

*Crash!* “Stop, in the name of Justice!”

I sighed, not bothering to look up. “A bit generic, don’t you think?”

The masked intruder scratched his head. “Ermm... uh... fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck...

Evildoer... beware?”

“Worse, not better. Keep going.” I was still fiddling with the switches on the console.

“...Bazinga?”

I finally looked up. The shrink ray calibrator wasn’t going anywhere, and as irritating as it was to be interrupted by some kid, we’d all been there. I supposed it was my turn to pay it forward. “If that’s the best you can come up with, generic is fine. Keep workshoping it before your debut, though. You can always get better.”

“...Thank you,” the kid muttered. I don’t think he expected to get that much out of me.

The kid’s costume wasn’t that bad. Primary colors, nothing particularly unique, but the green and red were an uncommon enough primary pair that he stood out, and it was nicely put together. I wondered who put him up to a round of “thwarting” though. If he was this awkward, it wasn’t his idea. Personally, my money was on Rex Blaze: Never trust a superhero with a pornstar’s name.

I got to my feet, adjusting my cape so I cut a proper image. “What’s your name, kid?”

“Uhm... Shockwave, sir.” He was probably blushing beneath the mask. Christ. All these years and I still wasn’t used to the effect my reputation had on people.

“I meant your *real* name. If you’re getting into the business, we’ll be working together, sooner or later. And for the record, mine isn’t ‘sir.’ It’s Jamie. Feel free to use it.”

“*Oh...*” The kid paused for a moment. “Er... Randall.”

I strolled closer to him, keeping things casual. “Well, then Randall, why did you get into... *all* this?”

Suddenly, his shyness disappeared. “Man, ever since I was a kid... Of course, we all thought it was real back then. I would have given anything to be one of you. And... well, when it all came out, I was upset of course, that none of it was true, but... well, there was still something *magic* about it. It was still so inspiring to watch. And maybe I couldn’t have made it in the Bad Days, as the real deal, but I can *do* this. Give the kids something to look up to, even if it’s not... well, the truth, per se.” There was a sparkle in his eyes as he said it. I could *feel* the conviction. He really believed in doing this. Even if it was all an act.

I didn’t know if he’d be any good. But I *wanted* him to be.

Although even as I was thinking that, his shyness returned. “Erm... sorry, sir. I mean, Jamie. I mean... I know it’s silly. But...”

“Don’t apologize.” I cut him off with a gesture. If there’s one skill I’ve always been proud of, it’s my gestures. “You want to be a hero, don’t you? The heroes aren’t the ones who say sorry for dreams. They’re the ones who believe in them.”

“But I’m not... even...”

“...A hero yet? You will be. I can see it in you. One day, it’ll be you and I going head to head.” I was lying about being able to see it in someone. You couldn’t see if someone would be great. You could only see potential. But it was true that he had plenty of that.

Randall looked down. “Well... could you... sort of... help me get there? That’s... why I came...”

I sighed. At some point I was going to regret this, but it was the right thing to do. "Sure, kid. But the first step is to clean up all the glass you left on my floor."

"Uh. Sure, sir."

"Jamie. Now get to it."