

You're going to die here.

The thought floated through the haze in Nick's head. Pain screamed from the slice on his chest. Hashashin had said the poison would induce a dysrhythmia, and his heart was seizing, crushing itself in his chest. He also said that when introduced to electricity it would explode inside of him.

You should have just let them go.

The mugging was happening right in front of him. His father had given him pepper spray in case he was in danger, with strict instructions to run.

He had also given him years of self defense lessons.

Voices swam through the fog of agony. Something cold pressed against his chest.

This is the end.

"Clear!" The word was sent echoing through his mind. There was a sharp pain and a blinding light...

He was standing in a garden. A stream of light bubbled beside him, winding through the valley to a tree, under which stood a woman beckoning him. The rest of the garden was so alive her pale skin came as a shock.

"I'm dead, aren't I?," he asked when he finally reached the garden's center.

Her smile was an enigma, and as she tilted her head he felt a tug pulling him backwards.

"Chaos and Fate twist in an endless cycle. Break it," she spoke softly as he flew backwards out of the oasis, over a desert, and...

"Holy shit!"

His eyes flew open. Two paramedics staggered back as air flooded his lungs and his body came alive. The paramedics were....glowing. Ever so faintly, along some specific lines. The back. The head.

No, the walls glowed too. Sharp lines shot up the walls in front of him and behind.

Behind?

How could he see behind him? And what was he seeing, because it wasn't sight, it was something else.

The paramedics shared a look.

"Did he just..."

"Oh. Oh. Oh no," Nick stammered out, catching on to what had happened. "Please don't—"

"We won't," they answered as one.

"We never saw you," the one on the right continued.

Nick stood. The Veil protected secret identities, but these two knew his now. They didn't know his power though, so identifying him later would be harder, hopefully.

You don't know your power either.

Well, it was a mental enhancement. He could see. He could...

...push?

Nick held up his hand, targeted a spot on the alley wall, and pushed.

Lightning fired from his hand, and he felt something *drain* within him.

"Kid!"

The paramedic was shouting from behind him. He turned to find him pointing.

"Go!"

The elastic strap of the domino mask snapped on the back of his head. A moment later he stepped out into public for the first time.

A few stragglers on the street took notice and nodded at him. His costume was obviously cheap, not the elaborate suprex-infused creations of the professionals. He was either a new hero, and needed to earn their respect, or he was a villain, and they wouldn't want to cross him.

Electricity coursed in his veins. It had taken a week to discover he needed to absorb it from somewhere. He'd fiddled with a socket in his room, but eventually breaking into his building's junction box had been the only way to provide enough electricity for multiple blasts with only a few minutes charging.

The vision, however, never turned off. He could see the electricity flowing through the buildings, through underground power lines, in the cars. In the two weeks since getting his powers he learned to think of it as the lifeblood of the city. He could see further and sharper with his powers than with his eyes, and the city was *alive* with electricity. Beneath him a subway was flying by. He could see the people, the phones, the watches, the lights, the motor, the third rail. In seconds it was gone.

Volt took a deep breath. He'd probably not find anything on his first patrol, but word would get back to the Spearhead. Looking south he could see it, a shining triangle, piercing through even the hundreds of buildings between him and it. It loomed ominously, a path he couldn't escape without being untrue to himself.

With a deep sigh Volt steeled himself and began patrolling.

The forcefield snapped off and Volt stepped into the Spearhead. His father worked here, he'd been here before, but it felt different now. He ignored the tracker urging him to the elevator and instead wandered over to the fountain. The massive indoor plaza that made up the ground floor was centered around the fountain of heroes. Every hero who had ever served here had a statue.

At the front, leading the charge, was current head of Division, Statuesque. His outfit was actually made of stone, and rumor had it the statue was a spare outfit, hollow inside. It was struck in his iconic pose, left arm angled down in front of him, right arm curled up behind, staring ahead defiantly. After a moment, Volt broke away to find himself face to face with a giant in shimmering silver armor. Protopod.

“Sorry, I know the tracker said go to the elevator but—”

“It’s not that,” a metallic voice replied. “It’s...” The voice trailed off. The suit of armor Protopod wore had no facial features. It seemed to be a single solid piece of metal until it moved. His head cocked to the side for a moment.

“Move along. They’ll be waiting for you.”

Volt hustled to the elevator. For a moment he saw Protopod staring at him from the fountain, unmoving.

The doors shut. Moments later they reopened on the training floor.

It wasn’t empty. Civic and Mirror Mirror jumped in and out of space fighting each other in one corner while Liberty practiced stopping live rounds in another. An instructor brought him to a training mat and began requesting demonstrations in various skills.

Over the next four hours Volt demonstrated the extent of his self defense training and his new super abilities until a new opponent arrived and put him on the mat in a blur of quick strikes.

“No fair,” Volt complained. “I can’t fight superspeed without my powers.”

The instructor helped him up before laughing. “Patterson isn’t enhanced, he’s simply skilled. Very skilled. You could beat him easily by learning advanced techniques and *practicing* them. And you will. Whether or not you join the Division, so long as you are a hero these facilities are open to you.”

“If I register my real name.”

“Well, yes, you’ll have restricted access otherwise. The open locker rooms and facilities are mask off, and heroes wouldn’t be comfortable with someone not registered being in there. Have no fear, the *only* people who can see the list are Statuesque and Protopod.”

A thought occurred to Volt. He glanced around. Ace had come in, devoid of his normal heavy armor suit, and was boxing a drone.

“They’re here for my benefit,” Volt said, nodding at Ace.

The instructor nodded. “I think it’s about time you saw Stat anyway.”

Volt registered that his tracker was beeping and followed it to find a viewing room a story up overlooking the training area where Statuesque was sitting at a meeting table.

“Welcome young hero. Take a seat.”

Volt did, taking just a moment to admire Statuesque's armor. He looked like an action figure made of stone, seams visible, but not a single gap one could attack him through. His control over rocks and stone moved it in a flawless mimicry of life.

"So, you put on a good display. Clearly you have had some training. In addition to the standard package, you have *some* enhanced sense that I cannot quite figure out. If you join you'll have to—"

"If? I wasn't aware I really had a choice. Join or go it alone. Wear this," Volt said, tugging at his shirt."

You just interrupted Statuesque.

Volt was shocked, but steeled himself anyway. It had needed to be said.

Statuesque laughed. "No, no, no. There are plenty of small, well funded independent groups around the city. We're the central unit though. The best funded. Official. We're where the action is. I'd be foolish to force you to join us, since we have our pick anyway. But, I have to tell you, I could see you were holding back displaying your full power. I am sure you'd find a place here, and rise through the ranks quickly."

Volt sat in stunned disarray. *There are others.*

"I dropped a bomb on you, didn't I?," Statuesque continued when Volt failed to respond. "There's a city-wide meeting Saturday, all hands. Come in, and you can shop around, see if there is another group you'd prefer."

Another group.

Freedom.

From him.

"So, what's the meeting about."

Lady Avian shrugged as they turned onto 30th, cutting laterally across town. "They didn't say, just said all hands on deck."

Agent Zero nodded. Zero had been in the military and was used to following orders. He stroked his chin as they made their nightly patrol.

"I'll keep everyone on stand-by," she continued. "Get Violetta in. If they put it off for a few days it's not urgent urgent, but still, better safe than sorry."

"Preparing before battle ensures success. Sun Tzu said that..."

She took a few more steps before turning to look at Zero. "What?"

He narrowed his eyes looking in front of them. She turned to look at the drunken group stumbling towards them.

"What?" she asked.

"That group, they're—"

"Go!" the leader screamed, and a dozen men charged forwards. Lady Avian telekinetically unholstered the new gun Omniscre had made for her, but before she could raise it two men were on her and the gun went flying. She lifted off, yanking her arms out of theirs, only to find herself hung up by her neck.

Cape.

With a telekinetic flick he released her cape and rocketed upwards. A moment later she had a view of the fight. Two people lay on the ground around Zero as he engaged five more. Four stood under her, helplessly gazing up as she hovered twelve feet above them.

The four under her began circling. From her perch they looked almost like hyenas waiting for prey they knew they had trapped.

Ignoring them for a moment, she picked up two unsharpened throwing knives off her belt, hovered them in front of herself, and chucked them at the group engaging Zero. Two were hit square in the back of the head, turning around and offering Zero an easy opportunity to drop to more to the sidewalk with well placed hits.

She turned her attention to the sidewalk behind where she had been standing. A moment later she spotted her new gun. Telekinesis guided it to one hand while she unholstered her other, more conventional gun with the other, pointing both down at the group of four circling below.

A car alarm went off and the four turned as one. Lady Avian followed their gaze to watch Zero trip his last opponent, slamming them into the car alongside their friend.

"You're beaten," Zero said matter of factly, motioning up at her.

"We don't care. We had friends in Vegas."

Ah.

The Lords of Vegas were among the first to declare independence to create their new magocratic state, where those with powers ruled, and those without, didn't.

Two were coming into town for the UN, and for the fourth consecutive time had hired the Irregulars as security.

"We're sorry, but diplomacy is diplomacy. Without it the whole world—"

"We don't care," the leader said as the four turned to leave. "We'll die before we let them walk around this city unchallenged."

"You know you're under arrest, right?" she asked. He turned to look at her, then at his friends lying on the sidewalk. For a moment she thought he'd start swinging again, but with a deep sigh he took a seat on the curb. Behind her Zero started calling in officers to make the arrests.

It took less than ten minutes to get them all in cuffs or ambulances. As the last car drove off Avian resumed her patrol with Zero.

"Shame you didn't get a chance to try the new gun," Zero said as they turned the corner again.

"He said it was probably too powerful for civilians anyway."

"Yeah." Zero fell silent for a time, before continuing two blocks later. "I'm sorry about that."

Before she could reply, she felt something in her pocket.

"What...oh."

She unfolded the piece of paper and read it, then shoved it back in her pocket.

"Your friend?" Zero asked.

She nodded.

"It must have been one of the attackers. If we can track down who—"

"No, I'm getting the feeling he's a super," she interrupted, rubbing the pocket the note was in.

"Anything interesting?" he asked as they climbed the steps to headquarters.

"Yeah, it said, well, it suggested there is a bigger threat in the city than the Lords. A much bigger threat. One supported by Majesty and Nova Dei."

"Shit."

"Yeah. We're gonna have our all hands on deck meeting early."

"We have three items on the agenda. First, I'd like to introduce Volt," Statuesque said, sweeping his arm at Volt.

"He's a new hero, he's currently independent, he's looking for a team, and he's quite skilled. I'd normally go more in depth but, well, time isn't on our side. I—"

"Hang on. Let's hear about him," a woman in black and white zebra stripes chimed in.

"I'm sorry, what are you doing here?" a black-clad woman answered from beneath an ornate masquerade bird mask. Her super suit shimmered with a pattern that looked like feathers as she shifted. "I was under the impression Professor Quantum was still in charge of your organization. You're just a lieutenant and—"

"I am perfectly capable of—"

"Stop!" The table fell silent as Statuesque slammed a rock fist into the table. "We don't have time for your bickering today. Blur, tell Professor Quantum next time he doesn't show up you don't get to attend. He can read the minutes. Lady Avian, if you could cooperate with me for one. Damn! Minute!"

The two nodded after a moment, and Statuesque continued. "The second is the event on Pluto Island six weeks ago. It was being kept under wraps, but..."

He took a deep inhalation, and then stood, surveying the room. "Pestilence was responsible."

There was a flurry of activity. Drinks spilled, chairs shuffled, and the room chilled, literally.

"This would be the focus of the meeting, but they aren't here, in New York. They've gone underground."

"Instead," Statuesque paused, taking a moment to gauge the room. "We have information that Chaoticus has moved to the city on a permanent basis. He has brought a number of mercenaries with him. We know he has hired Hashashin, Killian, Terroria, and Doctor Lobotic at the least. we've received information from the Association," he said, nodding at Blur, "that they are building a device to induce powers."

If the room had chilled before, it was ice cold now. Volt could have heard every breath if anyone in the room was still breathing.

"As we all know, or should know," Statuesque said, throwing a meaningful look at a few figures, including Volt, before turning back to the room, "pPast attempts have typically ended with massive casualties. We could be talking millions if he does this downtown, but if he were to somehow avoid that, and give people powers without mass casualties, then he'd be able to build an *army*. He has between fifty and two hundred unpowered followers in the city. If they were to all gain powers..."

Volt felt a shiver down his spine. Accounting for every independent hero in the city, Chaoticus would now have roughly an equal amount of villains. It'd be an all out war. New York would be the next Chicago or Austin.

Statuesque went on, giving all the information they knew. Volt considered mentioning the event that triggered his powers, but he held back. It was too personal, too pointed. He hadn't been Volt then, and explaining it could tear the Veil—the delicate, poorly understood power that kept heroes and villains identities from being exposed. The more Volt had read, the less he had

been able to determine what was safe. Until he could, he had decided to exercise caution. Extreme caution.

The meeting broke, and a few heroes left immediately. The rest stayed, and coffee and donuts were brought in. Most could eat through their masks, and the few who couldn't mingled anyway. Volt grabbed a glazed and a coffee and sat at the table, contemplating everything that had been dropped in the meeting.

"Mind?"

Rather than wait for an answer, Lady Avian slid into the seat next to him.

"Everyone in this room is gonna give you the hard sell before you leave, so just remember this," she said, handing him her card. "We're fully independent. We have our own financing. The Administration are the only other ones who have that, and you're not joining them unless you have a certain philosophy that, well, the less said the better. If that's you, join them. If not, give us a call."

She stood up and left before Volt could say another word. Glancing at the card, Volt read the delicately inlaid letters.

Lady Avian

The Manhattan Irregulars

“The last question doesn’t have a space for an answer.”

Lady Avian looked up from her laptop. It had taken a week, but as she predicted Volt had eventually decided to join them. There had been something in the way he sat, an uncomfortableness, a way of leaning away from Statuesque that had spoken to her.

“And that question is?” she responded, knowing perfectly well what it was.

His eyes widened behind his mask.

“We all know each other’s identities,” she explained, “and we haven’t written it down anywhere. Almost all hero teams act this way. We won’t let you join unless we trust you anyway.”

Avian turned back to her notes, only for him to interrupt her a moment later.

“I’m filling out my experience, there isn’t a lot of room.”

“Put a brief summary. Wait, back up. Did you read the whole thing before filling it out?”

“Engineering student,” he said without looking up.

“That isn’t an answer.”

“I mean, it kinda is? Always read the whole test first, then do the easy answers and so on.”

It’s not a test, she thought, but kept to herself. Knowing your team was a key to leadership, and that was an insight she’d have to mull over for a while.

“Nicholas Ward,” he said, interrupting again.

“Huh?”

“My name. You might as well know now. And you’re right, the other teams did need to know my identity. They actually wanted to know up front so they could do background checks.”

“Well, we’ll do one anyway, but it’s a formality,” she finished, her words trailing off. “Say that last name again.”

“Ward.”

“Out of curiosity, what is your father’s name?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Peter.”

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck...

Peter Ward, supplies manager for the Spearhead.

Secret identity, Statuesque.

Expletives kept firing through her head as she watched Volt continue to fill out the forms.

Did I misinterpret? Maybe it’s daddy issues? Ask? Fucking fuck.

“So, umm, what’s your problem with Statuesque?”

He paused writing, then continued without answering.

Why me? Why?

“My father works there,” he finally answered. “He, well, would you want to work with your father all the time?”

He’s got me there.

“If I work there, he’ll find out, and then he’ll start pulling strings to keep me safe, and worrying, and I’ll get promotions I don’t deserve, and it’s just too much to deal with. I want to forge my own path.”

Unfuck.

It was a reasonable explanation. More importantly, he seemed to be genuine. She had talked to him quite a bit over the past week. He had been looking at other teams, but deep down he had already chosen.

She had always had a knack for learning who people were quickly, and over the course of that week she had figured out a lot of who he was. He was an adventurer, into heroing to do good but also for the glory. He was absolutely trying to forge his own path. The question still remained however.

Why me?

His identity would come out eventually, and this would complicate her already strained relationship with the Spearhead. Strictly speaking, the Irregulars patron had given them financial stability. They could all retire now and live comfortably for the rest of their lives. The Spearhead, however, was a vital source of information and assignments. Assignments that let her and her team do the good they all desperately needed to.

We could always turn him down.

She sighed deeply and shook her head. She couldn't do that. He'd go to the Administration, with their bigoted ways, or he'd return to the Division, where his fears over his father would prove more real than he could have ever dreamed.

Overhead, an alarm bell rang out. She spun and pulled up the alert message on her laptop. An all-hands on deck alert.

Chaoticus attacking One Police Plaza, multiple armed gunmen and superpowered assailants on site. All available heroes to converge immediately

“What’s going on?”

Volt’s voice brought her back to reality.

“Are you ready to go?” she asked.

“Well, I haven’t been fully forthright with how my powers work, I was explaining here,” he said, holding up the forms, “but yeah, I can go.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Explain later. We’re rolling.”

She tapped a few keys to send the alert to the rest of the team as Omnis came running in. “Chaoticus made a move,” she explained to the two of them, “let’s go.”

Volt gripped onto Omni's back as the motorcycle made a rubber burning turn and mounted the sidewalk. They drove straight through the archway under the Manhattan Municipal Building. On the other side was a park, and then their destination.

One Police Plaza.

The steel plated office building was a tribute to sixties architecture, all metal and glass. Or it had been. Now smoke poured through a dozen holes in the side, and dozens more windows were broken.

"Hang on!"

Omni's words were lost to the wind, but the earpiece Volt had grabbed on the way out worked perfectly. A second later Omni hit the brakes hard, and the motorcycle bucked to a stop. Besides them Lady Avian landed a moment later, instantly drawing her guns. She gazed up at the holes with an odd look on her face.

"I can watch the new guy," Omni said, drawing his own weapons, which looked like futuristic laser blasters.

As if I need to be watched.

"No, no. We stick together."

Omni opened his mouth, but nodded.

Inside dozens of cops congregated in the lobby. One came up to them as soon as they entered.

"They have a jammer in the building. We're running messages, right now they appear to be in three groups, one camped outside the commissioner's office, one by the evidence room, and one on the roof. We *think* the roof team might be holding an escape route, but we have a runner communicating with the Spearhead and NYPD air units and there is no sign of an aircraft of any kind."

Volt blinked trying to take in all the tactical information at once, but Lady Avian lept into action immediately, turning to Omni, who was already messing with a holographic display on his watch.

"When I finish my damn suit," he muttered, and a moment later shook his head.

"Damn," Avian said, turning back to the cop. "More members of my team are incoming. Do you have a priority you want us to go after?"

The cop shook his head.

"Okay, we'll take the roof. Any members of the Irregulars who show up after send there."

She turned to leave, then turned back, raising a finger. "I'm serious. I don't abandon my team. I need your word. You send them to me."

The cop hesitated, then nodded. Not waiting for him to say anything more, Avian stalked off to the nearest stairway. They hustled up the stairs three at a time, somehow not tiring by the time they reached the roof doorway.

By the door to the exterior four officers were stacked up. Two had guns drawn, while the third tended to the fourth.

"Sitrep," Avian barked, taking the position closest to the door from an officer.

"We can't coordinate or we could storm the roof. Open the door and they lay down fire," he answered.

Avian turned to Omni. "Two minutes, then go. Volt," she said, turning to him, "Do not hesitate to take the kill shot. This is kill or be killed. If you can't do that tell me now."

Kill or be killed.

Images of Hashashin coming at him with scimitars, blue eyes sparkling with glee, flashed through Volt's mind.

"I can," he answered.

"Good. Two minutes, now."

The two glanced at their watches, and Avian slipped down the stairs. Silence dragged out, punctuated by distant gunfire.

"What is she doing?" an officer finally asked.

"Flying around outside," Omni answered, eyes glued to the watch.

"Ahh."

The silence dragged out for a few seconds more before Omni shouted and burst out the door.

Go.

The two officers charged out before Volt could, so he was left to lamely following up the rear. The rooftop was chaos. Six gunmen fired at three different doors onto the roof, and within seconds they went down, along with several cops. Unharmed, however, were three villains.

One flung whips of green plasma at Lady Avian, who dodged in midair. One was collecting any bullet coming near her and her friend into a ball of molten lead.

And one...

One deflected bullets with a pair of scimitars.

Hashashin.

Those blades. The same ones that sliced his chest. With poison that exploded on contact with electricity.

Volt raised a shaking hand. This was it. He could do it. Hashashin's blades flashed in the air, moving faster than bullets.

Come on, hit it.

A bolt of lighting shot out, arced past the sword, then curved in midair and hit the ground.

Fuck, come on.

Hashashin turned towards him.

Oh fuck, come on.

Another bolt flashed out, missing again. Hashashin's eyes narrowed, then went wide.

"Bravo, Bravo!" he screamed.

The villain with the plasma whip turned on a dime, slicing a hole in the roof ten feet wide with a single motion.

Hashashin dived for the hole, and Volt took one more shot.

The world went white.

"Volt! Volt, get up!"

Vision slowly clearing Volt climbed to his feet.

"What happened?"

The voice was coming from Lady Avian, who had landed and hovered over him.

"Poison blades. Explode when hit with electricity. Didn't know they exploded the electricity too. I think I'm dying," he gasped out as his vision continued to blur and resume focus.

"You're fine," she replied. "You're tougher now that you have powers. How did you know they would do that?"

Before he could answer, a ball of red, white, and blue *slammed* into the rooftop.

"Oh for fuck's sake," Avian exclaimed.

Americana stood up and strode over to them. "Where are the villains?"

Avian gestured to the hole in the roof.

"You let them get away?" Americana huffed.

"We took the roof. Be happy," Avian responded.

"I'm thrilled you failed to capture the villains. I'm sure that command will give you a medal."

"Maybe if you showed up on time—"

"Guys!" Omni shouted. "Americana, any new information?"

"No, I just got here. Comms are out. And you?"

Omni shrugged.

"I have some."

The group turned to see a woman in a dark brown suit with a copper mask approaching.

"They had a teleportation device downstairs. The roof was a distraction. Still," Liberty said, surveying the roof, "You did better than any of our other teams."

Volt watched as Avian's eyes flicked from Liberty to himself and back. *I'm not that green that Liberty's gonna make me weak in the knees or something.*

"Pack up, we're heading back to the Spearhead for debrief. I'll assume you have your team?"

Avian nodded.

"And you," Liberty said, rounding on Americana. "Knock it off."

"I—"

"Or I'll talk to Stat myself."

Americana spun and took off in a single motion.

"Well, maybe if we stopped fighting among ourselves..." Liberty trailed off.

"I try to avoid her," Avian said. "I really do, I just—"

"It's not your fault C—, Lady Avian. It never was."

6
Bonus

The window popped out of place with and hovered in midair. Peeking out and looking below, she dropped it, not bothering to watch it fall.

Hovering out the window, she checked her watch.

1 minute.

Two guns floated into her hands, one with humming as she activated the drive.

30 seconds. If my therapist could see me now.

She refused her own thought instantly. She had only left her team to throw herself into danger, drawing it away from them.

10 seconds. Allah guide my hand.

She lifted up the two guns and floated up over the edge of the roof.

In the center of the roof stood three villains. Terroria, Hashashin, and an unidentified third.

“Flyer!” the third cried out, and the three spun. They were the immediate threat.

Except...

Doors burst open on the rooftop, and she pulled the trigger on the gun in her left hand repeatedly. Three gunmen went down before they could fire on Omni as he burst through the door. She turned back towards the villains, but the third was already doing something to absorb all incoming gunfire, and Terroria...

Striking out with telekinesis while dodging left, she felt the heat of a green plasma whip strike past her, and again, and again. Behind the whips lightning struck out repeatedly, hitting thin air.

What is he doing?

Terroria suddenly turned, slicing the whip through the roof in a single motion.

Dammit no!

Bullets fired out, but they continued to be absorbed by the third’s power even as she dived into the hole.

Before she could order a chase, Hashashin dived, and lightning struck. A blinding explosion shook the roof as Volt was thrown almost over the edge.

What?

Pursuit fled her mind as she plummeted to the rooftop. He was still breathing as she drew up to him.

“Volt?”

He didn’t respond.

“Volt! Get up!”

The new recruit struggled to his feet, and she restrained herself from seizing his shoulders.

“What happened?” she demanded instead.

“Poison blades. Explode when hit with electricity. Didn’t know they exploded the electricity too. I think I’m dying.”

How—

"You're fine," she replied. "You're tougher now that you have powers. How did you know they would do that?"

Behind her she heard the all too familiar sonic boom followed by the shattering of concrete.

"Oh for fuck's sake."

"Where are the villains?" Americana asked, making a show of looking around as she approached.

Avian replied by gesturing to the hole in the roof.

"You let them get away?" Americana jabbed.

"We took the roof," she replied. *You bitch*, she didn't say. "Be happy."

"I'm thrilled you failed to capture the villains. I'm sure that command will give you a medal."

Telekinesis flexed on her guns, twitching, dying to strike out. Americana was bulletproof, but she wasn't painproof.

"Maybe if you showed up on time—" she fired back instead.

"Guys!" Omni shouted, intervening before Avian got them in trouble. "Americana, any new information?"

"No, I just got here. Comms are out. And you?"

Omni gestured to the roof.

"I have some," an all-too-familiar voice chimed from behind her.

"They had a teleportation device downstairs. The roof was a distraction. Still," Liberty continued, "You did better than any of our other teams."

Liberty. Something scratched at the edge of her consciousness. Liberty.

Oh. Right. She was Volt's mother.

Volt was standing there as if everything was ordinary. He wasn't sweating like his mother was there watching his first deployment. He also wasn't freaking out. He was just...fine.

"Pack up, we're heading back to the Spearhead for debrief. I'll assume you have your team?" Liberty said, soft eyes meeting Avian's through two sets of masks.

Avian nodded.

"And you," Liberty said, glaring at Americana. "Knock it off."

"I—"

"Or I'll talk to Stat myself."

Americana launched off in a huff.

"Well, maybe if we stopped fighting among ourselves..."

"I try to avoid her," Avian replied. "I really do, I just—"

"It's not your fault C—, Lady Avian. It never was." Liberty's eyes matched her words, but Avian couldn't take them to heart.

"First things first, my name is Chloe," Avian said with the same tone as if she'd ordered water.

What, why?

"I'm telling you this because I'm about to break one of the cardinal rules of our profession, and it would be wrong for me to do it without telling you my identity first."

Wait, what?

"A few months ago we had a team member named Harmony. We busted a ring of thieves stealing diamonds up town. Took six weeks and four fights to get them, and two still got away. And one of the ones we caught was Harmony's uncle. She thought she could handle it, and she couldn't.

"She left. We want to avoid that in the future.

"When I joined the Spearhead, I was assigned a mentor. I had one before then but...anyway, I was assigned Liberty."

What is she talking about? She's all over the place.

"She took me under her wing, we got along well, and three weeks later I was with her at the Coldwater-Forest Riots. I quit. But I learned her identity. And knowing her identity, I also learned the identity of her husband. Statuesque."

A horrifying realization came rushing in all at once.

"Stop! I don't know why you're telling me his identity, but I don't want to know. That's sacrosanct. I can't believe you're going to—"

"You already know. Deep down, just the fact that I am telling you all this should be enough to pierce the Veil. You know so much. Personally."

A thousand data points clicked into place as one. A thousand realizations, held back by the Veil, forcibly stopped from being connected, formed into a single coherent image in his head.

Every night he was out when a fight was happening, because he was working late.

All the power he had as a simple supplies manager.

His deep knowledge of the New York superhero scene, beyond what he should know without clearance.

Her late hours with him. Always working on something else, never together, but always out and back at the same time.

"I'm sorry."

She looked it.

"After today's events," she went on, "I realized there is no way to avoid you finding out at some point. You can tell them I told you. Liberty might protect me. She might not. I might go to jail. I don't care. You deserve to know, and you deserve to make an informed choice."

"I need to think."

"Okay."

The clock ticked mercilessly.

Avian broke the silence. "We'll take you to Tinker Tailor either way, you deserve a real suit."

"Tinker Tailor? Who's tha— Hey! What's wrong with my suit?"

Avian eyed him up and down. “Tinker Tailor is the best supersuit maker in the city. He makes all our suits, besides Omni’s, and Omni’s a special case.”

Volt seized on the thread, desperate to get his mind off of the topic at hand.

“What is Omni’s deal? He’s building that powered suit, and he’s good at martial arts, and his power is...”

“Learning.”

“Learning?”

“Learning. He can flip through a pre-calc textbook, then calc one, two, and three, and he’ll know calc. It’s that easy. He watches high-level martial arts demonstrations and he learns them like he practiced for years. He’s our team expert in everything.”

“Huh. So me getting a degree in para-engineering is kinda pointless now.”

Avian shifted, cocking her head. “Not at all. Omni cannot learn your experiences, your memories, the things that shape *your* creativity. And if you build your own equipment, you’ll know your needs better than he.”

Volt’s mind scrambled, grasping for another subject.

“Mastermind. She funded all this. But isn’t she, you know, a villain.”

A shrug. “Kind of? She never crosses the line, so the government works with her a lot. She does more good than evil. But yeah, she definitely straddles the line sometimes.”

“So, your head is a villain?”

“No.”

Volt blinked. “No?”

“I’m the head of the Irregulars. She is our founder, and she occasionally feeds us intel, that is all.”

Volt’s mind grasped, but each new topic it found seemed inconsequential. It all was so inconsequential next to the fact his parents were heroes. His father was Statuesque.

If I thought he was going to be tough to live with before...

“You can have a few days to think, today was intense and—”

“I’m in.”

Majesty drummed his fingers together in the otherwise silent room. "We were promised results. I want the machine."

Doctor Quantum watched as Majesty leaned slowly across the table, and Chaoticus shrank back. The man had made absurd claims about his powers and benefactors, but when faced with real power, all men quailed.

"The equipment we stole from the police was not nearly as useful as you led me to believe. I—"

"Are you blaming me?" Majesty's voice was soft. Quiet. Yet it carried.

"I'm not, I'm not blaming anyone," Chaoticus stammered. It was as if he had just realized the situation he was in. God himself could not exit this building if Majesty didn't want him to. "I am simply explaining. I cannot even make the attempt until I have the right parts, unless you want me killing every living soul in the city."

Quantum stood, reaching out with an arm and sending an order to his suit. On the arm, laser cannons lit up, a mock display, but an effective one. Chaoticus' eyes went wide.

"Threaten my city again—" Quantum roared—"and your very atoms will be ground to dust."

"I could kill you where you stand," he replied, leaping to his feet. "I've slain tougher men—"

"But not all of us," Majesty spoke, barely above a whisper.

Chaoticus hesitated, then sat. "Indeed. And you need me. After all, how many men are left who were there at the beginning? How many who *know*?"

"Which is why I have agreed to alter patrols and hold back my heroes. I assure you, if the Association had been at One Police Plaza, you would not have escaped."

Chaoticus shifted, drumming his fingers together. "Majesty, you came to me. I am working as quickly as I can, but changing the world takes time."

"Yes, which is why I am here talking with you, rather than simply having you killed. From now on—" Majesty motioned to a villain by the door holding a stack of coins—"Tether will be joining you. They are not associated with any of my, shall we say, *official* groups. You will keep Tether apprised of your progress."

"I don't need a babysitter, I—"

"Not a babysitter. An associate. Now take him and go, before I decide you are wasting my time."

Volt stepped through the hole in the air to find himself up town. Across the street, masked men held an armored car at gunpoint. Two had noticed and were turning their guns at the hole.

Volt raised his arm, but two bursts of electricity dropped the men before he could fire.

"Omni, I think the gun works," Avian's voice said in his ear.

Behind him, Zero stepped through, followed by Violetta.

"Okay, one's about to come out from behind the car on your left, Volt," Reset said over comms. Volt swung his arm over. As the gunman popped out, Volt fired. The gunman dropped, wounded but not dead. With the whole team, it was almost too easy.

"I'm sorry, A, I can't stop what happens next."

Volt started, then spun. He saw the whole street's electricity, every vehicle, every person, but he still scanned with his eyes. What was coming? What was about to happen?

"Reset, what—" Avian cut off as a hail of gunfire went off at once. A streak of human sized electricity flew down Fifth at blinding speed, stopping behind the armored car amidst three men. As one, the three flew out from behind the truck, guns flying from them, followed by a blur of white and black.

No, not a blur. The Blur.

She stopped on top of the three, staring up at Lady Avian. "I can take it from here. Thanks for the assist."

"Thanks? We were here first. We took out more than you did and—"

"No, I believe it's three to three. And I—"

A violet circle appeared beneath her, and a moment later she fell through it.

"Sorry Reset, sometimes there are things we can do," Violetta said over comms.

"I see. And this won't come back to bite us?" Reset asked.

"If it does," Avian butted in, "I'll handle it. In the future wait for me to order that, but thank you. She is...frustrating."

"So, what do we do now?" Volt asked.

Avian responded by suddenly thumping to the ground next to him. A pair of cuffs were shoved into his hands, and she took off, flying towards the three men Blur had taken out as they tried to stumble to their feet.

"Sir, I told you that poaching their fight would go poorly."

A deep sigh came from the other end of the radio. "You aren't hurt?"

"No."

"Got enough bullets to make it downtown?"

Blur checked her gun.

"Barely."

"Then head to the Federal Reserve. Chaoticus hit it while you tangled with the Irregulars. It'll be good for us to show our face and get intel firsthand."

Doctor Quantum hung up, and Blur heaved a deep sigh. Raising her gun and pointing it south, she fired, and began chasing her bullets down the island.

The door slammed shut, and Nick panicked, one word summing up all of his fears as he leapt into action.

Dad.

He was home early. Nick's suit practically flew under his bed as he launched himself to his desk. A moment later there was a knock at his door.

"Hey, umm, Nick, can we talk?"

"Uh, sure dad."

The door opened as his laptop finished logging in.

"So, you know, working in the Spearhead, I meet people, right son?"

Nick kept his face from twitching by the barest thread.

"I happen to be friends with one of your professors, Hoffstader, and he was telling me how you've been...changing, over the past two months. He's worried about you. You're one of his favorite students and you've been isolated, withdrawn, and generally just not yourself. I noticed some things to. You don't hang out with your sister like you used to, or help her with her homework, or—"

"Have my grades slipped?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Then what's the problem?"

There was a deep sigh. "Son, remember what I told you about the importance of making connections in college?"

"Dad, I'm doing fine."

Dad, I can't tell you the truth.

The truth was, how could he keep his old friends? Never tell anyone your secret identity. That was the first and most important rule of being a hero. He'd tried keeping them, but after a few weeks of lying to them, *they* had drifted away from *him*.

"I'm just worried about you. And so is your professor."

"Yeah Dad. Look, I'm going out," Nick lied in a moment of inspiration, "to see some friends."

That got a smile. "Really? Good. Will you be home for dinner?"

Nick's heart broke. It was too easy. He'd never been a rebel. He'd never stayed out late or smoked or did drugs or done anything to earn his father's disapproval. "I'll probably grab a bite with them."

A few more awkward lies and he was finally left alone.

Nick grabbed his stuff and shoved it in his bag, pausing briefly on the center of the field of blue where the bright yellow V struck across the center of the chest, the right side a lightning bolt striking.

Suit secured, Nick slung his bag over his shoulder and left. He actually had three hours to kill before patrol. What to do?

Headquarters was downtown, a quick subway ride away. Beneath fifth a few blocks up Nick could see the next train leaving the station. Nick turned and began racing it to the next stop.

Chloe stared at the big board. Like, really stared. That deep staring where your vision starts to blur and you aren't even really looking at a thing anymore but can still see it in your mind's eye.

Still, nothing made sense.

Association heroes were making a big show of appearing and stopping crimes whenever Chaoticus was about. Chaoticus had pulled off three thefts in a row, meanwhile they were stopping a total of eleven different crimes elsewhere in the city at the same time. It was obvious when you saw it, but how did they not.

And see it they did not. Syntax was adamant that the majority of Association heroes believed they were heroes. In some senses they *were* heroes. It was the upper echelons, Majesty and the team heads like Doctor Quantum who were using it towards their own ends.

Of course, the Association didn't have a formal policy of power supremacy, but they also definitely did not have a policy against it, so the types it attracted were people who would be a-okay with taking over the world for the good of the unpowered masses.

Chloe blinked and refocused. The lieutenants, Blur, Herodotus, and Super Fly had all been seen at crime scenes during Chaoticus attacks. One of them knew something, they had to, but all three outwardly looked like they were ignorant. If she could pinpoint which one...

"Sup? Ooh, a conspiracy board. Can I—"

Chloe flipped the board telekinetically. "You're early."

He grinned. "Thought I'd catch up on studying. Seriously, what's up with the board?"

He's Statuesque's kid. You can trust him.

More importantly, he was Liberty's kid. Statuesque was a larger than life figure, practically a demigod, if thinking such thoughts wasn't sacreligious. Liberty was human. Real.

Chloe donned her mask and let her hair free. It was easier being Lady Avian around others. "So yours and your father's identities are your business, but this has to stay secret, understood?"

Nick paused for a moment rather than immediately answering. *Good. He understands this is serious.* He nodded after a moment's thought, so Avian continued.

"Six months ago we began getting information from an informant we named Syntax. They have informed us that certain members of the Association, including all of the leadership, are out for world domination."

Nick leaned back, half sitting on a table. "So, we take them down?"

"It isn't that simple. We have to build evidence. Proof. The board tracks patterns of behaviour, but it is all circumstantial, and if we let them know we are onto them..."

Nick nodded. "So, what *do* we do?"

"For now we focus on Chaoticus. Our informant believes that the Association is going easy on Chaoticus in return for him handing them his power-inducing machine. If we can capture and turn him, we'll have proof, a witness, but we have to do it before he makes that machine, or..."

Understanding dawned on Nick's face. Or the whole island, possibly the whole world was at risk.

"Why can't we tell the division?"

It was the obvious question, and the one she had prayed he wouldn't ask.

"Our informant chose us rather than them because the Association has an informant in the Division."

"So, just keep it to..." He trailed off as he saw the look on her face. The answer why you couldn't just keep it to the heroes was...

...it was one of them.

Volt looked up from his classwork again as the...whatever it was went off. Drill? He had assumed headquarters would be a place of business, and thus a place he could study in peace. He had been half right.

Omni stood back and lifted off a welder's mask. He was working on a power suit. Sleek cooper lines surrounded a tinted black faceplate, or at least it would eventually. The chest was flung open, panels strewn across the ground, inner guts spilling out to reveal colored wires and exposed steel and glass.

"Need help?"

Omni jumped, then turned around. "Forgot you were there, sorry. I got this. You given any thought to yours?"

Mine?

"I'll take that as a no," he continued. "You should. My powers are a mixed bag, I am an excellent martial artist and firearms expert, but I am also an excellent engineer, so I could benefit in or out of the suit. You, however—"

"I am a glass cannon with no specific dexterity or strength powers. I would benefit from the protection and from the flight based mobility, to the point it would more than offset the loss of mobility on the ground."

"Well, yes, but I was more thinking about how it would mesh with your power."

"Mesh how?"

"Come here," he waved. Volt hesitated, then locked his laptop.

"Take a look, tell me what you see," Omni said as Volt came over.

Inside the suit was, well, beautiful. Wires and shield generators and e-thrusters and compressed chemical thrusters. Dozens of mCFR's, one central one sitting in the chest, but at least twenty lay around the suit where he could see.

"I see a fuckload of microfusion reactors."

"Exactly," Omni grinned. "I'm gonna have to pull a few for battery space. The primary difficulty in building a suit like this is power, making it and storing it. If you can feed electricity into one end of a circuit continually at a specific power level, and draw it back in from the other end, then you can be the battery yourself. Look at all the space you could save. You'd have one of the best suits in the world."

Volt stared at the dozens of small spheres embedded in the armor. "Huh."

"Exactly. You should think about it. It's your major after all."

"Yeah, I just, I always thought I'd be making it for other people."

Omni chuckled, then suddenly stopped. "Look, it's just us, can we talk?"

"About?"

"About our conspiracy. We're all in on it, and you have to join us. You *have* to."

Volt stammered. These people knew his name. His parents' names. Secret identities. They could do untold damage and it was all his fault.

"Lady Avian is, well, she is our fearless leader. She is bold, intelligent, compassionate. But, she has two problems."

What the fuck kind of conspiracy?

"First, she overworks herself. Second, she will not let us go into danger alone. No matter how little it makes sense, she'll insist on being beside us when we are in danger. I'm sure you noticed it during the attack on One PP."

He hadn't, but thinking back, she had stuck with the group up until she served as distraction, even when she could have joined the fight faster.

"Okay, and..."

"And, now you are part of our conspiracy to get Lady Avian to let go. To have a life. And to stop throwing herself into danger," Omni leaned back, apparently quite pleased with himself.

"What exactly does that entail?"

"Thinking about ways to get her to be chill."

"Kay but..."

Volt cut off at Omni's look. "You're new. You don't know."

"Know what?"

"We, all of us, we all have nowhere else to go. I don't know why you're here, but she has this uncanny ability to find lost souls. People out of options. If it weren't for her, well..."

Omni sagged for a moment, then stood straight up. "If it wasn't for her, we'd be scattered in the wind. She is what binds this team. But, like us, she needs help. So, we made a pact."

"If you all have issues, what's yours?"

"What's yours?" Omni countered.

Fair point. It wasn't like Volt could just out his parent's identity. Lady Avian might know it, but it was clearly not a secret everyone knew.

"Exactly," Omni said. "I like you, maybe I'll tell you. One day."

Volt nodded. "I can't tell you mine. It isn't mine to tell."

Omni regarded him for a moment. "I can respect that, though if I ever tell you mine it may change your perspective."

Volt turned back to the suit, spending another few minutes going over it before returning to his coursework.

In the back of his mind thoughts kept bouncing around. Being a hero was supposed to be simple. Fight bad guys. Beat bad guys. Get accolades.

Volt shook his head and returned to his work. At least math was still black and white.

Avian turned the corner. She had a gun in each hand, black steel glinting in the dim light. She'd be damned if she lost here. Not like this.

Industrial pipes banged. Steam shot from the walls. Behind her, Volt whispered.

"Down the alley, about to pop out."

A moment later a grey suited blur shot out. Two guns blazed, and the blur dropped cursing.

"Behind," Volt shouted, "someone got Zero."

Avian spun, and a copper suited woman rolled out from behind the corner. A hail of gunfire did nothing. A moment later her time bubble dropped.

Liberty fired as Volt's lightning shot out. Her shoulders sagged, then dropped her gun. "Fair and square," she said, leaning against the wall and dramatically slumping.

"Alright, we can move on to—"

"Avian. I can't."

"Why...oh, dammit."

Volt turned, and the front of his suit was covered in multicolored paint.

"Okay, I'm on my own."

And I am leaving you here to chat with your mother. Sorry.

Avian slunk around the next corner, noting the gears sticking through the walls. The Game Room, as this was called, was a twenty story tall labyrinth inside the Spearhead. Every hero team in the city did training here. The Division rarely lost. The Irregulars had a flawless record against them. In her ear, Reset gave her directions.

"Omni is still up, but he is heading down from 23 right now, pursued by Protopod. He needs help. It's just Protopod and Mirror Mirror left."

Lady Avian mentally checked through their powers. Protopod had a state of the art suit. No one knew their actual power, though it was widely speculated to be either a form of spatial rearrangement or, more likely, superintelligence. Mirror Mirror could move into and out of mirrored surfaces, as well as control any mirror in their line of sight. What counted as a mirror could be tricky, but there would be few in here.

“Nevermind, I got...one minute, seventeen seconds before Mirror Mirror is on me. He’s good. Damn good.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Help please.”

Avian sighed, then reversed course for the spot Reset had hidden. Reset’s power was the team’s biggest asset. At any given point in time, Reset could send their consciousness back three minutes. They couldn’t chain it, three was the maximum, but it allowed the whole team to be killed, repeatedly, until they found a way to take down villains that far outclassed them.

Like Protopod.

Well, Protopod wasn’t a villain, and in fact the Irregulars were playing the villains in this scenario, attempting to plant bombs in a factory, but Reset was still their greatest asset.

As she finally entered the large chamber where Reset hid Mirror Mirror was already assaulting, and Reset was dodging back, easily avoiding the mirrored discs flying through the air. Avian could only guess he had reversed twenty or thirty times to memorize the pattern perfectly.

Four guns blazed, and Mirror ducked back, a wall of mirrors appearing in front of him.

“Avian, grenade!”

She reached for her belt before realizing. A quick glance and she saw the mirror hovering above her. A moment later a paint grenade dropped through it, and she flung it with all her telekinetic power at Mirror.

It exploded halfway.

Reset got covered, and Mirror’s feet got hit. He dutifully fell over into the hail from Avian’s guns.

Avian threw Reset a look and he shrugged. “Can’t catch ‘em every time, sorry.”

Avian sighed. While no one was sure if Reset could rewind time after dying, they had all agreed to a basic ruleset, and in it he couldn’t.

“Omni, where are you.”

Omni didn’t reply.

“Omni I—”

Avian saw the shadow move and literally flew backwards, dodging behind the corner as twin beams of yellow flickered out.

Protopod.

He had her pinned. He was faster than her. If she could just...

She floated a gun around the corner only for it to be hit by a beam in a moment.

Damn.

Metallic footsteps sounded his approach, clanging off the walls.

Damn damn damn.

Protopod stepped around the corner, arm raised, hand glowing.

"Gotcha!" Omni shouted.

Protopod spun and his suit exploded in paint, several grenades going off at once. A moment later he stepped aside to reveal Omni standing there, grinning.

"And the Irregulars win again! Undefeated!" He did a pirroute in midair."

Avian sighed and stood. Her team treated this as a game, gloating every time they won. It wasn't. This was life and death. All of it was life and death.

But team morale was a consideration, so...

"Almays suh easy?" Volt said through a mouthful of pizza.

"Dude," Zero replied, and Volt swallowed before asking again.

"It is never easy," Avian replied. "But we have never lost, and I will be quite put out if we ever do."

"Man, we should bring Violetta next time, we'll wipe the floor," he replied.

"She never comes," Reset responded, pausing to take a swig of Coke. "She insists she has 'other things' to take care of, and she can only be here for actual patrols or fights."

“And those things are?”

The team shrugged, carrying on with their party to celebrate the Irregulars twenty fifth victory in a row.

The most powerful room in the world wasn't in the Kremlin. It wasn't in the Leopold, nor was it in the Great Hall of the People. It wasn't even in the White House, where many Americans assumed it was.

The most powerful room in the world had an unassuming door guarded by two dress marines. It led to a hallway that could have appeared in any Washington office building. Inside it looked much like the Situation Room in the White House next door.

It wasn't.

The Incident Room of the OEOB was the room from which the United States deployed its powered forces. The ability to merely destroy the world paled next to what could be deployed from within its walls.

Within the room sat a handful of people, each individually among the world's most powerful.

Paul O'Brian, the president's chief of staff, was presiding over the riot on behalf of the "world's most powerful man". To his right sat Secretary Keller from the Department of Extraordinary Affairs, and to *his* right sat Courtesan. Across the table sat Delphi, Senator, and a manifestation of OS.

All of them were yelling.

After failing to bring order he turned a plaintive face to Keller, who managed to wrangle to room after a few moments.

"Delphi," Keller stated, once they all quieted, "you were saying?"

"Chaoticus has to already have a working model. He has six 'mercenaries' working for him, but none of them have ever been seen before. None are offering their services on New York's open market. He has a working model, which means he is working on a *better* model. It is well past time we placed a dead or alive order on him."

Paul sighed. The problem with the smartest heroes was none worked for the government. Everyone in this room was independent, but it was simple fact that America needed their brilliance. Delphi didn't realize that President Harling didn't *want* to issue federal dead or alive orders anymore. It had taken a week to convince him to issue one for the new villain running around calling themselves Pestilence, and that was with the context of the first Pestilence's career *and* him already having joined the Horsemen.

"Agreement. Ninety eight percent chance Chaoticus has an unreliable method of imbuing powers. Recommended course of action: Issuance of dead or alive order."

And that was two votes for dead or alive.

"Dead or alive doesn't work," Courtesan said, puffing up. "That's for someone who could kill millions if you tried to capture them. Do you think—"

"Of course he can kill millions," Senator cut in. "Death is the key to powers. What happens when we try to capture him and he sets off a power generator that covers Manhattan? Boom!" he clapped his hands. "No more Manhattan."

"Strictly speaking the infrastructure would likely be fine but—" Keller cut himself off.

A bomb that killed everyone and left infrastructure intact and completely unharmed, not even irradiated, was something the DoD would very much like. Well, they would if it wasn't for

the pesky side effect of generating potentially hundreds of powered combatants depending on the size and population density of the target.

"Regardless," Delphi cut in, "killing Chaoticus is the best option. The New York heroes should be instructed to destroy any and all documents and machines they find. We have been down this road. It is dangerous. It is destructive. Used with anything less than a supernaturally deft hand, it is the end of the world."

Keller sighed. "It is invaluable. We can use the research to bolster our own not just in power creation but on where powers come from, how to control or counteract them, how to shut them down with *science*."

A laugh burst from Delphi. "I've told you where they come from, it is on you to believe it."

"Enough," Paul cut in. "We'll consider the order, and reconvene—"

"No you won't," Delphi snorted, pushing back from the table. "Your president's too weak."

"The feds aren't doing anything, you'll have to take the lead."

Avian narrowed her eyes. Mastermind ignored that, reaching up and adjusting her tiara. Unlike most heroes, who covered their faces, she left hers bare, the only bit covered the tiniest bit of forehead under the golden circlet and double M's. The Veil still covered her, somehow. It was just one of Mastermind's many secrets Avian had yet to unravel

"How do you know— Nevermind. You have a tip, just give it," she said.

"Now, now. You know I prefer for you to figure it out. That way I said nothing, and you put your critical thinking skills to good use. Use 'em or lose 'em is what they say, isn't it," she replied nonchalantly.

"Can I have a hint?"

"Where haven't they attacked?" Mastermind replied after a moment.

Where?

They had been all over the city. There was no pattern to their attacks because at least half were at random. Omni had determined that. Their true targets were obscured. They had hit everywhere from the Diamond District to the Piers to Wall Street. The only place she could think they hadn't was...

"Oh. Oh no," she said, deflating.

"Oh yes. Bellstar Labs. They won't want your help. And be warned, forces are at work here. Forces beyond even me." Mastermind stood and walked to the headquarters front door before hesitating. "Be careful, and good luck."

Volt glared across the street, and six security guards glared right back at him. It was day three of the stakeout. Bellstar Labs had turned down offers for help.

Lady Avian had turned down their refusal.

And so they now did shifts. Boring, all day shifts. Bellstar had filed an injunction forcing them across the street, so now Volt stood in full uniform, in the middle of the sidewalk, glaring.

“They don’t care, you know.”

And ignoring *him*. It turns out Bellstar had a few mercenaries on staff for security, and the most annoying of them was Cyberian.

“Plus, they have ergonomic shoes. You’re just wearing out your feet while they stay fresh and ready.”

The son of a bitch followed Volt wherever he chose to stand.

“You know, your slave driver Lady Avian should...”

It took Volt a second to register that Cyberian had stopped talking. He turned to find Cyberian staring.

“What?”

Cyberian didn’t answer, so Volt turned

Marching down the street was Chaoticus. With a flick of his wrist a telekinetic storm slapped a car out of his way.

Volt fired once, twice, thrice, larger and larger bolts, each dispersing in midair in a burst of telekinetic energy.

“Guys, I need help. He’s here!”

Chaoticus rose up in the air, floating, robes flowing around him, arms raised towards Volt.

Oh fuck.

Telekinetic storms burst forth, crackling the air with near invisible bolts of energy, flowing towards him, ripping the air apart—

Bang!

The storms vanished and reappeared on either side of Chaoticus, slamming into him a moment later in an explosion.

“You’re welcome,” Cyberian said. “Now move!”

“But, he’s...”

...dead.

Chaoticus stood, or rather, floated, seemingly unharmed, fury etched in his face. More storms burst forth, and Cyberian redirected them one after the other.

“Into the labs! Go!”

Volt didn’t hesitate. Traffic had stopped as people fled, and Volt dodged cars as Chaoticus continued his assault, changing tactics to throw vehicles.

Cyberian’s powers allowed him to teleport objects in motion. His suit had some light energy shielding, but could famously hack into defense networks and redirect them for him.

In front of Volt, two miniguns unfolded from the front entrance, both swinging sideways in seconds to unleash fury upon Chaoticus.

“Don’t stop!”

Volt sprinted beneath them inside to find a lobby in chaos. The team was somehow already inside, Reset shouting orders at panicked guards as Avian argued with Cryptorian.

Behind, steel barriers snapped shut, the dull beat of miniguns continuing for several second before finally stopping.

"How?" Volt asked Agent after finally managing to grab a member of the team.

"Reset sent your warning back and Violetta got us inside, then popped back outside to distract him. Unfortunately, he stopped radio communications because we could really use her."

"Because?"

"Because in one minute his mercenaries are gonna land on the roof to grab whatever it is they wanted. He baited us down here."

"So send Reset back to...oh."

Reset could only go back three minutes. He went back a full three and rallied the troops, which would have been when Volt called for help, which would have been a minute or two ago, which meant that Reset could go back, unless...

"Violetta dropped us off and was already circling around when Chaoticus was engaging you," Agent said, seeing the gears turn in Volt's head. "By the time we knew we couldn't go back far enough."

"So, the top of the building?"

Agent nodded towards the elevators. A group finished evacuating and Avian, Omni, Reset, and a dozen security guards packed in. "We'll go next."

It took another thirty seconds for the next elevator to arrive. Volt piled in with Agent, Cyberian, and Cryptorian. Above, Volt could see people running. So many people running, on every floor, but at the top, flashes of electricity corresponding to energy weapons, lasers, and energy shields.

The elevator shot upwards. Above Volt could pick out Reset as their brain flashed repeatedly, each flash representing them jumping back from the future. He was clustered with two people by the elevator, exchanging some form of electrical fire with a group in a different room.

"You okay?"

Volt started as Agent laid a hand on his shoulder. "It's usually not like this. We can go months without a fight. A gang or the mafia or a terrorist group attack somewhere, by the time we mobilize they're gone or pulling out so we can't really engage. You should have had more training before it got like this. You should have—"

"I'm fine," Volt lied, shoving a shaking hand behind his back. "I'm just, I'm not used to the way they..."

Agent gave a grim grin. "You aren't used to the way some villains go for the throat. Go for the kill with no mercy. Most of our fights aren't like that either. Most thieves aren't willing to catch a murder charge to avoid jail, and in those fights we don't go lethal either."

"I just—"

Volt cut off as the doors opened onto chaos.

"They're making for an exit! We gotta push! Go!" Reset screamed. Volt exited the elevator and started firing.

"Left! Left!"

Volt was looking forward, but with his electrical vision he could see Reset's brain pulsing like a disco. He followed his orders without question, dodging an explosion by inches.

If Reset waited three minutes, they'd be dead, so he was just getting them through alive. If they were going to win, it would be on Volt and the others to find a way to do it.

Volt paused as Chaoticus floated into view. Behind him Violetta appeared on top of a building and threw purple beams of light at him, which he deflected effortlessly.

"Volt," Reset shouted, "umm, don't move."

What?

As he turned to look at Reset, pain flared in his chest. A moment later he was crashing into a wall.

Before he hit the ground he realized his power was surging. Somehow, Chaoticus telekinetic storm was infused with electricity.

"Do it!"

Volt wasn't sure if it was Reset's voice or his own, but he raised his palm and unleashed all of his power in one burst. An ear splitting explosion filled the room. Chaoticus tumbled.

Before Volt could celebrate, another explosion hit him.

The Irregulars sat scattered around the room, in chairs, on desks, and leaning on walls. No one spoke. Soon they'd be called down to the Arrowhead. It didn't matter that the Division wasn't there, they were in the City, so they officially answered to the Division so long as they stayed on the right side of the law, and there were going to be questions. Many questions.

Despite their best efforts, Chaoticus had escaped. In the process half of the building had been wrecked, and it would take several days for the team to recover from their injuries, days where Chaoticus would keep going and they could do nothing to stop him.

Agent finished wrapping Volt's arm and gave him a pat on the shoulder. Volt was the only one to hurt Chaoticus, who had immediately returned the favor with a telekinetic blast that tore a hole through three floors.

"How though?" Reset muttered as Agent moved to him. He was taking it hardest. When running the fight from afar, he could afford to let things play out again and again. In the heat of battle, he had to keep them alive.

"Eyes," Agent demanded, pulling at Reset's eyelids and aiming a flashlight.

"No, do everyone else first, I—"

"Oh for heaven's sake," Violetta shoved him aside and held up a glowing violet hand.

"What?"

"Chaoticus. He's a wizard, and yes, wizards are real."

Agent's eyes widened as Reset's skin slowly started knitting together. "What are you—?"

"Chaoticus is far more powerful than he should be. I met him once, long ago, and the things he can do now, they're beyond what he should be able to do."

"You're—" Agent began.

Violetta sighed. "A wizard too, yes. No, it doesn't mean I can do whatever I want. Yes, I do have a good reason for hiding it."

Volt chimed in. "Which is?"

Violetta threw a look at Avian, who shrugged. "It's your secret," Avian replied, "and you're apparently spilling them all."

"Wait, you knew?" Volt asked.

"My mother will kill you all if she finds me."

Reset and Volt gaped, then launched into questions about magic, but Agent stepped back, thinking. Project Indigo had explained to him at length where his power was coming from.

"How does magic work?" Reset asked, sitting up.

"I can't explain it."

"Try."

"Explain love to one who has yet to experience it. Explain the color blue to the blind. Explain joy to a rock. It is what it is, no more, no less, and unlike anything else you could imagine."

"I'd just like to say I knew," Omni said, half smirking.

"How?" Violetta demanded. "This is life or death, if I left a clue—"

"Learning is my power."

Violetta raised a finger, then let it drop.

"And your mother is—"

The finger went back up and he cut off.

"I'd like to know your mother's name," Reset chimed in.

"You wouldn't believe me anyway."

"So we'd know her? If you don't tell us we'll wildly guess."

"Volt was asking about my abilities. Well, magic can do anything, but outside of what I can do naturally, and what I have trained very, very hard to do, it's all *hard*. Really hard. And the bigger it is the more impossible. Changing living things against their will without having a natural ability to do it is like trying to hold back a river with your hands. You can't just do it. You need to build to it. After all, a dam is made by your hands, even if those hands make machines first. That is what Chaoticus is doing. I just don't know *how*."

"Wait, so if magic is real, then what are superpowers?" Reset finally asked.

Violetta rubbed her temple and stepped forwards. "Magic. Somehow. Someway. I don't think anyone is really sure."

"But, you're a wizard, shouldn't you know?" Reset asked.

"Where did your car come from Reset?"

"The dealership," he responded immediately.

"And before that? How was it made? What processes were used? How was it shipped? There are a million things you don't know about your world of logic and rules. People with powers just kind of appeared one day."

"Everyone **stop**," Avian demanded. Volt opened his mouth to speak but closed it when four pairs of eyes fell on him.

"You said Chaoticus is more powerful than he should be. Explain," she continued.

"I can't."

"You can't?"

"To use a bad metaphor it's as if a twenty two rifle was putting holes in the side of a tank. There is no proper way to explain magic to someone who has never used it, who *can't* use it. He just was more than he should have been. We're lucky he didn't tear the whole building down."

"Did he just get the last piece?"

Violetta frowned. "I don't know, but I think, for everyone's sake, we should assume he did."

"So, what do we do now?" Volt asked.

Avian's eyebrows narrowed. "We kill Chaoticus, whatever it takes."

Lady Avian hung up the phone, a grim look on her face. "They found him."

Agent leapt to his feet. "Alright. I have some special weapons I think might help, we'll coordinate and help—"

"No. He has several new villains guarding him."

"So..." Volt said. The rest of the room stayed silent, eyes slowly turning to him. "Oh." Realization hit him and the syllable came out as squeak. He had new villains. His machine was working.

"So, we go now. A strike force is mobilizing with every available hero. I contacted Violetta, she'll be here within the hour."

"Plan?" Omni asked.

Within minutes the big screen had the map of the warehouse Chaoticus was using as a base, nestled next to Hell's Kitchen. Markers indicated lines of potential defense and attack points.

"Okay, so, from the top. We ignore the other heroes and cause as much noise as possible here," Avian said, pointing towards the north side of the factory. Violetta should arrive in time and will deposit herself along with me and Volt inside. Volt will be wearing that," she said, arm waving towards the wall.

There, Omni's suit sat, nearly complete, still lacking proper capacitors and batteries. Omni had been making modifications for weeks, ever since Volt had joined the team, just in case. He claimed that Volt should be able to fly it now on his own.

He very, very strenuously stressed the word *should*.

"Volt should build up enough electricity off the suit's reactors to blast through any shield Chaoticus throws up around the device. The device is target number one. Chaoticus is target two. We need both though. As long as the device is intact it can produce more opponents. As long as Chaoticus is free he can build a new machine. Everyone and everything else comes second."

"I have a question," Volt shifted uncomfortably. "It's just, well, Victoria has her magic shields, and I'll have armor and whatever shields Omni has active in the suit—"

"Front shields only, and they are easily overloaded so be careful with them," Omni interjected.

"Right, some shields and armor, and I kinda have to be there, but why are you coming into the warehouse."

Agent blew air out his nose in a faint imitation of a snort.

"I'm in charge, I'll be directing you and drawing fire," Avian replied.

"I think we can handle it without—"

"I'm coming, that's final," Avian barked, hair flaring up in a burst of telekinetic power.

Fuck, she's insane.

Omni threw Volt a look before he could say another word. There was no arguing. Volt shrugged it off and started getting suited up.

"You can take the L-50, but not the grenades," Reset passed along after resetting.

Agent and Avian both nodded, not even questioning what he said. Reset would never get over the level of trust involved.

Agent had spent two minutes explaining to Avian what he wanted, and Avian had permitted the rifle, but barred grenades on concerns about redirects.

Neither would ever know. To use Reset to speed along arguments, they had to trust him, completely. Explaining the positions they had said would inevitably lead to them adding more, and going in circles. To save time, they *had* to trust him. There was no other way. And so, if Reset wanted, he could take command. He had been tempted before, but never done it. He had spent too long being manipulative. Being selfish. Working on a team, doing good, it was an atonement. Not for being evil. No. For using the gifts God had given him for such petty things as money and power.

Reset closed his eyes and crossed himself. Once more into the breach. Tonight he'd watch his friends die, again and again. He would bear the grief, and he would soldier on.

#

Agent racked the bolt on the fifty caliber rifle. On his back was a smaller rifle using NATO 6.35 ammunition. On each hip was a pistol. On his right ankle was a combat knife, on his left six throwing knives.

He was a walking US arsenal. People with powers, they were hard to put down. Put a bullet in their lung and they could keep coming at you. Stop their heart and they took minutes to die. Each gun was loaded with explosive point bullets, a tiny high power charge that would detonate in the tip a heartbeat after impact, just long enough for the bullet to penetrate..

Tonight he wasn't playing. Project Indigo had made some of the deadliest assassins the world had ever known, and, unknowingly, him. He had seen first hand the damage Chaoticus could do if he *just* gave people the side benefits of powers. Health, strength, speed, intelligence, healing, the Veil. If Chaoticus was giving out real powers, well, one way or another, Agent would make sure he was put down.

He glanced sideway at Avian as he shouldered his rifle.

One way or another.

#

Volt jumped as the helmet shut on his face, but didn't go anywhere. The suit held him tight. Omni and he were similar in size, but he was a bit taller, so it was *snug*.

"Get used to the systems, then start drawing in power," Omni said, not looking up from what looked like a ray gun.

In front of Volt a heads-up display snapped on. Volt spoke commands, and the suit started booting. The first thing up were the motors, and he immediately turned and grabbed the gloves. The backs were copper plated, but they were ultimately just black cloth gloves.

"Why cloth?"

"Finesse," Omni answered. "I can't fit all my weapons in the suit yet, and making proper gauntlets with the same dexterity as human fingers is extremely difficult. I haven't had a chance to learn how to do that yet."

Volt felt the reactors turning on. Bare copper touched his skin on his legs, torso, arms. Each point hummed alive as electricity flowed into him.

For the first time, Volt started to feel real power pour into him.

#

Omni focused on the gun. It didn't work, he wouldn't be taking it, but he had to focus on something.

Instinct had told him, weeks ago, to do this. Chaoticus wasn't a joke, he was a be-all end-all threat to mankind. He was a no-holds-barred kinda fight.

And still...

And still, watching Volt take the suit on its first real test run hurt. He'd tested all the systems, even done an integration test, but not once, not once had he had the suit in combat. This was its maiden run, and it wouldn't be his.

Shaking his head, he answered another question from Volt about the power output. So many questions. Understandable questions, as Volt's life and the success of their mission depended on him understanding the suit, trusting the suit, melding with the suit.

Omni set the gun down and picked up his scanner. It was working in perfect order. He started checking it anyway.

#

Avian holstered her fourth gun. She wasn't great at it yet, but now wasn't the time to throw away an option because it might not work. She'd keep every card in her deck.

Around the room her soldiers prepared. Agent was thinking about going off book. She'd have to keep an eye on him. Omni was hurting because he had to let Volt use his toys. He'd get over it. Those two would bond eventually over their love of building. Reset was praying. She understood, and wished there was another way, but the success of the team relied on his power doing what it did, and the success of the team saved lives. And Volt...

...she finally had a read on Volt. He was alright. Had a complex about his dad now he knew who his dad was, but who wouldn't. He'd do alright, or he'd crack and run. It was fifty-fifty. If he ran Violetta would have to take down Chaoticus on her own, which she wasn't sure she could. If he didn't, he'd be able to do anything by remembering this night.

Straightening up and cracking her neck, she called the team's attention.

"Everyone ready? We're moving out."

The bipod nestled against the rooftop edge with ease, like it was made for it. Urban combat gear was made to be versatile, but it was like fate had made this rooftop for Agent.

Behind Agent, Avian took off. Before him, Warehouse Ninety Two stood surrounded by a shimmering barrier designed to let humans pass through, but deflect bullets. Inside, two dozen villains readied, arrayed to protect the building. The warehouse shield extended out from the pier, cutting across the West Side Highway and halted traffic. There was plenty of room inside to fight. There was room to fight inside, beneficial to heroes and villains alike.

Agent's crosshair drifted from target to target. He checked the rapel he'd use to get to street level when his spot got exposed, then settled back. He'd know when it kicked off, and when he could start shooting, until then, worrying was pointless.

Instead, he practiced his breathing. In. Hold. Hold. Hold. Out. Again and again. Calm, careful, precise. Gun and shooter, one and the same.

#

"Okay, go," Avian said, managing to keep her cringe to the barest twitch.

Dozens of heroes battered the shield, slipping in and out to harry the villains. They were stalling, Statuesque had given Violetta fifteen minutes before an all out assault would begin.

Omni flashed Avian a smile and charged the shield. The unnatural shimmering white stood stark against the black sky over New Jersey. Behind him, he could almost feel Avian yearning to go with him. She'd be going into even more danger, yet she would be in two places at once, doubling her danger if she could.

The wall came up fast. Behind it, a man in jeans and a faded jacket, an Oni on his face, half horns and anger. His body became mist for a moment, the mask the only thing solid, and then they were face to face, a mere few inches and an impenetrable barrier between them.

"Still getting used to those powers eh?" Omni smirked. "Good. I got your ass beat."

The man in the mask didn't respond.

"I know, I know," Omni replied as if the man had answered, "I'm not one to talk, but hey, I've had mine for a while, and my power scales with time, fast. See, it taught me how to build *this*."

Omni held up a ray gun with a flourish. As the man looked up at Omni's right hand as his left hand flashed through the barrier, a beam of light piercing the man through.

It was over in a heartbeat. The man crumpled, mist pouring off of him, and then nothing. *One down.*

He supposed he should feel bad. He had never killed before. He had never needed to. But the internet was a wonderful and horrible place, full of all sorts of information on how the government turns ordinary recruits into killing soldiers. On how to remove remorse. That had seemed useful in a line of work that may one day require him to kill someone who cannot defend themselves. Someone who's power works on a giant scale to flatten cities, but couldn't kill a simple person standing in front of them. They existed. They were rare, but they existed.

So Omni felt nothing. No, not nothing. Nothing worth noticing. The tiniest twinge.

Undo that.

Omni had no clue how easy that would be. He had known going in messing with his mind was a dangerous prospect. He had seen first hand what happened when you did that. He even knew why he would be driven to do it anyway. The curse of reading every psych textbook you could get your hands on and having a power that let you not just retain it but understand it.

One day someone would write one of those things that described how to go about this kind of lifestyle and maintain a healthy mind. One day.

#

Victoria shed her gown in a moment. A portal to her apartment in New York, and she began dressing. Pants. Boots. Top. Jacket. What a jacket. Of all her looks in all the years, the jacket was a top five.

She slid two knives in her belt. Anti-magic fields were real, and a long lifetime taught one caution. She still hadn't mastered the use of firearms. She'd get around to it eventually. Knives, though. Even Omni would be hard put to match her with knives.

Taking a moment to check herself in the mirror, she portaled to the South Pole. Rule one was never, ever open a direct portal from a place you kept private to your destination, which meant portaling to somewhere no one was watching, no one would see, and then portaling to your true destination.

Avian was on her in a moment. "It's already started. Let's go!"

Victoria closed her eyes, feeling her way past the shield, and into the warehouse. She grabbed the layout, felt out the machine, where large objects felt like people.

She opened her eyes and nodded. "Violetta Taxi Service, your need is our deed," she said with a smirk, opening a portal in midair.

