Part IX: Jus sanguinis

Colleen and Brian are on a jog through a new neighborhood⎯new to them at least. Brian is officially accompanying Colleen as a bodyguard, but unofficially, they’re just running together because they want to.

They cycle back around to the subway station they took to get here. Colleen looks around at the street, taking in the sight of all the stores and apartments, the people going about their day, the cars rushing past. Someday, the bustle will get old, but not today.

A man in a nearby shop turns the sign from “Closed” to “Open.” It’s a used bookstore, and Colleen tugs on Brian’s arm. “Oooh, can we go see?”

The shop is dim, and the shelves reach all the way to the ceiling. It smells like musty paper and, to Colleen, everything right in the world. She runs a loving finger along the spines of the books.

“Oh man, they have ‘America’s Greatest’ 1940s omnibus!” calls out Brian from the other side of the shop.

Colleen is gazing longingly at an American first edition set of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. She had a copy once⎯not an old one like this, so pretty⎯but... well, they got burned. Brian, holding a very large book with colorful drawings, comes up to her.

“Check it out, Colleen! My dad had this, but I haven’t seen these since I was a kid.” He flips through the pages, showing her the collection of pictures.

“...What is it?” Colleen isn’t sure she’s ever seen anything like it.

“It’s a comic book. Or a lot of them all put together. These originally came out in the ‘40s. They’re about Legacy’s dad.” He hands her the book, and she studies a page.

“I don’t understand. Are they true?”

Brian chuckles. “Supposedly. I used to think that it was kinda dramatized for storytelling purposes, but now I’m not so sure. I guess we could always ask.”

“Do people still make comic books?”

Brian grins. “Yeah, of course. There are a lot more made-up ones, sure, but you can still read about the ongoing adventures of the Freedom Four⎯ripped straight from the headlines, a few years afterward. Adapted from the true story.”

Colleen raises an eyebrow. “Are *we* going to end up in these?”

Brian hadn’t thought about that. “Uh... I guess.” His stomach does backflips. Him. In a comic book. His dad used to bring him home the newest issues every month, and they’d all read them together. Now *he* might be in one. Brian isn’t entirely sure how he feels about that. Then again, it’ll be a few years before he has to worry about it. Plenty of time to get used to the idea, right?

Colleen is enthralled, reading a story about America’s Greatest Legacy fighting Baron Blade (an earlier generation). Her eyes are the sizes of saucers, and when Brian asks her if she wants to buy anything, she jumps three feet in the air (with Colleen, this is literal).

She reddens in embarrassment. Brian winks at her, “I’m guessing *that’s* coming home with us? Anything else?”

Colleen snaps the comic book shut and takes the *Lord of the Rings* off the shelf. She holds it up shyly. “I never got to finish them,” she explains.

“You never finished them? How far’d you get?”

“To the Prancing Pony. Then Dare had them confiscated.”

“They stole your books?”

“Human fiction was discouraged. Some were okay, but anything that made humans seem like heroes was verboten.” She holds up the comic book. “Needless to say, I’ve never seen one of these before.”

“Probably haven’t seen the movies either, though I guess they came out in 2001 to 2003.”

Colleen thinks. The more times she tries the revisit her early childhood, the clearer things get. Are they real memories that had been covered up but can now roam free or are they false memories that she (or someone else) created? She isn’t even sure how to begin to decide. Still, a haunting violin motif floats to the top of her memory. “....I do remember the movies, but I wasn’t old enough to sit through them, so I never saw them.”

“Well, we’ll have to fix that. We could start watching them tonight?” Brian raises an eyebrow at her hopefully. It has only been a few days since their kiss in the hallway, and their... whatever-this-is is still sufficiently new that he hasn’t worked out all the rules yet.

“That would be nice.” She glances at her phone. “Oh man, look at the time! We’re gonna be late!”

Brian smiles to himself as they pay with their phones. Colleen insists on treating what they do like a job, with a specific start and end time. Yesterday, she got so caught up in some experiment using hydrocarbons that she stayed late, and Brian heard her asking Legacy if she was allowed overtime. He doesn’t doubt that she’s making legitimate contributions to science, but he also isn’t about to tell her that the US government would make sure she was taken care of even if she stayed home all day. No one wants a metahuman with world-ending powers out on the street.

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Brian, on the other hand, does work. Back in his office at Freedom Five HQ, he’s trying to figure out where the rat men keep coming from. Apparently, they’ve been an ongoing problem. It’s a new one each time; the other heroes swear that they’ve killed several. Killing sentient beings is not encouraged, but the same laws of self-defense apply to superheroes that apply to police officers. Besides, Dr. Stinson told him that the one time they did manage to capture and try to cure one, it infected half a lab and the infected who didn’t die turned into rat men. That unfortunate accident did give everyone more information about how the infection is transmitted and how the transformation process takes place, so there were positives. But not enough to ever consider repeating the attempt.

When science fails, policing steps in. Rat men can’t just live anywhere⎯they’re enormous. They need a steady supply of food and they leave a swath of destruction wherever they go. Despite its unsavory reputation, Rook City hasn’t been completely overrun (yet, and who would be able to tell? Brian can’t decide which joke to go with, so he chooses both), so there probably are only one or two at any given time.

But if there are only one or two, where do they come from? Brian starts mapping out sightings and attacks onto the streets of Rook City, and is in no way surprised to see that they center around Pike Industrial. Brian briefly wonders if the EPA or OSHA or the FTC could be given more criminal enforcement power, like the Treasury Department back in Prohibition, simply to deal with crazy-stupid chemical companies that make every decent person’s life a living nightmare of mutated monstrosities scientific experiments gone horribly awry. Yes, he’s still bitter about the Spite thing, thanks for asking.

Brian writes up what he found in a memo to Legacy. The real crux of the matter is that Brian had no idea how much insanity actually goes on that the general public doesn’t even know about. Sure, if a sentient robot attacks Megalopolis, it’s gonna make the news. But now that he’s in on it, he’s heard about fights against a being from a shadow dimension trying to break in, against time traveling pirates, and against a primordial chaos being (that one really should have made the news, Dr. Stinson had told him, but it was out in a sparsely populated part of New Zealand).

And nothing he’s learning about missing people is making him feel any better. Once he opened up his search to include international data, he realized that there might be hundreds of Citizens of various power levels. Some sure might be there against their will. But not all. Not all.

It means that he’s beginning to understand why Meta Unit was always so secretive. If they know even half of things that he knows now, they must think that everyone else’s concerns about street crime and traffic tickets are naïvely shortsighted. Brian sure does.

Then again, it was those little crimes (parental interference, shoplifting) that clued him in to this entire mess in the first place. Little crimes and a healthy dose of metahuman intuition, that is. He can’t lose sight of the mundane, even though he’s been thrown in a world of mind-bending complexity.

...And he shouldn’t lose sight of his regular life either. In the weeks since he left his job at MPD, his interactions with his family have been reduced to stilted phone calls. He still hasn’t told them about his meta-status. He tells himself it’s because that kind of news ought to be broken in person, not over the phone. But really, and he knows this all too well, it’s because he can’t figure out how to tell them without making things worse, without making it sound like he’s saying “I’ve been right all along and now you’d better recognize it.” It doesn’t take a psychic to know how *that* would go over. He keeps telling himself that he’ll go over to Sunday dinner this week, but he knows that a crisis will always come up. He thinks he might be okay to let that happen, at least for a while. His phone rings.

“Brian Bender,” he answers. He isn’t sure what the etiquette on code name usage is, and he also isn’t married to the idea of being called “Detective” as his actual code name.

“Brian, it’s me.” Matt’s voice is strained.

Brian pauses long enough to think that he isn’t going to have many more opportunities to avoid his relatives, before responding in business-like tones, “Matt. What can I do for you?” Brian might be avoiding his family and the inevitable fall-out, but he’s a professional. His brother sounds legitimately worried about something, and Brian isn’t going to let interpersonal conflict affect his job (not any more, he tells himself. Brian the rebel got fired from the MPD and Brian the teamplayer took a job with the F5).

“Brian... after the meeting with the Freedom Five, I sent out a message to the precincts telling them to report to Meta crimes committed by groups of teenagers, people reporting getting harassed by strangers, all that stuff from your research. Most of it gets filtered out; turns out teenagers are assholes in large groups. But, some of it has turned gold. Like, we just got a call about a pair of punks who are hanging around a school and two kids matching their description knocked over a bodega three blocks away.”

“Could be regular street thugs?”

“The report about them hanging around the school came from a beat cop who’s been working that neighborhood for longer ‘en these kids been alive, and he doesn’t recognize ‘em. And, he says he thinks one of them had weird eyes. Described them as ‘like looking at glass or a mirror.’ Definitely not human, right?”

Brian takes a deep breath. His gut says metahuman, his gut screams Citizens. “Definitely not. Give me the location and I’ll be there.”

“87th and Madison. Just you? Shouldn’t you bring a super with you?”

“Meet me there, Matt.”

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Under orders from Lt. Bender, a plainclothes detective has maintained surveillance on the two subjects from a café across the street for the past hour. If the detective is any judge, school should be getting out soon, and he figures that’s what they’re waiting for. Sit tight, they’d said. Don’t approach them, because they’re suspected metas, they’d said. Meta Unit’s sending help, they’d said. Well, what’s he supposed to do when class lets out and they do their thing?

“Relax, the cavalry’s here.”

The detective jerks his head up. Lt. Bender, in a suit, and a slightly younger man who favors the lieutenant, wearing black cargo pants and a black t-shirt, pull out chairs and join him. The younger one, the one who spoke, must be the infamous Brian Bender, formerly of the MPD. He’d heard stories.

Lt. Bender starts quietly asking for a report, not that there’s much to say. They’ve just been waiting for school to let out, chain-smoking. Neither one had done much threatening, but they were obviously on edge. One is wearing a green hoodie, and the other has a red baseball hat and a denim jacket.

Brian studies the two of them, praying that his gut will step up and give him what he needs. His cop-training can see why the beat cop picked these kids out. They stick out like sore thumbs in this neighborhood⎯wearing clothes that are ten years out of style and ill-fitting, glancing over their shoulders in all directions, twitching their limbs like they have ants in their clothes. Cops are supposed to look for incongruities, and this pair is the textbook definition.

The school bell rings, and a minute later, middle school students pour out from the front doors. The two teenagers rub their cigarettes into the sidewalk simultaneously. One shoves his hands into his pockets, and the other looks around nervously. Brian jumps to his feet, just as a jet of steam obscures the pair. Brian, Matt, and the plainclothes sprint across the street, brandishing their badges into passing cars as if they were a force field against pedestrian strikes.

When the smoke clears, the teens are no longer where they were. “I see one, to the right!” shouts the plain clothes. “Green hoodie, baggy jeans.”

“...No, that one’s over here,” corrects Matt, pointing in the opposite direction.

Brian pivots wildly. He’s counting at least five more teenaged boys in green sweatshirts⎯all the same one. He searches for the other one, the one with the denim jacket, but he seems to have disappeared entirely. Brian takes a deep breath and tries to imagine the world fading into the background. His eyelids grow heavy.

“Brian?” Matt says his name sharply. Brian puts a hand up to silence his brother and feels himself sinking into a peaceful calm. An alley on the other side of the school, behind a bakery⎯that’s where they are, with a boy.

Brian snaps his eyes open and starts out at a sprint toward the alley. “Come *on*!” he shouts. He doesn’t wait to see if the other two are following him.

He rounds the corner and skids to a stop. The alley is a dead end, and at the other side, the teen with the green hoodie is holding an eleven or twelve-year old boy tight against his chest.

Brian puts his hands up, showing he’s unarmed. “Okay, why don’t you just let the boy go?”

“Why don’t you come get him?” sneers the teen.

Brian steps forward, but his gut nags at his elbow. He pulls up short, and good thing too. A sewer grate opens a foot in front of them and a second later, a burst of wind rushes upward from the grate. Brian shields his face from the sudden gust.

The gust coalesces into the teen in the jean jacket, who immediately drops into a fighting stance. Brian tries to punch the teen, but the boy dissolves into a cloud before Brian can connect. The cloud blows past him⎯literally, Brian feels the cloud pass around him and for a brief second he is inside the cloud. Brian whips around to see Matt and the plainclothes arriving at the head of the alley. Then a rush of wind sends Matt and the plainclothes flying backwards. They both slam into a building on the opposite side of the street, knocked unconscious.

Brian presses the ‘Incident’ button on his wrist communicator. “You just attacked two MPD. Let the kid go and put your hands up.” Yeah, that’ll work.

The mist boy flies across the street and aims for Brian again. This time, Brian pulls out his shock baton. As the mist surrounds him and wind starts lifting him off his feet, he activates the current. The cloud crackles with electricity, and they both drop to the ground. The boy looks unconscious. Brian checks his pulse⎯he’s a kid, even if he’s a supervillain⎯and zipties his wrists.

Brian stands, draws his gun, and faces the other teen and his hostage. There are five of them, all exactly the same.

“Which one, cop?” they ask in unison.

The real one (second from the left) just seems more... solid to Brian. It’s so clearly obvious he wonders for a second if anyone falls for it. Well, they probably don’t see it like he does. Now, the question is, what does he do about it?

He lets his eyes rest on the far-right version. He’s willing to shoot someone who just murdered a F.I.L.T.E.R. agent and is about to blow up the Block with everyone inside. He’s less willing to do that to a kid. And he has no idea what the younger child is capable of⎯although he’s 100% certain that he is capable of *something*⎯and doesn’t want to risk stressing him into leveling a few blocks of Midtown Megalopolis.

“I think I can figure out which one,” Brian stalls for time. Come on, powers, pull something out of a hat....

“You think so?” he taunts. The younger boy whimpers.

Brian’s mind searches the alley and pings off a clothesline. “Yeah, I think so.” He pivots and fires a shot into the wall bracket, sending the clothes line tumbling down onto the real version. A bed sheet covers both. Brian is already running toward them and pulls the smaller child out of the way before wrapping the older one in the sheet. The teen struggles, but Brian and the sheet hold him in place. He zipties his wrists before removing the sheet.

“BRIAN!” Matt’s voice echoes through the alley. Brian wheels around. The other teen has regained consciousness and he vanishes into mist and disappears, leaving the still-looped zipties on the ground.

“Looks like your buddy is leaving you behind,” mutters Brian. Matt and the plainclothes, upright but wincing, join them. The plainclothes takes the boy off to one side.

The teen smirks. “My people will come and liberate me from your base oppression, human. THE CITIZENS WILL RISE AND A NEW DAY WILL DAWN ACROSS THE EARTH!!!”

Matt looks horrified. Brian gets powerful Colleen flashbacks, but rolls his eyes. “I AM one of your people, Citizen ‘Got-myself-stuck-in-a-dead-end-alley.’”

The teen stiffens, deeply offended. “I am Citizen Mirrors, and if you are a god, why do you work for your inferiors at the *Megalopolis Police Department*?”

Brian frog-marches the teen to the street, where the F5 response units are arriving. “Who said I worked for the MPD?” he asks, handing the teen off to agents with suppression guns.

“Orders, sir?” asks the head agent.

“Take him to Interrogation. Something tells me *this* one is gonna sing for us.” Brian turns back to go find a quiet corner so he can report.

“Brian.” Matt is leaning against a building, watching all this unfold with awe. “Brian, what did you mean ‘I AM one of your people’?”

Brian snaps his phone off. “Um, well, I’m a metahuman.” He swallows the last word, and it barely escapes his lips.

“You’re a *what*?” hisses his brother, stepping closer and putting a hand on Brian’s arm, closing off their conversation from the rest of the world.

“Metahuman. Turns out, I’m not just lucky, I’m supernaturally lucky. I’m a psychic.” Brian waits for the fall-out, knowing that there will be some, but unsure what it would be.

“...a psychic. So, all that success on patrol, all those close scrapes, you powered your way out. Why didn’t you *tell* us?!”

“I didn’t know, not until just recently. It works subconsciously, so I never even paid attention. Now, if I try hard, I can activate it consciously, but I still usually just rely on my gut instinct.”

“Your gut is an actual superpower.” Matt’s expression must be very similar to what Brian went through when he first heard. “So, you don’t just work at the Freedom Five HQ as an attaché....”

“No, I’m the Detective, and no I didn’t pick the name, and I’m... well I’m a superhero.”

Matt processes this silently for several seconds. Brian worries that he should have told them earlier, or that he shouldn’t have told them at all, or that he should have just ignored his brother’s call in the first place and cut off all contact. Bender family relations are tense, but not the kind that you’d walk away from. Now, he’s probably torpedoed them entirely.

“Well, it’ll be nice to have a cop watching the costumes for a change,” Matt says finally. Brian laughs with relief. Matt claps him on the shoulder, giving him a genuine smile. “Guess we gotta keep this on the DL, huh? Probably for the best. My kid brother, the superhero.”

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Wraith and Ex-Patriette have more in common than either would be willing to admit. For example, both have bolt-holes scattered throughout Rook City. Admittedly, Wraith’s are much nicer, filled with high-tech gear and all the amenities money can buy. But Ex-Patriette has few needs, and her little hideaways are fully stocked with the essentials.

Right now, she’s in a one-room illegal sublet in Waterfront. Her room is ten-by-ten and illuminated by a single 60-watt light bulb. She has a cot, a sink and grungy mirror, some non-perishable food, hot plate, first-aid supplies, police scanner, ammo, and a mini-arsenal. Cash flow is always an issue, but Ex-Patriette (like Wraith) believes in a good investment. Given her vocation, investing in extra weapons to squirrel away is a much better use of her money than rent.

She field-dresses a wound to her left shoulder while she reviews the fight in her head. A perfect ambush, if she says so herself. The goons didn’t know what hit them, at least not until it was too late. One of them managed to get a shot off, but arterial bleeding will significantly hamper a person’s aim. All in all, a good night’s hunting.

Satisfied with her stitching, she opens a can of soup using an old-fashioned can opener and sets the can on the hot plate. She stretches out on her cot while she waits for her dinner and switches on the police scanner.

Rook City cops can’t be trusted to actually respond to anything. But they still warn each other when they ought to stay *out* of the way. If you can crack their code and you have a good mental map of the city (another thing she and Wraith have in common), you can figure out where trouble is through the process of elimination.

Right now, the dispatchers are reporting a lot of low-level stuff that hardly bears mentioning. Ex-Patriette sighs. She’d been hoping to hit the streets again. This stuff with the Citizens is starting to wear her patience thin, and she really wants to just throw herself into her work to get her mind off it. Maybe she’ll just go looking for trouble; this is Rook City, she’ll find it.

The scanner crackles with feedback. Nothing out of the ordinary⎯she’d bought it from a guy who probably had it fall off a truck intentionally and its reliability is questionable at best. The feedback interrupts the transmission in a remarkably rhythmic pattern. Sounds like...breathing.

Ex-Patriette rolls off her cot and kneels in front of the receiver to adjust the knobs. The rhythmic feedback is on every channel, some louder than others. She rocks back on her heels and resists the urge to look out the window.

God damn it. Citizen Energy. Normally, he vibrates himself on the visible spectrum, but if it’s on the electro-magnetic spectrum, he can mimic it. He switches to other bands to travel quickly, to spy, to move through solid objects, to attack people. Have you ever seen a person microwaved? Ex-Patriette has. God, there’s a reason she stays the hell away from the Citizens.

She paces, soup forgotten. Is he coming for her? Don’t be paranoid; he’s clearly looking for Colleen. She stops pacing mid-stride. A very unfamiliar feeling strikes Ex-Patriette. Is she... is she worried about Colleen Mosley?

Yeah, she is. A memory of a day on Insula Primalis, a memory she’s tried to ignore for years, comes to the forefront of her mind. Ex-Patriette lets her expression set into grim determination. She straps on her flak vest and starts loading up. As she double-checks the latch on her shoulder harness, she reminds herself: Always pay your debts.

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“So, can I be the bad cop?” Brian and Legacy are about to go interview the teen calling himself Citizen Mirrors. It had never occurred to Brian that *Legacy* could have things he wanted to be when he grew up. Judging by his eager expression, little Paul Parsons VIII dreamed of wearing a badge and busting perps some day. The irony is not lost on Brian.

“Actually, it’s usually good cop-good cop. That kid *wants* to talk to us. He’s *dying* to tell us how wrong we are and how we ought to open our eyes and see the light. I’ve never seen anyone so desperate to dig himself a hole.” Brian shakes his head in amusement. “We’ll just have to let him come to us.”

Legacy nods seriously. It’s not that he’s *never* interrogated someone. It’s just usually they’re slammed up against a wall and some infernal device is about to wipe out a major population center. It just doesn’t seem right, doing that to a sixteen-year-old kid who’s only power is the ability to make images of himself. Then again, the danger could be more immediate than they know, he reminds himself. Brian’s right, though. This kid is a natural-born monologuer.

They walk into the tiny interrogation room and sit in chairs opposite Citizen Mirrors. The boy sneers at them. “Welcome, sheepdogs,” he growls. Colleen had explained this aspect of Citizen philosophy once. Humans are sheep, and they figure that any metahuman who defends the sheep must be a housebroken sheepdog. It is not a compliment. Thus far, he has done nothing but hurl insults and threaten degrading death to anyone who tries to talk to him. His swagger is almost suffocating.

“Hello, Derek.” Legacy’s response is cheerful and thoroughly disconcerting to Mirrors. This is why Brian had not said “Legacy, you can’t possibly be the bad cop,” despite the fact that his cheerful persona seems impossible for him to shake. Brian’s long ago been convinced that Legacy knows *exactly* what he’s doing with the “Golly gee” act. The effect on Mirrors, for example. He was expecting hostility and antagonism. To be treated like a naughty, but indulged child took the wind right out of the kid’s sails. He seems to wilt in the face of Legacy’s sunny smile.

“...How did you know my name?”

Brian shrugs dismissively. “Doesn’t really matter, does it?”

The boy quails for a second, before grinning wolfishly. “You’ve been tracking me.”

Legacy leans back, twisting his mouth into a thoughtful pout. “No,” he drawls. “Your mom gave us your picture.” He winks and slides over a school photo from the year before. At the time, Mirrors⎯aka Derek⎯had braces and acne and the worst bowl cut ever inflicted on a person and was sporting a screen-print t-shirt of disembodied wolves’ heads⎯*un*ironically.

There is absolutely nothing that punctures a sixteen-year old ego quite like an embarrassing photo delivered by Mom. He hangs his shoulders. “You’ll see,” he mutters under his breath. “The Citizens *will* rise and then you’ll be sorry.”

Legacy’s voice is calm, quiet and controlled, like a cat poised to strike. “What are they planning to do, Derek?”

Some of the defiance finds its way back⎯a sixteen-year old can always repair his ego. “As if I would tell you. You will know soon enough, sheepdogs.”

Brian puts a hand on Legacy’s shoulder, indicating that they should go. Once they’ve stepped out, Brian sighs. “That’s all we’ll get out of him, I’m sorry to say.”

“Are you sure? That’s not nearly enough....”

Brian shakes his head. “That’s it. Besides, I think we’ll find that we’ve got more than enough to go on. We know they’re amassing an army. They’ll probably be coming soon.”

“They’ll probably be coming for Colleen.”

Brian nods. Yeah, they probably will. He wishes them luck.

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Colleen leaves her lab early. Tonight she and Brian are supposed to watch the *Fellowship of the Ring*, extended edition, and she’s anxious to get home. It’s their first “date night,” and the anticipation makes it hard for her to concentrate. She walks quickly down the sidewalk to the subway station, her hands shoved in her coat pocket. It’s hard to concentrate, but she’s not stupid. The world is not a safe place for her, and there’s no amount of excitement that would keep her from paying close attention to her surroundings.

After a crowded, claustrophobia-inducing subway ride, she emerges a few blocks from her apartment. It’s dark and though the streets aren’t empty, Colleen gets the distinct impression that she isn’t the only person who has someplace she’d rather be.

She passes a few stores, glancing in the reflection at the street behind her as she does. Something doesn’t feel quite right. In keeping with her new-found sense of self-preservation, she abruptly stops.

“You know, since I came back to the US, I’ve seen all sorts of fancy inventions. Like the cell phone,” she quips without turning around.

“I’m not really a texter.” Colleen turns around. Amanda is leaning against the nearest building, supremely unconcerned.

“No, that’s not really your style, is it? Amanda against the world.”

“Hey, I don’t need shit from you, Colleen.”

“You don’t need anything from anyone, right?”

“What’s with the attitude? I’m here to warn you, ain’t I?”

“Warn me about what?”

“Energy. He’s looking for you, Cols. I picked him up on the scanner.”

Colleen turns ashen. Energy... “They’re gonna try to turn me on, aren’t they?”

“Probably.” Amanda straightens up.

“Wait, where are you going?!”

“Gotta get back to the train station or I’ll miss my ride to Rook City.”

“You... you *can’t*. How can you leave now? They’re coming, Amanda. Your *mother* is coming. We need your help.”

“I don’t really play well with others, Colleen. And no, they don’t. Don’t know if you’ve picked up on this or not, but I’m not exactly the most popular girl around the Freedom Five HQ.”

“Of course you aren’t. They have no idea who you are and you act so shady all the time.”

“And what would you rather me do, show up and say ‘Hey guys, name’s Amanda Cohen, Dawn’s my mom. Lemme know if you wanna take out any of your frustrations on me.’ Not likely.”

“You’re talking to me.”

“Yeah, well I owe you. And we’re even now, by the way.”

Colleen looks up at Amanda sadly. Right now, the other woman towers over tiny Colleen, but there was one day a few years back where their positions were reversed. That day really changed things for both of them. “That’s not why I did it. It was... because I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“And you were the only one. Sometimes, Colleen, I’m not sure you did me any favors at all.”

“Don’t say that!” snaps Colleen. “We’re survivors. We got out of there and we sure as hell aren’t about to give in to feeling sorry for ourselves, now are we?”

Ex-Patriette frowns. “No, we’re not. We’re also not gonna throw away our second chances fighting the entire Citizen Army. See ya ‘round, Cols.” With that, she’s gone.

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Brian sets a timer for himself so that he remembers to leave in time to meet Colleen. It’s not that he isn’t constantly thinking about their date, but Brian knows himself well enough to recognize that when he gets wrapped up in a case, everything else gets pushed aside.

In the end, he needn’t have worried. Just as he’s sitting down to compile a list of the powers of known and suspected Citizens, the lights flicker and die.

“UNITY! WHAT DID YOU DO TO THE POWER?” bellows Tyler from somewhere down the hall.

“Wasn’t *me*,” she replies from her lab-away-from-lab next to Brian’s office.

“I’m going to check now!” calls out Dr. Stinson.

Brian rolls his eyes. Instead of using their wrist communicators, which are solar-powered with battery back-up and therefore in perfect working order, they all just yell at each other. It was like that at his house as a kid....

A purple bolt shoots across the ceiling, causing the air to crackle with purple sparks. A sudden flash of light as bright as burning magnesium burns Brian’s eyes, blinding him momentarily.

When the searing light slackens, a six-foot, four-inch purple human-shaped forcefield looms over Brian. He looks up long enough to see Energy zap him with a jolt of energy. Brian jerks and collapses to the floor.

Unity hears him cry out and sticks her head in. She sees this purple man leaning over Brian, who is twitching on the floor and covered in purple energy. She claps her hands over her mouth and backs away. The purple figure turns and seems to see her. It starts towards her. She grabs the door jamb to spin herself around.

She screams and runs down the hall. As she passes a janitor cart, she rearranges the objects into a Stealth Bot. She pulls a bunch of supplies from an empty office and creates a Platform Bot. She sends both toward the purple figure. She can feel it destroy them, but she’s almost to the klaxon.

She slams her hand on the red button. BANMP BANMP BANMP. The klaxon begins to sound just as Energy hits her with a blast of energy damage. She also drops to the ground.

Tachyon speeds into the hallway, running circles around Energy. “I got him contained,” she thinks, “so long as he isn’t....”

Energy blinks out of view and reappears in front of the Bunker suit.

“...traveling at light speed,” Tachyon finishes lamely. She skids to a halt and bends over Unity.

There’s a small explosion as Energy fries the electronic components of the Bunker suit. Tyler watches it happen helplessly from a few feet away. He shouts into his wrist communicator, “FROST, GET YOUR STUFF BEFORE HE TAKES IT OUT TOO!” Energy turns around and hits Tyler in the chest before walking past him. Tyler slams into the wall and blacks out.

Legacy puts a hand on Tyler’s shoulder a few seconds later, waking him up. “On your feet, soldier.”

Tyler pants for a second, fighting to catch his breath. “He could *kill* Frost. We gotta keep him busy.”

“On it!” Legacy and Tyler look up. Felicia darts out of the room, preparing herself to be immune to energy damage. Legacy almost takes after her, but instead he helps Tyler stand.

“You get to Devra, Lieutenant. I’ll go help Felicia.” Tyler limps into the hall and puts the unconscious Unity into a fireman’s carry while Legacy goes to join his daughter in the hallway.

“He keeps trying to get to Brian!” shouts Felicia when her dad joins her.

With both of them resistant to energy damage, they are able to weather his hits easily. Keeping him occupied is another matter entirely. Their punches do absolutely nothing, and Felicia’s atomic gaze just seems to tickle him. When Energy seems to realize that he isn’t hurting them either, he blinks out of sight.

Legacy calls out onto the communicators, “We can’t keep up with him. He keeps zipping around or teleporting or something.”

Tachyon is rummaging around in her on-site lab. “He’s traveling at light speed... We gotta figure out a way to contain him. Give me a sec, I think I have an idea. Keep him busy!”

Frost is in his cryo-chamber when the call comes through. He immediately starts packing on modules, continuously glancing over his shoulder. A tinny-sounding alarm starts going off inside the chamber and a glowing red figure starts melting the metal of his chamber.

“Oh shit!” he shouts, unconcerned if it carries or not. “THIS THING CAN MELT METAL!”[[1]](#footnote-1) Frost tries to back up, but his chamber is overheating and the melting metal blocks his exit.

Wraith, called over by the alarm, does a front flip into the room through a window and fires off her stun bolts into Energy’s back. His whole body crackles with electricity and he pulls away from the cryo-chamber.

His hand is still glowing red and he turns to Wraith. The heat from the excited electrons is unbearable. She backpedals, but she can feel her clothes start to smolder. Then the door to the cryo-chamber opens, and Frost freezes him semi-solid. He grabs Wraith by the hand and half-drags her away.

In her lab, Tachyon puts the finishing touches on a giant electro-magnet⎯two big iron pylons, each wrapped in copper wire and attached to a dynamo. She’s pretty proud of it. “Alright, Paul, all we need is to draw him here, and then this ought to contain him.”

“Reconvene in Tachyon’s lab!” orders Legacy over the communicators.

Brian hears the directions and struggles to his feet. He feels like he just got hit by a freight train, and his ears are ringing. Wraith and Absolute Zero run in the opposite direction.

“BRIAN! Where ARE you?!” asks Legacy.

 Energy emerges and makes a beeline for Brian. “Uh, he’s coming right at me....!” Brian shouts into his communicator.

“Good! Draw him this way!” responds Legacy.

Easier said than done, thinks Brian, but he makes a sharp left turn into the break room in the hopes of cutting through. Energy zips right past him and blocks his exit, so Brian turns around to go out the way he came. Energy zips again and is blocking THAT way out. Brian turns a second time and Energy moves to block him yet again.

This time, Brian glances around and his mind settles on the microwave. He yanks it from the wall. “Think fast!” he shouts and lobs it at Energy. Energy catches it. The magnetron interacts with Energy’s field and there’s a brief popping noise. Energy gets hit with a small-scale electromagnetic pulse and he dissipates.

Brian bolts for the opposite door, running to Dr. Stinson’s lab like his life depended on it. Which, if you think about it, it does. Everyone is waiting in the lab, standing around a very shady-looking... is that an electromagnet?

Energy has to take a moment to reconstitute from that EMP, but he’s quickly chasing down the interloper. The advantage to traveling at light speed is that you can always find the person you are chasing. The interloper is standing in the middle of the room, and Energy reaches him easily. But just as he is about to rip the interloper’s electrons to shreds, a magnetic field forms around him. Energy is instantly stuck, his energy forced to align with the magnetic field.

“...Well. That’s that then, huh?” Tachyon brushes her hands off demonstratively. “Chalk up another win for science.”

The others peer at the effectively-frozen Energy. Legacy rubs his chin. “How long will he stay here?”

“Oh, as long as the field holds,” replies Tachyon. “So, basically as long as the power’s still on from the dynamo.”

Brian breathes heavily for a few seconds. That hit was *hard*. “I should call Colleen and let her know what happened.”

Legacy nods. “Yes, definitely. I think it is safe to assume that the Citizens’ plan for an invasion is rapidly approaching fruition. Until we have a better idea of what they want, we should all plan to stick around HQ.”

There are nods all around, some more enthusiastic than others. Brian calls Colleen to apologize for missing their movie date and to assure her that Energy is contained.

“You don’t understand, Brian,” she whispers into the phone. “He’s barely alive. He doesn’t eat, he doesn’t sleep, he doesn’t stop. Ever. He can go anywhere, travel as fast as light, infiltrate any structure. He can freeze you from the inside and melt stone. He’s energy, pure energy. You can’t hurt him, Brian. No one can. But he can hurt you.”

“We got him, Colleen, it’s okay. We got him,” he replies soothingly.

“Just.. be careful,” she begs before hanging up. Brian lowers the phone and watches the static Energy. No one looks very threatening when they’re stuck in a static field. Then he goes to join the others’ preparations for the now-inevitable fight with the Citizens.

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Citizen Smoke knows that something is wrong, because the constant transmission from Energy is gone. He knows that Energy had been at the Freedom Five HQ, so he catches an air current and rides over there. He’s been spying on the humans, gathering intelligence about their preparedness since his partner, Mirrors, was taken.

Getting inside is simple. Most buildings are not air-tight, and this one is no exception. The doors are well-fitted, to be sure, but all he needs is one air vent, and Smoke is in.

He waits until it seems like all the “heroes” are asleep, or at least very quiet, before he drops down from the air vent. He allows himself to stay in his mist form, which renders him essentially invisible, as he searches the facility.

He finds Mirrors first. His partner is caged up, like an animal, but locating the key and freeing him is easy enough. He signals to Mirrors that they need to be quiet. They tiptoe back into the hallway.

The place seemed deserted, but Smoke catches sight of a few heroes sleeping. Mirrors makes a move as if to go touch them but Smoke stops him. They need to finish their job.

In a room with lots of science equipment, Energy is frozen between two large, humming, metal poles. Smoke looks around at the set up and decides that if he throws this switch, it ought to turn off. Sure enough, there’s a low-pitched whine and the machine turns off.

Energy instantly darts around the room, working off all the excess that had built up while he was contained. After a few seconds, he stops in front of Smoke and Mirrors. He nods to them, which is about as much acknowledgement as you get from Energy. He then turns and walks straight through the nearest wall, melting the concrete as he goes.

Smoke and Mirrors dart through the new opening as alarms go off. Smoke wraps himself around Mirrors, and by the time the sheepdogs realize what happened, all three of them are long gone.

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Colleen isn’t asleep. How could she be? She’d tried to warn Brian, but he’d been too sure that they’d found a solution to the Energy problem. But she knows better. So she’s lying awake in bed, somewhat hoping that she might just sleep through whatever is going to happen because she doesn’t think she can face what’s coming fully aware.

Her clock radio turns on. She doesn’t recognize the song (not that that means much) but the lyrics send shivers down her spine.

*I must admit, I can’t explain, any of these thoughts racing through my brain. It’s true. Baby I’m howling for you...*

She leaps out of bed, her heart racing. The song is now playing through the television, through her phone, she’s surrounded. He’s coming.

Her cell phone is overloaded with the song, and she can’t call out. She picks up the landline (another safety measure⎯two separate phone lines) but the interference from the crackling energy in the air makes it impossible to even hear the dial tone.

Colleen can’t help it. She starts to cry. The inevitability of it all hits her right in the stomach. She knows (much better than Brian) that there is no place she can run, no place she can hide. Not from him.

Out the window, she can see a purple figure coming towards her. The purple figure fades and a bright yellow light, like a giant spotlight aimed right at her, fills her vision. The light filters through her windows as she shields her eyes. Her electrons are already going haywire and she feels ill. Her head is pounding, and her vision blurs

The song continues, echoing in her ears. The light surrounds her, brushing against her skin. Then, there’s a jolt and she stiffens.

A few moments later, Tachyon skids to a halt in front of the very startled doorman.

“Hasanyonecomeinoroutjustnow?” she asks in a single breath. The doorman stares at her, trying to work out what she’s saying. Tachyon tries again. “Has. Anyone. Come. In. Or. Out. Just. Now?” she asks, being sure to enunciate each word.

The doorman nods. “Ms. Mosley just left. She looked a little stiff and was a sickly color, but she didn’t say anything when I asked what was wrong.”

Tachyon swears inwardly and calls back to HQ. “She’s gone. The Citizens have Colleen.”

1. By exciting electrons and thereby raising the heat-ed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)