Part VI: Asylum

In the hallway, the emergency lights come on. The lights flicker, casting vaguely-threatening shadows and creating a disorienting strobe effect.

Tachyon blinks to adjust to the low light. “Well, at least the containment fields are on their own generators.” She immediately regrets saying anything. It’s like inviting....

Klaxons sound. Wraith comments drily, “That would be the prisoner containment fields shutting down.”

“Oh. Dear.” Legacy looks around, taking in their surroundings. His danger sense is in overdrive, underscoring how unhelpful in can be in a situation like this. His first thought is to check on the detective and Colleen. He turns to his left and realizes that the door to the interrogation room is no longer there. He whirls around, making sure that he hadn’t gotten mixed up. He looks at his partners and points at the wall. “There *was* a door right there, right?”

Tachyon touches the wall to verify. “Yes, there was. Oh, this might be a sign of the breakdown of the stabilizing fields. We’re in an inter-dimensional space, and if someone messed with the stabilizers, how we interact with our location in space-time would be fundamentally altered.”

“So we’re lost.” Wraith cuts through the tech-talk and gets right to the point. She also palms a pair of throwing knives.

“Or everyone *else* is,” points out Legacy.

Tachyon looks over her shoulder. “Neither. We just need to make our way to the central control room and reboot the system. Ought to be able to fix the stabilization and check to see what made the power go out at the same time. Easy.”

A thudding sound echoes from another part of the building, followed closely by a scream. The three heroes wince.

“Until you can fix it, what are we looking at?” Legacy asks Tachyon. He’s worried about his civilians⎯Detective Bender might be a cop, but this situation is about as far from Missing Persons as you can get, so he counts as a civilian⎯and hopeful that she’ll have some way to get to them quickly, before something else does.

“Well, the stabilizer keeps the Block accessible to other dimensions, so as long as it isn’t operating, no one’s getting in *or* out. But we’ll also need to stick close together because our spatial relationships could vary at any time.”

Legacy nods at “no one’s getting in or out” but looks entirely at sea for the second part. Wraith clarifies in English, “Basically the hallways are gonna shift around on us, so if we don’t want to get really lost, we should stick together.”

Legacy can tell that it’s going to be one of those days. Their only chance of helping the civilians and guards is to try to get everything back in working order. “Tachyon, where *is* the central control room?”

“...That’s going to be harder to find. Remember what I said about spatial relationships?”

Wrath closes her eyes, centering herself before speaking, “So it’s lost too.”

“Well then, we’ll just have to find it.” Legacy checks down the hallway in both directions before setting off. “Eyes open, ladies.”

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“Colleen, are you alright?” Brian puts his hands on her shoulders and leans in close so that he can see her face in the dim light.

“I’m fine. What was that?”

“Just the lights. Sit tight and I’ll go get the others.”

“Cuffed to the chair,” she reminds him drily.

Brian doesn’t respond to her crack. He opens the door and peers into the hallway. It’s empty. It’s only been a few seconds since they stepped out, and there’s no sign of them at all. Even stranger, the hallway looks very different from what Brian remembers. Of course, that’s ridiculous, that couldn’t happen, right?

His pessimistic side kicks in. “...Oh shit, we’re in the Block.” Brian doesn’t know all that much about the science behind the inter-dimensional prison, but he knows that it breaks the laws of physics to keep the most dangerous of the most dangerous super-powered criminals away from everyone else. Seems logical to assume that what would be a minor inconvenience elsewhere could turn into a major disaster in a place like this. Based on the screaming he can hear echoing through the halls, the disaster has already started.

He shuts the door and turns back to Colleen. “...Well, we aren’t where we started out.”

He can’t see her face very well, but he can hear hints of derision in her voice. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she asks.

“The hallway’s different, and the Freedom three of Five aren’t out there.”

“They left us?” Colleen’s voice rises in pitch.

“No. The hallway’s different. I think we moved.”

Colleen scoffs. “They told me you people would lie, but I thought it would be a bit more believable.”

“I’m not lying. We’re in a prison built in inter-dimensional space, and we lost electricity. Weird things happen.”

There are several moments of silence⎯long enough for Brian to feel very uncomfortable. Then a loud bang a few feet away makes them both jump.

Colleen hisses, “What was that?!”

Brian puts his finger to his lips and cautiously cracks the door. Across the hall, one of the other doors is ajar. He watches in fascination as a guard is suddenly flung from the room. The guard, dead, slams into the wall next to Brian.

Brian has the presence of mind to shut the door to the interrogation room before who or whatever threw the guard sees him. He takes a few shuddering breaths. There’s another bang, this time closer.

Colleen didn’t see what Brian saw⎯her back is to the door⎯but she could hear it well enough. She squeaks, “We’re trapped. It’s gonna find us!”

Brian focuses on his academy training and slips into cop-mode. This is just like any other high-stress situation. He’s the professional, and he has to stay calm if he and Colleen are going to make it out of this in one piece. He reassures her, “No, it’ll be okay.” He steps behind her and unlocks the cuffs⎯as a member of law enforcement, his thumbprint is coded to the locks on all the cuffs the Block uses.

As she stands up, there’s a bang on their door, and it flies open.

Terror and a very unfamiliar feeling overwhelm Brian, and then he’s seeing the world from a remarkably different angle.

The door hangs off its hinges, and Brian’s worst nightmare walks into the room. Spite is the sort of criminal that cops whisper about in awed tones. And now Brian’s trapped in a room with him, and a civilian, and not for the first time he seriously regrets ever leaving the Missing Persons’ office.

Spite looks around, sniffing. He has dandruff. Brian wonders how he noticed that, and then it hits him. Colleen has her arms around him and a hand clamped over his mouth. And they’re crouched on the ceiling, looking down on the room. Only he doesn’t feel upside down at all. The blood isn’t rushing to his head, Colleen’s hair brushes her shoulders, and his inner ear and stomach seem perfectly settled. Only reason he knows they’re on the ceiling is that his head is tilted back to watch Spite walk around.

Colleen shifted the orientation of gravity with respect to the two of them and jumped onto the ceiling to hide. The power usage was a natural reaction for her, and her powers changed gravity so smoothly that Brian hardly noticed it happening. So now they’re in the best hiding spot they could have in a ten by ten room. It’s dark and they’re crouched in a corner beside the door, and who looks at the ceiling anyway?

As it turns out, Spite does. His eyes glow reddish-purple in the dark, and the malevolence that gives him his nickname is palpable. Brian dearly wishes he had been allowed to keep his sidearm.

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The three heroes, sticking close together, walk cautiously down the hallway. The lights flicker, and there are disturbing noises around them, and Tachyon feels like she’s in a horror movie. In the corner of her eye, she thinks she can see a figure looming.

She snaps her head around, but there’s no one there. Then, she sees it again, this time off to their left. She whispers, “I think we’re being followed....”

Out of the gloom, over ten, maybe fifteen if Tachyon stops to count, men lunge at them. They’re coming in from all sides, and the three of them are forced into a very tight knot. The heroes have spent a lot of time fighting together and have a system worked out, but these guys are attacking with still more impressive coordination.

The tight quarters make it almost impossible for Tachyon to get up to speed, and she can tell that Wraith is feeling a bit boxed in as well. Legacy is doing his best to open up space by pushing their attackers away, but superior numbers can trump strength and power.

It’s desperate fighting, silent and disorienting under the strobing lights. The three heroes can’t spare the breath or the time to speak, and the escaping prisoners don’t seem to need to converse. They’re getting pummeled, and Tachyon knows that she has to do something about it.

She squeezes Wraith’s right forearm, a signal to prepare one of her devices, and then Tachyon lets loose. When the whirl of motion stops, the three heroes are still knotted together in the middle of the hallway, but the fourteen⎯Tachyon counted⎯men are staggering slightly in a circle a few feet back. Wraith doesn’t hesitate. She throws down a smoke bomb, and all three run past the stunned prisoners and down the hall.

As they round the nearest corner, the ground shifts beneath their feet. Legacy lifts each of his companions and floats a foot off the ground. All around them, the hallway changes and they’re suddenly in an entirely different area of the prison. The experience is truly unreal⎯one minute you’re in one place, and then the walls shift to different walls and you’re somewhere else.

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Spite laughs. “An unexpected treat,” he observes. His hand glows with the same reddish-purple energy that illuminate his eyes, and he raises it, palm toward them.

Brian tenses, ready to push Colleen away from the attack if necessary. But Colleen acts first. Brian feels his stomach lift, like he’s riding a rollercoaster and going down a big hill, and he realizes that he’s floating mid-air. Colleen lets go of Brian and plunges into Spite. The force of the impact snaps bones and drives Spite to the floor. She immediately returns Brian to the ground and points to the door.

Brian reacts quickly and propels Colleen through the door and into the hallway. Behind them, he can hear Spite dragging himself after them. Brian winces when he hears another metal door being flung open. A scream pierces the air.

“Run. Faster,” urges Brian under his breath to Colleen. She nods, because now they can hear Spite running after them, his footsteps echoing through the hallway like fate knocking. They run as fast as they can, but the footsteps get louder and louder.

“Who is THAT?” cries Colleen as they run.

“Spite. Jack Donovan. He’s a serial killer with drug-induced superpowers.”

“Drug-induced? Like... intentional?”

“Well... yeah. Experiments on prisoners.”

“Experiments. On criminals. That make superpowerd serial killers. And *we’re* the villains.”

Brian doesn’t have an answer for that.

Then he’s right on them, and a bright purple light shrouds Brian’s vision. He hears Colleen cry out in pain before his sight clears. He blinks several times and backpedals. Spite looms over him with a satisfied smirk on his face. Spite raises his hand and encircles Brian’s throat, lifting him off the ground. Self-defense training can’t overcome super-strength. Brian’s head swims.

A jolt of electricity runs through Spite’s body, and Brian feels like he just received a very powerful static shock. Spite’s arm flexes and his hand releases Brian. Brian drops to the ground. Spite’s body contorts and spasms, as Colleen advances on the two of them. Her eyes are glowing blue, her hair stands on end, and electricity sparks from her out-stretched palms.

“Leave. Him. Alone.” She punctuates each word with a fresh pulse of electricity. Spite staggers and swears furiously. He turns to Colleen, charging up his energy attack despite the onslaught. Brian frantically tries to work out how he could intervene. Then the ground shakes beneath them, and Colleen disappears in front of him.

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When it seems like the shifting is done, Legacy puts Wraith and Tachyon back on their feet. Wraith looks a bit green under the mask. Legacy asks her, his eyes full of concern, “Are you okay?”

She puts up a hand to hold him off. “Let’s just get to the control room and clear this up, ASAP.”

Tachyon is looking around at the new room. It’s a very long, wide room full of see-through tanks⎯she’d say glass, but she knows better. Some look unused. Some are still occupied. A few are broken. She leans over the nearest broken one and reads the name.

“That... that is not good.”

“HANDS UP! WE HAVE SUPPRESSION GUNS!”

The heroes jump and put their hands in the air. “It’s just us,” Legacy calls out.

A pack of F.I.L.T.E.R. agents, about twenty, are standing a few rows away. They’re in a tight formation, tactical gear on and suppression guns⎯which can knock out even the most resilient superpowered individuals⎯raised.

“Stand down, stand down,” the commander of the agents orders. In one movement, the agents lower their guns and relax slightly. The commander strides forward. “I had been told you’d be making a visit today, but I didn’t realize you were already here. Thank God.” He greets Legacy with a firm handshake.

“What’s the situation?” Legacy is likewise glad to see the agents. He has no problem rounding up escaped supervillains, but once you’ve rounded them up, you need someone to hand them off to. Unless you just want to drag around a collection of disabled supervillains wherever you go.

“We’ve lost the stabilizers and contact with the outside world. One of our tech guys,” he jerks his head at a nebbish man who has emerged from behind the wall of agents, “says that the stabilizers were depowered from within.”

Tachyon steps closer. “From within? How does he know?”

“He found a little bot that had overridden the controls.”

Legacy narrows his eyes. “Has anyone checked to see if Baron Blade is still where he belongs?”

The commander grimaces. “I’ve lost contact with two-thirds of my agents. They could be dead, they could be lost, I have no idea. Entire sections of the Block are completely silent. We’re just barely keeping ourselves together; I don’t have the resources to do a full sitrep.”

Legacy exhales. “Well, it was probably him. I’m at an ‘assume the worst’ point right now.”

Wraith taps her tongue against her teeth. “Knock out the power to shut down the locks and restraints. I get that. But why take out the stabilizers? We’re all stuck here now⎯no one’s getting out.”

The commander gestures around him. “Creates chaos. If you just shut down the power, we’d be able to assemble a response team and coordinate. And we’d be able to warn the outside. Every entrance to the Block has its own legion of F.I.L.T.E.R. agents. Even if a prisoner did skip the dragnet, he’d walk right into the welcoming arms of agents in riot gear.”

Tachyon snaps her fingers. “And that’s why he turned off the stabilizers. If you shut them down and then reboot, you could add new locations. He knew he couldn’t just walk through the usual Block entrances, so he’s making new ones. Every time we shift, that must be them turning it on and off again. A bunch could have already escaped.”

The commander swears. “And they could end up anywhere.”

Legacy holds his hands up. “We just shifted again, that means that they’re still getting people out. We have a chance to contain this before it gets worse. We just have to keep looking. Commander, you and your team start rounding up escaped inmates⎯I know we just ran into... several. We’ll keep pressing on toward the control room.”

The commander nods. Tachyon clears her throat and mutters under her breath. “Legacy, look at this.” Legacy glances over at her and then follows her finger to read the name that she had seen earlier. His stomach drops. He inhales sharply and says, “Commander. It seems that Jack Donovan is out. We were here to speak with someone who was staying in your hospital wing, a young woman named Colleen Mosley. As far as I know, a Megalopolis PD detective is with her. We all know Donovan’s predilections. Keep an eye out for them.”

Legacy is trying to keep calm. His every instinct is telling him to rush off and find them before *he* does. But, he’s been a hero for way too long to just give in to that impulse. No one’s safe until they get the power and stabilizers back on. You have to sometimes resist the urge to save one to make sure that the many are secure. Still. Escaping the Citizens of the Sun only to be murdered by Spite in an inter-dimensional prison. Some rescue.

The blood runs from the commander’s face. Most of the other prisoners here are dangerous if they have their minions, their tech, their special relics that turn them into gods, whatever. Spite is just dangerous. And crazy. Crazy dangerous. He nods in acknowledgement, but privately he thinks that the girl and the officer are probably dead. Even with two of them, they’d be no match for Spite if he runs across them.

“Here.” The commander gestures for an agent to hand out two spare shortwave radios. “At least we’ll be able to keep in touch. They seem to work despite the fluctuations.” Legacy and Wraith clip the radios their uniforms.

The ground rumbles again, and Legacy quickly grabs the other two heroes before the agents and the room with the tanks shift into another location.

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Brian immediately realizes that Colleen didn’t disappear so much as he and Spite moved. Colleen’s electricity stopped when they left her, but Spite is still quivering slightly from the after-effects. Brian looks around desperately. They’re in the hospital wing.

Brian starts running for the door. Spite recovers enough to throw a hospital bed at Brian. The bed is aluminum, so lighter than you might think, but it still sends Brian sprawling on the ground. The bed pins Brian awkwardly to the ground, and he frantically tries to wiggle away.

But Spite isn’t coming toward Brian. Instead, he’s rummaging around in the drug cabinets. He laughs triumphantly and shoots himself in the veins with various compounds. Brian can hear the fabric of Spite’s clothes rip as the drugs contort his body. Brian doesn’t remember exactly what Spite’s drugs do⎯Spite was always Rook City’s problem, not Megalopolis’⎯but he knows that things are about to get worse.

Spite stalks toward Brian and tosses the bed off to the side. Brian tries to scramble away, but Spite places a foot on his ankle. Brian feels the bone snap, and he cries out reflexively. Spite laughs again. Brian’s attention focuses on a supply cabinet right in front of him. Despite the pain and fear, his curiosity is piqued by the lowest drawer. Spite raises his hand, focusing the energy to his palm, and Brian opens the drawer and reaches in.

He wraps his hands around the first thing he touches and pulls it out. It’s a brown bottle labeled “Isopropyl Alcohol.” Spite bends over to kill Brian, savoring the moment. Brian pulls the bottle in close and opens the top. He can feel Spite’s breath on his neck, and the energy is making his skin burn and tingle.

Brian winces and splashes the alcohol over his shoulder, in approximately the direction of Spite’s face and eyes. Spite yells and recoils as the alcohol hits his eye membranes. Brian pulls away and drags himself to his feet. His ankle shouldn’t be able to support his weight at all, but adrenaline courses through his veins and the pain doesn’t even register.

Brian vaults over the nearest bed, putting some distance between himself and the serial killer. Just like it did with the drawer, his attention now focuses over in a corner. The hospital wing has some of the same containment units that the rest of the prison has. It is powered down, but the unit has its own little battery.

Spite lurches to his feet. His eyes are bloodshot and his face and body are horribly twisted. The effect is striking. He focuses on Brian and sneers. Spite snaps the bed that separates them in half and closes the distance.

Brian makes a split-second decision and dives for the containment unit. The adrenaline isn’t THAT powerful, so the dash turns into a slide, but he makes it inside and scrambles around to face Spite.

Spite smiles evilly. “Looks like you’ve cornered yourself.” His voice is deep and vibrates against Brian’s sternum. Brian pants, his heart racing.

Spite crosses the room slowly. Brian’s never felt so helpless before. The killer is clearly toying with him, and that makes Brian irrationally angry. If he’s gonna die, he’d rather just get it over with. This is just ridiculous. Brian clenches his fists and sets his jaw. Interestingly, instead of being overwhelmed with fear and pain, his world is in sharp definition. A few points of interest clamor for his attention. One supply cabinet⎯on the other side of Spite, sadly⎯holds surgical instruments. Another has pain meds. Then, next to the containment unit, is an AED.

Brian smiles as Spite reaches the containment unit. At this point, Spite is probably about eight feet tall and he looms over Brian menacingly. Of course, there’s also a lot of space between his legs too, and Brian dives under and past him.

The containment unit is a tight fit, especially for the huge man. So while Spite struggles to turn around, Brian slaps his palm down on the “Charge” button of the AED. He places the paddles on the battery just as Spite manages to sort himself out. The AED whines and discharges. The containment unit powers up. An energy barrier drops between Spite and Brian.

Spite snarls and slams his fists against the barrier, but it holds. It won’t last forever, but at least he got a break. Brian’s lips twitch into a half smile and then the adrenaline rush ends. He sits down heavily on the ground, tucking his head between his knees and breaths heavily. Oh God, he thinks. I hope Colleen is okay.

The ground rumbles. Brian closes his eyes, not sure that he wants to watch the scenery shift around him again, given how dizzy he feels. When everything settles, he hears “We got a casualty here” and someone lifts him into a fireman’s carry. Brian is happy to let it happen.

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Colleen isn’t entirely sure how to describe the sensation, but as she watches Brian and that monster-person disappear, she instinctively knows to tighten her hold on the gravitational field. She tries to reach out to grab Brian, but he vanishes before she can.

She’s left alone in the dark hallway. The sounds of gunfire and screaming echo from far away. She sits down, leaning against a wall. No point in trying to find the others. They’ll probably just disappear again, so instead she’ll just wait here.

She buries her face in her hands. This is not what she had expected her first foray to be like. The other Citizens would come back with tales of glorious victories, talking about how the craven and depraved supers living with the humans trembled before them. How the humans recognized their superiors and greeted the Citizens with open arms. Instead, there had been screaming and pain and grizzly death. She had been so shocked that her fellow Citizens would prey on the weak instead of guiding them like responsible and compassionate betters⎯every good Citizen’s role, naturally⎯that she’d intervened.

And they turned on her. Attacked her, hurt her so badly that she ended up in a hospital. And now she’s imprisoned and those craven and depraved supers who fool the human sheep with their protestations of virtue are bending over backwards to help her.

Or they’re lying. Dissembling. Trying to treat *her* like one of the human sheep. She shakes her head. She has been away from the island, away from the truth, away from Citizen Bold for too long. She knows very well that what he always says is true⎯she’s a very mixed up person and she will give in to fear and doubt if she does not stay with him and heed his words. Because sitting here, in the hallway, with the lights flickering, she is very much beginning to doubt the truth of the Citizens. What’s worse is that she is actually starting to convince herself that she ought to doubt them. She shakes her head to clear it and clenches her fists. No. Citizen Matter is not afraid.

The ground rumbles and Colleen latches onto the gravitational field again. Three figures materialize a few yards away when the shaking stops. She tenses, drawing her knees to her chest and hyperventilating. The figures walk toward her.

Radios squawk, “Legacy. Confirm that we have found Detective Bender. Injured but receiving treatment. We are in Cell Block Gamma.”

One of the figures lifts something from its waist and says, “Roger that. We’re back where we started, near the interrogation rooms and armory. And I think we have found Colleen.”

Colleen whimpers. All the talk about not being afraid goes right out the window. They are going to be so angry that she broke out of those cuffs and then left the room and then let Brian and that monster-person get away. She’d heard how powerful Legacy is, and her chest aches in anticipation.

The figures are close enough now to be seen, and sure enough, it’s Legacy and Tachyon and Wraith. They approach her, but before they can reach her, an explosion rocks the hallway. Colleen’s world goes dark for several seconds.

When she comes to, the three so-called heroes, who were closer to the blast, are lying on the ground, still stunned. A man steps out of the armory, wielding two high-powered guns and looking satisfied.

“Au revoir,” the man quips before firing both guns. Legacy is awake enough to try to take the hits for his companions, but it turns out to be unnecessary. A thin veil of blue light separates Ambuscade from his targets, and his high-caliber bullets hang suspended.

Colleen is on her feet, eyes glowing blue. She couldn’t tell you why she’s helping the “heroes,” except that Legacy actually reminds her a bit of a person who, by now, only exists as a shadow in her memory. She couldn’t protect him, but maybe she can protect these people.

Ambuscade looks up from the still-stunned heroes to evaluate the new target. “Eh bien, cherie. You are not on my list. Yet. What else can you do?” He vanishes.

Colleen lowers her hands, looking around and breathing hard. Then someone, presumably the invisible man, grabs her from behind. He places a hand over her mouth and wraps his other arm around her arms and chest. He leans in and whispers in her ear, “Tant pis, you die too easily.” He prepares to snap her neck.

The burst of electricity that Colleen releases is so loud and bright that even Colleen’s ears ring. The invisible man is flung away, though still invisible. The hallway crackles with electricity, concentrating around a blank spot⎯he might be invisible, but he still leaves a space. Colleen advances on the space, directing her electricity toward it. There’s a pop and a hiss and a bit of smoke. The man snaps back into visibility.

He’s hurt, but not disabled. He springs to his feet and draws a very large gun. He fires off two rounds and Colleen is hit in the chest with fire charges. She staggers backward. Fire is something that she cannot defend against. Ambuscade presses his advantage, hoping to disable her before she can electrocute him again. He closes the distance, only to be met with Colleen’s fist.

Now, she probably weighs a hundred pounds soaking wet, and a lot of that is hair. But, Colleen can alter gravity. So when she connects to his stomach, she hits him with force equivalent to five hundred pounds. Ambuscade crumples.

Colleen turns around, back to the heroes. She crouches down beside them. All three are conscious, but they look worse for the wear. The ground rumbles, and Legacy reacts quickly. He pulls all three into his arms and floats about two inches off the ground. He and Wraith and Tachyon wince, waiting for the world to shift.

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By the time Brian’s fully conscious and with an appropriate level of pain management, he and the agents have shifted again. They’re in the control room. Something about this strikes Brian as ironic, but the agents aren’t feeling the humor.

One techie is examining a black box that seems to be overriding the stabilizers while another tries to trace the source of the blackout. The rest of the agents guard the perimeter.

Several tense minutes later, the first techie announces that he knows what the problem is. “The device flips the stabilizers on and off in a set pattern, so that the prisoners trying to escape know when they’ll be able to leave, but we won’t be able to just follow them.” His voice is thin and reedy.

The commander eyes the techie. “You can make it stop, right?”

“Er... well, yes. But...” he taps a blinking light on the side of the box. “This is a transmitter. Chances are, it’s a trap. Knowing Baron Blade, if we disable it, bombs will go off and possibly kills us all or at the very least trap us inside permanently.”

The commander rubs the bridge of his nose. “We’re going to have to reevaluate security. How did he manage to set *that* up?”

“The same way he got this in here, little bots.”

The other techie speaks up, “If I can get the electricity on, we can scan for transmitters. Tachyon’s here, right? Maybe she could disable them before they go off.”

The commander nods. “That’s the plan then. Get the electricity back on, pronto.”

Brian leans against a console, resting his ankle and letting the pain meds the medic gave him go to work. He’s listening to the conversation with detached interest, but his gut is elbowing him⎯something’s fishy. His gut’s been three for three today, so he’s inclined to listen to it.

He glances up at the commander. “...You keep the villains’ devices, relics, whatever here, don’t you?”

The commander sighs, “Yes. People always ask why. The answer is that those things can be just as, if not more, dangerous as the criminals themselves. We keep them here so that if they decide to go haywire, the world won’t suffer for it.

“Locked up.”

“Only the agents can access....” The commander’s eyes narrow. “Are you suggesting what I think....” He’s cut off by the rapport of a pistol, and the commander drops to the ground⎯eyes glassy and with a brand new bullet hole in the forehead.

Brian and the other agents whip around. The techie working on the black box has a gun raised. He quickly grabs the second techie and presses the gun to her temple.

“Back off, or she dies.” The techie’s voice is much firmer and more assured.

The agents lower their guns. Brian’s the closest to the double agent and his hostage, so he speaks calmly, “You set this up then? Did you design it or just help him implement it?”

He smirks at Brian, “You’re trying to get me to monologue. Ha. Like I’m stupid enough to do that. Everyone knows better. Only fools give in to the temptation to tell the hero the pla...”

His eyes widen and a trickle of blood rolls down his nose. He stiffens and falls backwards. The hostage jumps out of the way. Brian lowers the commander’s sidearm.

“Gloating is just as bad,” Brian mutters. The remaining techie shudders and starts crying. Brian jumps to his feet and offers her his shoulder. The other agents are stunned.

One of them, the second-in-command, addresses Brian with something approaching awe, “How... how did you do that?”

Brian shrugs. “I’ve always been a lucky shot.”

“What do we do now?” he asks Brian.

Brian gazes into the woman’s eyes. “What’s your name...” he glances at her uniform. “Okay, Thompson. Listen to me.” She meets his eyes, quivering slightly. “Thompson, you were very brave, and now we all need you to focus on your job and get the electricity running again. Can you do that for me?”

She nods, stiffens her spine, and gets back to work. Two agents respectfully move the body of their commander and less respectfully move the spy’s body. The rest take their defensive positions again. When no one’s looking, Brian sinks into a chair. If only his family could see him now.

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Wraith tenses her stomach in preparation for the shift. But it doesn’t come. The ground stops rumbling and they’re still in the same place.

“...Is it over?” Tachyon asks cautiously.

Colleen, singed and panting, nods. “Yes, the disruption has ceased for now.”

“But, we’re where we left off,” Wraith observes.

“Of course. I held you in place.”

Tachyon blinks. “You can avoid being moved by the shift?”

Colleen nods again. “Yes, I’ve been here the whole time and people have come and gone around me.”

Tachyon grins at Legacy and Wraith. “This means that we can reach the control room!”

Legacy sighs in relief and starts to stand up. Colleen sees him struggle a bit, so she rises and offers him a hand.

“CITIZEN MATTER.” An alto voice snaps through the air and Colleen visibly stiffens.

Five citizens, the ones who were detained back at the water treatment plant, approach. Colleen drops Legacy’s hand and whirls around. She’s standing stock still, her hands at her sides and her head lowered. “Citizens Sweat, Battery, Dare, Tears, and Summer. Good to see you better.” Colleen’s voice barely carries.

Tears, Battery, and Dare pin each of the heroes to the ground. Summer gathers flames around her hands and watches from the side. Sweat, the one who spoke, places a hand on Colleen’s shoulder.

“Well done, Citizen Matter. Defeating three ‘heroes’ by yourself. Dawn will be so proud.” Colleen forces herself to meet Sweat’s eyes.

Battery glances down on the ground and sees all the bullets. Still pinning Tachyon down with one hand, he picks up a bullet with the other and throws it at Colleen. The bullet stops in her magnetic field. Sweat’s eyes dart to the suspended bullet.

Battery sneers, “If you were defeating these snakes, why did you stop all these bullets? Why not let someone else take care of them for you?”

Colleen doesn’t respond fast enough for Sweat. She twists Colleen’s arm behind her back and slams her against a wall. She twists Colleen’s arm again, snapping her wrist. “You were *helping* them, weren’t you, Matter?”

Colleen whimpers again, squirming against the wall. Summer yells in wordless fury and blasts the heroes with fire. They cry out in pain.

Sweat strokes Colleen’s hair. “Oh, Matter. You are just lost because you are separated from your Energy. Not to fear though, you will be reunited soon.”

The idea of being reunited with Energy hits Colleen in the stomach, and she’s suddenly desperate to avoid that fate. Desperate enough to... well... to...

Colleen takes a few oxygen atoms from the air and discards their neutrons. The resulting explosion sends Sweat reeling.

Colleen whirls around. Sweat is staggering; Tears, Battery and Dare are no longer paying attention to the charred heroes; and Summer is screaming wildly.

Colleen tightens her hands into fists. “I am not going back with you.”

“Then you’re going to die a traitor’s death,” intones Sweat. The five of them advance on her. She cringes and sinks to the ground under the first, powerful blow.

The Citizens surround and pummel Colleen, leaving the heroes free. They all stand, looking rough. Legacy is NOT going to let them kill that girl in front of him, and his determination spreads to Wraith and Tachyon. All three feel their spines stiffen and their injuries numb.

Tachyon strikes first, knocking Summer out from behind. Wraith jabs Tears in the throat, sending her sprawling. Then she throws two knives, one into Dare and one into Tears.

Battery hauls Colleen to her feet, holding her by the neck and in front of him like a shield. Legacy’s fists clench and his brow sets.

“Let. Her. Go.” Legacy is usually a very calm guy, unflappable really. It makes situations like these, where he’s literally seething in rage, very impressive and slightly terrifying.

The radios squawk. “Legacy, this is Detective Bender. Things have been exciting, but we’re in the control room and we know how to get all this to stop. We need Tachyon though.”

Battery smirks and tightens his grip on Colleen. She writhes weakly.

Legacy speaks without taking his eyes off Battery and Colleen. “Tachyon, Wraith, get ready to go.”

They both nod, and Legacy strikes fast. He tosses Colleen into Wraith and slams Battery against the wall, wincing slightly as he does. Wraith takes Colleen by the hand⎯the non-broken one⎯and the three of them race toward the control room.

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They reach the control room just as the ground starts shaking again. Wraith yells at the agents to stop fooling around and grab on to each other. She maintains her grip on Colleen, who is swaying dangerously and looks even whiter than she normally does.

Still, injured or not, she keeps the whole lot of them steady as the shift passes.

Brian and the agents look around in amazement when they realize that they didn’t move. The techie gets right back to work. “I’ve almost.... got it!” she announces as the overhead lights power back on.

They immediately start scanning for transmitters and explain to Tachyon what the problem is.

She nods, noting the locations of all the explosives. She notices also that one of the people who worked here had M&Ms. She helps herself. “You’ll have to deactivate the device overriding the stabilizers or I could just end up running in circles. Of course then it’ll be a tight deadline for me to knock them all out. I guess that’s why you called me.”

“Are you ready?” the techie asks. Tachyon nods. One of the agents opens the door. The techie disables the device and Tachyon speeds off.

In the end, it was easy. A few seconds later, she’s back with an armful of disabled bombs. “Piece of cake,” she grins.

The lights are on, the stabilizer is working, and they’re reconnected with the outside world. Reinforcements pour in from every Block entrance. All that’s left is for them to figure out who got out and round up the others.

Tachyon smiles at Brian. “You did good. You know, we might be able to use someone like you at HQ. Cool under fire is a rare gift.”

Brian blushes slightly, but doesn’t say no. Wraith kneels in front of Colleen, taking her hand. “Colleen, I heard from the grapevine that you weren’t as bad as you appeared, and I wanted to see for myself. And you aren’t, okay? You’re not one of them. If you want, we’ll make sure that you can start a normal life. All you have to do is....”

Wraith is interrupted by the door to the control room exploding inward. Several things happen at once. Spite, free of the containment unit and furious, fills the doorway. The ceiling caves in, trapping most of the agents. Spite blasts Tachyon, Wraith, Brian, and Colleen with an energy attack. He stalks toward Brian, revenge on the mind. And Colleen splits atoms. Lots of atoms.

The blast is enormous and disables Spite entirely. Everyone else reels backward, momentarily blinded and deafened. Debris pins them all down

Legacy runs into the room and pulls chunks of stuff off his team. He helps Wraith sit up. She shakes her head and points to Colleen.

Colleen is lying still, blood trickling from her mouth. Her eyes are closed, and her chest barely rises. Legacy leaps to his feet and stumbles over to her. He moves some of the debris away and cradles her in his arms. She blinks, then squints in the light.

“Colleen, Colleen, are you alright?”

She nods weakly. “...My name is Colleen Mosley, and I’m... requesting political asylum.”

Legacy’s concerned expression shatters into a grin. He nods happily. “Oh yes, I think we can do that. Welcome home, Colleen.”