. A bruised and bloody Mantower appeared behind him and, both hands clasped together, clubbed the long haired man over the head.

"You... you get him?" the voice was the third woman's, spoken through coughs and gasps for air.

"He's out cold," Mantower spoke approaching the door, "What was so important out... here..."

He stopped and stared, "Oh shhh...ugar. Come here, Arc."

The third lady, dark haired with a white hairband and black lines on her costume, limped up beside Mantower in the doorway, and the pair of them looked down at me.

Faced by two strangers that were bloody, bruised and wearing torn costumes, I started to cry. Tears obscured my vision, and I stumbled backwards until my back was against the wall, balled up fists jammed in my eyes as I bawled.

It was a little while before one of the women - Lady Photon - knelt in front of me and put her hands on my shoulders. She smiled at me, which wasn't that reassuring, given the cut on her lip and the bruise blossoming over the right side of her face. Still, the edge of panic was gone, and I struggled to stop crying, my sobs hitching as I tried to find my breath again.

"Sweetie, what's your name?" she spoke.

"A-Annie."

"Jesus, how long has she been here?" Mantower boomed. I shrank back in reaction.

"Shush, Daniel. Let's get her calmed down first," Lady Photon spoke. She turned back to me, "How old are you, Annie?"

"Five," I spoke, wiping the dampness from my eyes with my sleeves.

"I have a niece your age, Annie, and two kids just a few years older" Lady Photon spoke, "My kids started calling me Photon Mom, and the newspapers got wind of it. It drives me crazy."

She smiled. I didn't.

"My niece, she just started counting the months. When someone asks her, she says she's five and four months or that she's five and a quarter."

"I did too," I answered, "but I lost count after I came here."

"When was that, Annie? Do you know?"

"Christmas. He came to our apartment on Christmas. He and my mom had a big fight in my mom's room. He came out, picked me up and brought me here."

Lady Photon - Photon Mom - nodded encouragingly, though her smile seemed forced, "Well, this is September, now. That's nine months after Christmas."

I held up my hand, counting on my fingers, "Then I'm... five and um nine, ten, eleven months old."

"Very good!" she smiled at me. This time I smiled back.

"Do you know how your mom knew The..." she stopped herself, "How your mom knew that man?"

"That's easy," I replied, "He's my da."

"Jesus!" Mantower cried out.

Photon Mom shot him a dirty look, "Do you need to wait in the other room, Daniel?"

The reactions got me worked up again, and tears started flowing again, "Is... is my da okay? Did you hurt him?!"

Photon Mom sat down on the ground, rubbing a tear from my cheek, "Oh honey... your dad, if that's what he really is, did some bad things and he's probably going to go to jail."

"Probably!?" Mantower exclaimed.

"Fleur," Photon Mom snapped, "Take him into the other room and have him take watch."

The woman with the black hair and white-black costume escorted Mantower from the room. The third woman entered in his place, standing in the doorway with her arms crossed and a stern expression on her face. I watched the proceedings in a kind of numb confusion.

"Did I hear that right?" she asked.

"Yeah," Photon Mom replied. She glanced at me, and I was shocked to see that she had tears in her eyes. I remember it because it was, I think, the first time I ever saw an adult crying.

"The media's going to be all over her," spoke the woman in the white and gold costume.

Photon Mom spoke firmly, "Then she will have to stay with us."

The expressions on the faces of the other two women were unpleasant, to put it mildly.

"Donny and I aren't parents," Fleur spoke, "We don't have a second bed, let alone a couch for the girl to sleep on."

"And," spoke the lady with the gold sword emblem, "I doubt you intend for her to stay with you. I don't mean to put too fine a point on it, but you and Daniel have asked Nick and I for handouts five times in three months. It's not that we mind helping, but Daniel hasn't had work since we unmasked in front of the press, and that's not likely to change anytime soon. You guys are in a tight enough spot with two kids."

Photon Mom looked down, embarrassed, "Yeah."

The woman sounded annoyed and upset as she added, "So what you really mean is that you want the alleged child of... that man... to stay with Nick and I."

"Just for a few months," Photon Mom spoke, pleading the way I did when I wanted candy from my mom, "Until the media frenzy dies down and the foster care system finds Annie a place."

The woman in gold didn't reply right away. In fact, the silence stretched on, until the man with the green on his costume walked through the door, "Shall we get a move on?"

"Let's," Lady Photon spoke, standing. The lady in gold looked down at me, arms folded and a frown on her face. I was spared that glower when Photon Mom took my hand and led me out of the house. Three sleek white cars, their sides and fronts speckled with the dust of the dirt road, waited around the corner from the driveway.

Lady Photon picked me up and buckled me in. She cracked the window down a notch before closing the door.

The windows were tinted in a way that I couldn't see out, and nobody else got in the car. In a panic, fearing that I'd be left behind, I unbuttoned my seatbelt and stood on the seat, peering through the crack.

The strangers were speaking in fierce whispers, all moving in a pack around Mantower, who held my father's limp form over his shoulders. As doors opened and closed, I could hear the argument, but I heard only a few of the words. "Villain". "Probably abused". "Foster care." Other words, I didn't understand then, but the coming years would bring understanding like a bucket of ice water. Murderer.

After an indeterminable amount of time, the front doors of the car opened, and two of the strangers - the lady in gold and the man in green - got in.

"Well, it seems my sister has decided you'll live with us for the time being," the lady spoke.

I nodded at that, looking at her eyes in the rearview mirror. Apparently satisfied with the nod, she started up the car and pulled onto the road.

It was a long and terrifying drive to my new home.

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The following morning, I woke to find myself in strange clothes and a strange place. I felt confusion and fear that didn't quite go away as I remembered the circumstances that had led me here. The smell of cooking combined with a bursting urge to pee drew me from the safety of the bedsheets that had been placed over the sofa.

I moved through the new place furtively. I didn't enter any new rooms or hallways without first checking the coast was clear. My explorations took me to the front hall, dining room, then finally the kitchen. The lady in gold and the man in green were no longer wearing their costumes, and a girl my age with pink pyjamas and blonde hair sat at a small table with milk, fruit and pancakes in front of her.

While I stood there with my legs pressed tightly together, trying to figure out how to announce my presence, the girl spotted me, smiling wide.

"Hello!" she almost shouted.

"Good morning," spoke the man standing at the stove. He had one arm in a sling, the other holding a spatula. "Do you want some breakfast?"

"Yes, but..." I answered.

"But what?" the woman turned. Her face still bore the marks from the previous night's fighting.

"Bathroom?"

"Upstairs, end of the hall," the woman spoke, pointing up.

I kind of froze. It wasn't that it was impossible for me to understand, but my mind was still muddled with traces of sleep, it was a new place and I was wracked with doubts.

"Come on, I'll show you!" the girl hopped down from her seat. She paused when she was nearly out the door to the dining room, "Can I show her?"

"Go ahead, Vicky," her dad answered with a chuckle. The girl grinned wide and grabbed my hand, pulling me through the dining room and into the front hall with enough speed that I nearly tripped over my feet. As we rushed up the stairs, she said something - I think it was 'hurry' - and she practically pushed me down the hall and into the bathroom, closing the door for me.

After a moment, I heard a muffled voice from the other side of the door, "Make it?"

I answered, "Yeah."

"Woo!" her cheering could be heard clearly enough, "Rescue succesful!"

After I finished and washed my hands, I opened the door to see her standing there.

"I'm Victoria," she spoke, "But most people call me Vicky."

She extended her hand in my direction.

"I'm Annie," I took her hand, and she shook it in an exaggerated fashion.

"My mom is Carol, my dad is Nick," she spoke, leading me back downstairs. Leaning over with a hand covering one side of her mouth, she whispered, "They're superheroes."

"Oh, I knew that," I answered.

"Everybody knows now," Vicky spoke with the tone of someone who knew what they were talking about, "Even my teachers and friends at school. Mom and dad and auntie and uncle took their masks off on TV and told everybody their real names."

"Oh," I replied, finding that very puzzling. It didn't seem like something a hero should do. "Why?"

"It's complicated," Vicky spoke as we re-entered the kitchen. As I hesitated in front of the table, she pointed to a chair, "Sit there."

It was a minute before my plate was set before me. I grimaced at the watery milk, but enjoyed the pancakes well enough. Nick and Carol joined Vicky and I at the table with plates of their own. I eyed their orange juice enviously.

Nick spoke to me after he'd had a few bites, "Annie, after we take Vicky to kindergarten, we need to take you to talk to the police, okay?"

I flinched, wondering just what I'd done wrong, but simply nodded and spoke, "Okay."

"Why?" Vicky asked.

"Her dad may be going to jail, and we need Annie to tell us everything she knows about him."

"Is her dad a supervillain?" Vicky asked. The shared glance between her parents was apparently enough confirmation for her, "He was! Who!?"

"Finish your fruit, Vicky," Carol spoke.

"Who!? Which one was he?"

It hit me almost without warning. Five -nearly six- years old, I felt the worry, the fear, the pain and the frustration hit me all at once, and I hung my head, crying silently with my black curls like a curtain keeping the rest of the world at bay.

"Carol," I heard Nick saying, "Just... geez."

A chair scraped, and I felt a hand on my back. He spoke, "It's okay to cry. Things aren't fun for you right now. But they will get better, okay? I can't promise you it will get better all at once, but things will improve. We'll go shopping this afternoon, and get you some clothes and maybe some toys or books, so you have some things that are yours to keep. In a week or two, you can maybe start school and go to kindergarten with Vicky, alright? That'll be fun."

I nodded without looking at him, more for the sake of answering than an affirmation.

He continued, "Carol and I? We're heroes. We help people and we will make it a goal to help you, alright? In a few months, you'll be all settled in with a new family, and you will barely remember all of this. I promise."

Seven years and four months later...

"Dude, open up!" the fist pounded on the door ceaselessly.

I rolled my eyes, unlocked the door and opened it.

Victoria, hands on her hips, spoke, "You take forever in the bathroom, Annie."

"You don't leave me any hot water," I retorted.

"Semantics," she answered, "Scoot over, I need a share of the mirror."

"That's not what semantics means," I said as I finished drying my hair. I started combing.

"Nerd."

"Dork."

"Wimp."

"Wannabe."

She punched my shoulder, "You say that like it's a bad thing."

I just grinned. Victoria started applying makeup - what little Carol let her wear - and I finished my hair, picked up my toothbrush and started brushing.

Victoria was one of the lucky ones. I guess you could call it good genes, but she was the most popular girl in school - and it wasn't just because her parents were practically celebrities. Tall, curvy as one can get at fourteen, platinum blond hair and a face you'd expect to see in a magazine. She had good fashion sense, made friends easily and was practically fearless.

She was an on-and-off member of every girl's team in the school, be it track, volleyball, rowing, basketball, tennis or soccer, and was among the best in each. Something that was helped, of course, by her fierce drive to become a hero just like her parents. From the time she was seven, she had been training herself daily for her future career. Doctors had actually told her to take it easy, because she was risking damage to growing tissues. When Carol and Nick had told her that "A superhero brushes her teeth" or "A superhero does her homework", Victoria had listened. It had been a transparent parental ploy to get her to do what Carol and Nick wanted her to do, but nineteen times out of twenty, she had done it anyways. She didn't have powers yet, but her cousins - Lady Photon's kids - did, so it looked promising.

Then there was me. Annie. Stick thin, no hips to speak of, modest breasts (admittedly normal for fourteen, but that didn't help when I compared myself to Victoria), a bookworm rather than a jock. I wasn't unattractive, but I certainly wasn't gorgeous like Victoria. My best feature was my hair - black and curly without being frizzy - and I had grown it long over the past two years. In all honesty, the time I spent taking care of it was probably why Victoria complained about me taking so long in the mornings.

"We leave in five, geek."

"Thanks, doofus."

I hurried to our room to get dressed. Pink long sleeved shirt with a black T-shirt over it, jeans, pink socks. I pulled the hair from either side of my face back, and clipped it behind my head with the rest hanging free, showing my ears and more of my shoulders. iPod nano stuck through a belt loop, keys in right pocket, and since we couldn't bring purses or (and this is ridiculous - backpacks) to school, wallet in my left pocket.

Carol was waiting as I came down the stairs with schoolbooks in hand. I noted with triumph that I had beat Victoria.

Carol was a lawyer through and through. Hair tied in a stylish but professional bun, business suit with dress, low heels. Her reputation as a superheroine only added to the intimidation factor. In civilian life, she was a lawyer who worked for the DA's office. Never, that I knew of, actually on the floor, and never working on a case she'd attended in her hero identity, but her presence at the prosecution's bench was enough to make defense attorneys curl up and whimper.

As a costumed heroine, Carol was known as Brandish. Light spears and close-proximity forcefields made her a literal warrior woman of the modern day. She could pull her punches when need be, but when circumstances called for it, she didn't shy away from dismembering a villain. Crackle, thwoom, and more than a few bad guys had been left with a cauterized stump where an arm or leg used to be. No joke.

I had lived with her for seven years and she still intimidated me.

"Hurry up, Victoria. I said five minutes."

I smirked at Victoria as she came down the stairs, carrying a precarious heap of books and a tennis racket. I gave her a hand before she dropped it all. We headed out to the car, the two of us piling into the backseat.

"So mom," Victoria spoke in a too-casual tone. "Some of my friends were talking about going to a movie after school. Could I get a few bucks to go with?"

"What happened to your allowance?"

"Clothes, a CD."

"Ah, I see," Carol's tone implied that was her answer to the question.

"Necessary expenses," Victoria said.

"Do tell."

"Keeping afloat in the social scene means constantly selling myself-

"Like a prostitute?" I cut in.

"Like a person at a job interview," Victoria glared at me, then continued, "I regularly meet new people, friends of friends, and each first impression counts."

"Annie seems to do fine without a new outfit every week."

"Totally different social circle," Victoria didn't break stride, "The people I hang with include the daughter of Milan Moore, the mayor's son, the heir to Esprit Medical... all useful contacts for when I get my powers and don my costume."

It never failed to amaze me how Victoria managed to turn everything into a calculated move for when she became a superhero.

Never missing a trick, Carol spoke, "And the reason you're trying so hard to get permission to go to this movie, it wouldn't be the boys you just mentioned?"

The one second of hesitation on Victoria's part absolutely floored me. Having no romantic interests of my own, I'd kind of assumed Victoria was the same. Carol's smile, reflected in the rearview mirror, told me she'd come to the same conclusion as I had. "I thought that was clear. It's a date, but it's by the rules you set. Group dates until we're sixteen, ten pm curfew, bed by ten thirty, no vigilanteism."

"Who's going?"

"Dylan, Brett, Cole, Pat, me..."

"That's four boys."

"Three boys. Pat's a girl, and with Annie, there's three girls too."

Before I could speak, Victoria's hand shot across the back seat to clasp my own. I felt the tremor of excitement in her grip, even as she didn't even glance my way. She was willing me, begging to play along, without giving her away to Carol with a look or protest.

Carol spoke, after a moment's thought, "I suppose you'll want some money for the movie too, Annie?"

"Please," I answered.



I felt a strange kind of apprehension as I waited for the boys to arrive. People milled around the theater, lining up for tickets and drifting in and out of the arcade.

"Pat is a no-show," Victoria said. "Just us and the boys."

"Us and three boys?" I asked. I felt a bit nervous at that.

"Two boys. So it's sort of kind of a double date," Victoria said.

That bad feeling I'd got a little worse when I heard that.

The boys arrived and I could see Victoria was barely restraining her excitement. But she could wear everything on her sleeve, and everyone still loved her.

The two boys were Cole and Brett. Guys in the 'in' crowd. The mayor's son and the heir to Esprit Medical. Good looking guys. Way out of my class.

We exchanged hellos, got the tickets and then Victoria paired off with Cole.

"She's excited," Brett said.

"Yes," I answered. I wasn't excited. Cole looked puzzled, studying the two.

"Are you upset she didn't choose you?" I asked.

"No, not really," Brett said.

But he didn't have much to say as we went into the theater for the movie.

I'd thought a popular guy like him would be more outgoing and talkative. I couldn't help but think he was being quiet because he didn't like me.

Brett and I took our seats in the first available row. Victoria winked at me, and then led Cole to the back of the theater. When I craned my neck to look back, she pressed one finger to her lips.

I wasn't supposed to tell Carol or Nick.

That bad feeling reared its ugly head again.

"Are you okay?" Brett asked.

"Yes," I lied. "Are you?"

"I have a lot on my mind, these days," Brett said. "Cole dragged me along because I was getting wrapped up in my own head. I get the feeling you came sort of reluctantly too?"

I nodded.

"If it helps," he said, "I think you're awfully interesting, in a good way."

"Interesting?"

"I'm saying it badly," Brett said.

Weren't the popular people supposed to be more suave?

Wait. I reminded myself Victoria existed.

"I'm saying I'm interested," he said. He fidgeted some. "I'm not disappointed we were paired off."

"Oh," I said.

Why couldn't I be excited like Victoria was? I didn't have butterflies in my stomach. I had worms or eels.

"You're not interested, though," he said.

"I'm..." I couldn't decide what to say.

"It's alright. You're not interested, and you won't be," he whispered.

He knew an awful lot about how I felt.

"I'd like to be your friend, though. No pressure tonight, no expectations. I cover for Cole and you cover for Victoria."

That ugly feeling faded, and as it did, I could see his smile appear and widen.

"Sure," I said.