Part I: The Cold Case

Det. Brian Bender knows that the Missing Persons Unit is a dead-end detail. He knows this because Deputy Police Chief Samuel Bender, Cpt. Daniel Bender, ret. and Lt. Matthew Bender told him so last week at a family dinner. They’ve been telling him that for the past eighteen months, ever since he got the assignment.

It doesn’t matter that the average officer doesn’t make detective until after at least ten years on the force and that Brian passed the detective exam at twenty-six. Matthew passed his exam at twenty-five. To make matters worse, Brian had developed a reputation at the Academy for being an independent thinker who doesn’t take orders well. They kept him around because there’d been Benders at the Megalopolis Police Department since Day One and because he got results. Still, his beat lieutenant probably threw a party for everyone else the day he passed his detective exam.

That was the worst part, Brian thinks. It was bad enough that he was a uniform with a problem with authority. If he’d been a regular bad apple with a chip on his shoulder, the older guys could have beat some sense into him and then he’d have turned into a steady desk sergeant who puts the fear of God into the next crop of rookies. But he had the best collar rate in his precinct. It’s like he’s got a sixth sense or something for the criminal element. He sees crime before it happens, says his sergeant. Orders are important. Collar rates make lieutenants look good. Collar rates play well with the press. Collar rates get attention.

For Brian, nothing could be worse. Nothing angers establishment people like a kid who doesn’t follow orders and is so clearly successful that he has to be rewarded. Toss in the resentment that comes from being the scion of a huge family in policing⎯his uncle is the deputy chief, and well, Brian wonders if he needs to never go first onto an unsecured scene. No, it’ll never be that bad. Partly because his nose for trouble comes out in other ways and he’s saved more than one beat cop from the guy with the shotgun under his coat or from the petite lady who’s actually meta-human and could break a person in half.

Problem is, he’s not on the beat any more. He’s in Missing Persons. He’s in career hell. Only Property would be worse, but his uncle probably intervened to keep that horror from happening. Nothing happens in Missing Persons. Homicide and Major Crimes would be great places for Brian’s detective skills⎯making a difference in achievable ways by cleaning up the streets of threats that endanger the people of Megalopolis as much as supervillains do, if less dramatically. Or, he could serve under his brother, Lt. Bender, in the Meta Unit. The Meta Unit may be an unwinnable war, and dangerous to boot, but it brings in glory. A cop in the Meta Unit has SWAT training, special equipment, and enough swagger to never have to pay for a beer again. Brian can hear his father’s voice from last week’s family dinner. “Toe the line, follow orders, and they’ll transfer you.”

The unspoken message was that Brian was sent to Missing Persons to learn a lesson, and, if he didn’t make waves, in a few years he could move on to something better. Unspoken messages are great for plausible deniability, in Brian’s view.

He smirks to himself at the thought of spending the rest of his less-than-illustrious career in Missing Persons, just to spite his police family. When he opens the door to the office and tries to squeeze past the twenty filing cabinets to his desk in a corner, the smirk vanishes.

There are four other guys assigned to this unit, and Brian figures only one is even worth the plastic that goes into his badge. The others are drunks and malingerers who can’t even be trusted in Property. If you screw up in Property and lose evidence, a case might be blown and a bad guy goes free. If you screw up in Missing Persons, the status quo remains undisturbed.

He nods to the only one he even talks to, Nick Corcoran⎯a forty-five-year-old detective who made the mistake of marrying the wrong lieutenant’s sister. Corcoran is reading the paper, but he has a stack of files that he’ll be going through today. Corcoran seems to be under the impression that some day one of his cases will show up in a news photo in the background or something, so he scans all the major papers with a magnifying glass, just to be sure.

“Hey Bends.” Corcoran doesn’t look up, but his voice is warm.

“Found ‘em yet, Corky?”

Corcoran shuts the newspaper in deliberate punctuation. “Nope.” He pats his pile of folders. “I got actives today. What drawer are we on?” Actives are cases that have actual leads, cases that might get solved. They also search through the file drawers to make sure that the cold cases aren’t suddenly about to warm up. They never are.

“Ten ‘C,’ I think.” Brian shimmies his way to the tenth filing cabinet, which is currently in the fifteenth spot from the first cabinet, and opens the third drawer from the top. He reaches in and grabs as many files as he can, slipping one of Corcoran’s old newspapers in as a place-holder.

The files hit the desk with a thwomp, dust flying everywhere. Brian runs his hands along the tabs, mentally counting how many he just assigned himself. All of the folders are of the generic beige, manila variety, except one. It is blue. He pulls that folder out and pushes the rest to the side.

Corcoran looks up. “...Is that a meta-human file?”

“That’s what blue means.”

Corcoran leans over and Brian flips open the folder with an intense feeling of anticipation. It’s a Missing Persons affidavit⎯what did he expect, he chides himself⎯for a nine-year-old girl. A school photo of a girl with about fifteen pounds of black curls, emerald eyes, and more freckles than not is paper-clipped to the affidavit. The edges of the photo are worn⎯someone handed over a beloved wallet photo to find this little girl. Brian unclips the photo and passes it to Corcoran.

Corcoran swears. “I hate it when it’s kids.”

Brian nods absently, starting to read the file. It’s a clear case of interference with custodial rights. Brian relaxes a bit⎯those cases are hard to solve too, but at least you know the kid isn’t dead in a ditch somewhere. Mom and Dad separate and they take the fight out on the kid. It’s awful, sure, but these parents still raise the kid. Mom misses a court-ordered visitation and then Dad’s at the station, saying the kid’s been kidnapped. Brian reads a bit further. Hell, the parent accused of kidnapping had full custodial rights. This is barely a case at all. And the date reported? This was fifteen years ago. She’d be what... twenty-four? She’s probably already dealt with dad or has decided that she doesn’t want to. They can’t close the file because technically the case hasn’t been solved, and there’s no statute of limitations on kidnapping (never mind that this case isn’t kidnapping, but the lesser charge of parental interference, which does have a time limit), but they do have a system of marking the tabs to designate those files.

He shuts the folder and reaches for the red marker. Corcoran nods in concurrence. Then Brian’s gut interrupts him.

“Damn it.” He retracts his arm and opens the file again. He flips through the affidavit in agitation. Where was it?

There. In the victim’s narrative, the father tells the detective that his ex-wife has been dating a guy for at least seven years⎯the reason the marriage broke up⎯and he thinks the boyfriend abuses his daughter. That shouldn’t strike Brian as too odd⎯these sorts of cases, everyone’s throwing abuse accusations around. But, it is weird that the father had only limited visitation rights. Why...?

Brian flips to the detective’s notes. There it is. He went out to a nursing home to take the complaint. Dad’s quadriplegic and so he lost custody. How the hell did he become quadriplegic, Brian asks the detective’s notes. Thankfully, the detective wasn’t a complete waste of time and asked that question. Accident, two years prior. He’d been awarded full custody when they got divorced when the girl was three⎯mom hadn’t been interested. But after a car struck him on his way home from work, he had to give up custody.

Brian was even more impressed with the original detective, because he’d even gone to the dad’s lawyer to get some background on the second custody case. After the accident, there’d been another fight⎯the dad wanted the girl with relatives, in the foster system, anywhere but with her mom. Boyfriend had charmed his way through the witness stand though, and the judge had chalked it up to typical divorced parent bitterness. Lawyer thought the boyfriend was a sociopath.

Brian’s stomach is doing backflips. Where’s the boyfriend’s name?

Kevin Slate. Kevin Slate and Maggie Mosley. The dad provided a picture of the two of them with the girl, Colleen.

“Holy hell, she was taken by the Citizens of the Sun.”

Corcoran had already gone back to his own files and almost jumps out of his chair when Brian’s voice breaks the silence. “What? How did you figure that out?” Corcoran’s already learned that Brian’s sixth sense about cases is always worth listening to, so he skips right past doubt.

Brian passes the group photo over, too excited about his discovery to realize Corcoran already believed him. He points to the mother. “Citizen Fortune.” He points to the boyfriend. “Citizen Bold.” He leans back in this chair.

“Why the hell did it go to us then, and not Meta Unit?”

“Look at the date. Three, four years before they first started causing big-time trouble. Back then, they probably didn’t even know what the Citizens were.”

“And you think they were recruiting though, under the radar?”

“Of course they were, they had to be. Citizen Dawn goes AWOL, what, almost thirty years ago? Then suddenly shows back up eighteen years later. What was she doing? Getting her army together.”

“Building a new society,” corrects Corcoran with a sarcastic edge. Corcoran’s voice is mocking, but his expression is deadly serious. This case just went from dead in the water to so potentially incendiary they ought to look into asbestos suits.

No one had ever gotten a real good handle on the Citizens. Sure, the Freedom Four showed up and drove them out, sure they’d sent a few stragglers to the Block, but even now, no one knows what goes on over there. The stragglers developed convenient cases of amnesia, or worse, and whatever goes on within their ranks is an absolute mystery. The Megalopolis Police Department doesn’t like mysteries, not when dealing with people who could turn this city in a pile of ashes.

Brian looks back through the file. “Five’ll get you ten the mom caused the accident. That’s what Fortune can do, you know. Control tiny details to make things happen by chance,” he tells Corcoran. His partner files this away. In addition to never doubting Brian’s gut, Corcoran has never had occasion to question his memory. Brian has access to the deepest reserve of police collective wisdom of any guy Corcoran knows, and as much as Brian resents the family name, he’s too good at being a cop to ignore that wisdom. If Brian says Citizen Chance has the power to cause a car to run a red light and strike a pedestrian who happened to be her ex-husband, she does and she probably used it.

Brian pours over the father’s statement again. “He doesn’t mention the mom or boyfriend’s meta-status. Why’d this get a blue folder?”

“Who’s the detective?”

Brian checks. “Stevenson, William Stevenson.”

“Bill Stevenson?” Corcoran rubs his chin. “Bill Stevenson had your chair back in the day. He’s good police. He wouldna put it in a blue folder unless he had damn good reason. You’re lucky. Bill ran down every lead before he filed a case. If it’d been some of those others....” Corcoran jerks his hand at the empty desks “well, we’d be up the proverbial creek.”

“Well, if the Citizens took her, maybe she’s meta-human.”

“Does the dad mention it?”

Brian shakes his head. “Not a word.”

Corcoran frowns. “Don’t mean a damn thing. Maybe he didn’t know. Maybe he didn’t want to say. People have all kinds of reasons for hiding meta-status from the cops.”

Brian nods. “Something tells me she started showing powers around two years and a bit before she disappeared.”

Corcoran smiles evilly, the look in his eye when he’s suddenly on to a bad guy’s train of thought. “Suddenly mom’s interested in more custody of her darling daughter.”

“And dad’s even more adamant that she not get it,” Brian adds. “But, if he’d known that the mom or boyfriend were meta-human, he’d surely tell Stevenson, even if he doesn’t mention his daughter.”

“So they’re good at hiding it.”

“Citizens Fortune and Bold... yeah they’re both good at hiding it. Fortune can do that manipulating the future thing and Bold is...” Brian thinks. “Bold is charming, the ultimate con artist and bluffer.”

“Charmed the judge.” Corcoran’s settled into denouement mode, that glorious place where all the pieces are fitting together and suddenly a big pile of nothing is becoming a story with a beginning and a middle⎯end to be provided by Megalopolis’ finest.

Brian on the other hand is not nearly so satisfied. His instincts are telling him that this story is far from over and that he needs to have the fullest possible picture of the past before he can feel safe. He goes back to the lawyer’s statement.

“...Here. Right here. You were right, Corky. A month before the accident, mom requests a new custody hearing, and the judge denies it because she can’t even put down a permanent address. Jeez, she was already on the island by then. What. Changed.”

The files say nothing else. He and Corcoran pour over the notes for hours, reading and rereading everything that Stevenson wrote down.

Around three o’clock, Corcoran leans back, rubbing his eyes. “Remind me why we’re doing this? Maybe someone changed the files when the Citizens came through.”

Brian gives Corcoran a look. “Do I even have to say how unlikely that is? No, the girl’s meta-human, and we have got to figure out what she can do.”

“How do you know she isn’t already a known Citizen? She’s twenty-four, plenty of time to get on our radar.”

Brian shakes his head firmly. “Nope. I’ve never seen her.”

“You need a hobby, you know that?” But Corcoran doesn’t question Brian’s certainty. “Look, if Stevenson put it in a blue folder, you’re right, he did it for a reason. But I for one can’t see it.”

“Maybe he left the notes out.”

“Like hell he did, Bender. The man is meticulous.”

Brian pats the group photo. “Maybe somebody asked him to leave the notes out.” He raises an eyebrow.

Corcoran swears colorfully, shuddering. “Citizens getting to cops. Makes my skin crawl.”

“We have got to find these people, Corcoran.”

“...Okay, well Stevenson’s retired to Florida by now, and if he got charmed or something, I doubt his memory’s any good anyway.”

“So we find it the old-fashioned way. We’ve got a time frame. I think it’s worth starting with the assumption that her powers came out in a dramatic fashion, so you check Juvie records and I’ll call... Benjamin Harrison Elementary School.”

Corcoran reaches for his phone and gives Brian a dubious look. “Do they keep school records from elementary school for fifteen years?”

“Seventeen. Had to be before the accident.” Brian gives Corcoran a wry smile. “No, but the janitor at my school had been the janitor when my dad was a kid and still got onto me for the time he’d put a stink bomb in the teachers’ lounge.”

“A Bender engaging in delinquent behavior? I’m shocked.”

Brian winks and turns his chair around to call the girl’s former elementary school. After some confusion on the part of the school secretary, he’s put through to the head janitor.

“Yeah, I been at Ben Harrison for... thirty-four years now.”

“Fifteen years ago, you had a fourth grader, a little girl, disappear.”

The janitor’s voice chokes. “Colleen Mosley. Yeah, I remember her. Cute as a button she was. You never forget the ones you lose.” The man sounds old and tired.

“Yeah, I know.” Brian rubs the bridge of his nose. This guy’s certain the girl’s dead, and Brian’s certainty that she was alive and well from when he first opened the file is slipping through his fingers. Never mind that she’d be almost his age if she’s still alive. Last known contact was as a nine-year-old, and as far as he can tell, she might be nine forever. “Listen, I’m interested in the years before she disappeared. Did anything weird happen with her?”

The janitor pauses for several moments while he searches his memory. Then he sighs. “That’s right, two years before, her dad got in a bad accident. Paralyzed. I took her to the office when the cops called.”

“Okay, I’m thinking about a few months before that. Anything strange?”

“You know, that’s what that other cop asked too. The one who came by after she disappeared.”

Brian exhales. Stevenson asked the same questions, but there’s no mention of the school in the file. He’s on the right track. “Could you tell me? What’d you tell him?”

The janitor chuckles. “Oh yeah, she had to be banned from the computer lab where the kids were learning typing because she fried three machines. Those things were expensive back then, you know.”

“She fried them?”

“Yeah, she sat down and zap! No more computer.”

“Like a meta-human-fried them?”

 “Who told you that?” The janitor’s voice changes, hostility dripping from his tone. “Anybody can say they’re a cop over the phone, you know....”

“Whoa, listen, I am a cop and I’m trying to find her.”

“You’re just like that bastard who came around asking for her after school. We had to send him off all the time. I ain’t answering that question, she was just a little girl.”

Brian can tell the janitor was about to hang up on him, so he says quickly “The mom’s boyfriend, right? He was creeping around?”

“...Yeah. He was a bad one. You spend enough time around elementary schools, you learn to see the bad ones. You wanna know who took her, it was him.”

“He’s a Citizen of the Sun.” The janitor is silent on the other side of the line. Brian knows he has his attention. “He’s a Citizen of the Sun and he was back then. He was tracking her down to recruit her. I HAVE to know what else happened. What could she do?”

“One day, in gym class, the kids are climbing rope. She was never the strongest kid, but she had determination. So she makes it up to the top, but she’s exhausted and lets go. Now we have pads and it ain’t that high, so she wasn’t really gonna be hurt, but she doesn’t hit the ground. She falls to about five feet off the pads and stops. Floating. Another time in gym, she’s playing dodge ball and she’s the only one left on her side. All the kids on the other team with balls get ready to throw them at her all at once, and when they do, the balls just stop, mid-air, floating just like she did. And you couldn’t give her cassettes or floppy disks, she’d erase them.”

“She controlled magnetism, electricity, and gravity?”

“Probably. But that wasn’t what really got that bastard’s attention. He only started showing up after the incident.”

“What incident?” Brian can tell the janitor is reluctant to say more. “We’re not gonna punish her for something she did as a second grader. We just need to find her.”

“She blew up the girls’ bathroom.”

“What?” Brian pulls a face.

“She was washing her hands and she said the water wasn’t hot enough. So she thought about making it hotter, and next thing there’s a mushroom cloud and she’s in the hallway. It wasn’t a big explosion by any means, but I swear to you, God as my witness, there was a little mushroom cloud.”

“Like a nuclear bomb.”

“Exactly. I asked her what she was doing, and she said that if you break the bits apart, it warms things up.”

“‘If you break the bits apart’.... she was splitting atoms?”

“Hey, I’m a janitor because I’m not smart enough to be a rocket scientist, but that’s what I figured thinkin’ about the cloud.”

“You report it?”

“...Nah. The fire marshal said it was the boiler.”

“You didn’t say anything at all?”

“Well, no one got hurt, and she seemed to control it good. We did tell her dad.”

“You’re telling me she could control gravity, electricity, magnetism, and splits atoms.”

“She was a kid. A sweet thing, shy maybe, but everyone liked her. And she kept it under wraps. She never got in trouble, and after the one time she fried the computers and the bathroom thing, she never damaged anything else. And who were we gonna tell? The cops? The F.B.I.?”

“...Good point.” Brian had always had the cop’s view of the costumes. He likes to know where they are, so he can give them a wide berth. But he’d never thought about what he’d do if he was faced with a kid who had powers and hadn’t ever done anything either way. “Thanks for your help.”

“You think you’re gonna find her?”

“We’re closer than we’ve ever been.”

“That’s what he’d say. That other cop.”

“I think it might actually be true now.”

Brian says good-bye and hangs up. He stares at the receiver for a minute then vaults over an empty desk to the whiteboard of active cases. He writes “Mosley, Colleen” under his name. Then he pauses at the spot for the victim’s age. He glances back at the photo on the desk, and writes “24.”

Corcoran grins. “And it’s on.”

Part II: The Hunt

Pleasant Gardens Rest Home is none of these things. The air in the hallway smells like cheese and chlorine. The floor tiles are an off-shade of mint green, and the walls are inexplicably sunshine yellow. The doors squeak, and voices echo from each room and the nurses’ station. Det. Brian Bender has been in funeral homes that seemed more inviting. And the eponymous garden? Do three limp palms and a wilted begonia in pots count as a garden?

Brian is waiting in the hallway for the nurse⎯he’s already calling her Nurse Ratched⎯to announce that he’s allowed to go visit Patrick Mosley, the father of his missing person. It’s been over a week since he’d written Colleen’s name on the whiteboard, and there hadn’t been a lot of progress.

Finding this place had been his major coup, to be frank. The dad wasn’t poor⎯he actually worked as an architect⎯but the ex-wife cleaned him out while she had custody of the little girl. Chances are Citizen Bold helped with the grift. The vindictiveness doesn’t surprise Brian; very little human misbehavior can. Still, paralyzing a guy, stealing his kid, and leaving him broke seems excessively evil. Brian wonders what happened between the two of them to make Citizen Fortune so spiteful. Then again, she might not need a reason at all. She’s a Citizen, maybe she just assumes that it’s hers by right and his feelings have nothing to do with it.

Thanks to his impoverishment, the dad has been bounced from facility to facility and tracking him down took the better part of four days. In the course of getting the runaround from various medical service providers, he learned that Colleen was still the listed next of kin. Poor bastard hasn’t given up yet. Brian can’t blame him. Judging by the state of his current home, the hope of seeing his daughter again is the only thing he has going for him.

He actually spoke to Mosley on the phone yesterday. He seemed pretty much all there, so hopefully he’ll make a good witness. Fifteen years later, you never know if you can trust a person’s memory. But this was probably the turning point of his entire life. Chances are, he’ll never forget the details, even if he wanted to. The man seemed so relieved to have the police calling, Brian actually worries that he might be doing more harm than good coming down here and passing out false hope.

Brian is annoyed about Mosley’s tendency to move about because the staff at Pleasant Gardens have never met Colleen Mosley. He would have liked to question them about her and her visiting habits before she disappeared. Brian is... fairly certain that Colleen is still with the Citizens, but knowing whether she was the sort to rush back to daddy at first chance or whether she’d be happier not having to do her filial duty would go a long way towards confirming his suspicions. A girl who thought visiting her quadriplegic father was a chore might welcome the excuse that a parental abduction would bring. A girl whose world ended when her father lost custody of her would come rushing back immediately. She wouldn’t have had the procedural difficulties he did, so if she had wanted to see Dad, she could have.

The nurse walks back to the bench where she’d abandoned him and gestures. Brian follows her to a small room at one end of the hallway and leaves without a word. The room is small, just a bed, a chair, a dresser, and a television, but it is homey. The window is open, and unfiltered sunlight gives the place a cheerful air. The horizontal surfaces are covered with photo frames. Colleen is in every picture, sometimes with her dad or with a pet cat, at various stages of childhood. The pictures stop the year her front incisors were entirely grown in. The walls are decorated with Colleen’s crayon drawings, faded by time. No other memorabilia is visible. Regardless of her feelings for him, Colleen was clearly her father’s entire world.

Patrick Mosley is in a motorized wheelchair that supports his head. He has enough use of his hand to move his chair, and he can just get out enough breath to speak, if slowly.

“Would... you... sit?” he wheezes out, pointing slightly at the other chair.

Brian nods, thanks him, and sits. “Thank you, Mr. Mosley, for letting me come see you today.”

Mosley interrupts. “Thank... you... for... asking... about... Colleen.”

Brian nods and gives Mosley a brief update on the case. He leaves out his suspicions about Citizen Bold and the tainted case file. He assures him that they are still looking for his daughter.

“Is... she... still... alive?”

This is the question everyone working Missing Persons dreads. “It still seems really likely, Mr. Mosley, that she was taken by your ex-wife. When children are taken by their parents, they usually... do fine.”

“She... hated... her... mother’s... boy...friend.”

Brian tenses. He’s been rehearsing this since he started looking for Mosley. “Mr. Mosley, do you know who the Citizens of the Sun are?” He has no idea how much he would have kept up with the news. Luckily he’d apparently stayed up to date, because Mosley pales slightly and nods once.

“Kevin Slate is one of them. So’s your ex-wife.”

Mosley processes this information for several minutes. Brian had originally worried about dropping news like that on a man who isn’t in the best health. He shouldn’t have worried. Mosley’s probably had nightmares every night about his daughter. Nothing Brian could say would be worse than what he’d imagined a hundred times.

“Colleen... is... special. Didn’t... tell... detective... because... we... didn’t... talk... about... it... back... then.”

Brian nods. “A meta-human, right? Don’t worry, I just figured it out talking to her elementary school janitor. We haven’t seen anyone matching her description or power profile. Ever. We don’t know what happened to her, but she hasn’t been engaging in superpowered terrorism.”

“She... wouldn’t.” Brian nods again. “No... listen... She... wouldn’t... They... asked... her... before... she... dis...appear..ed.”

“They asked her? You mean about joining the Citizens?” Mosley nods. “She told you.” He nods again. “How soon before she disappeared?”

“The... last... visit.”

Well, the pieces just fall into place. “Why didn’t you tell the other detective?”

“No...one...would... believe... me.”

“Even fifteen years ago, there were supervillains.”

“Said... I... mis...remem...bered. Thought... because... I’m... in... the... chair... I’m... not... all... here.”

Okay, that unfortunately is probably true. Brian wasn’t expecting much out of him when he called and was thoroughly surprised to be talking to someone who could actually provide decent witness testimony.

“Mr. Mosley, I’m gonna be honest with you. We don’t know where your daughter is. She hasn’t shown up anywhere, so Insula Primalis, where the Citizens live, is the best bet. We can’t get there. We don’t know whether she’s still alive; her not showing up might not mean anything. And if she is alive, we don’t know what they’ve done to her. She’s been there for most of her life; she might not be the girl you know.”

Mosley shakes his head as vigorously as he can. “No. My... Colleen... wouldn’t... give... in.”

Brian takes his leave. He’s a cop, and he’s not stupid. Fifteen years in a place like that, even the sweetest child would be singing a different tune. Completely isolated from the outside world, she might believe anything they tell her at this point. And just because she isn’t a known supervillain doesn’t mean she’d be willing to rejoin the normals of Megalopolis. Brian ought to be taking the cynical view and assume he’s more likely to arrest her than rescue her.

But. Maybe it’s his gut. Maybe it’s the picture. Maybe it’s the janitor and the dad. But Brian can’t just believe that this girl has bought into the Citizen rhetoric hook, line, and sinker.

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Corcoran is waiting for him when he returns to the office.

“How’d it go?”

“Dad seems like he’s still all there, and he thinks she’s alive. Said that he didn’t tell Stevenson about the powers because he didn’t feel comfortable mentioning it. I wish he had. If he’d have said something, they might have put more effort into finding the girl. Parental interference is one thing. Kidnapping a nine-year-old with superpowers is a whole other ballgame.”

Corcoran frowns. “Slate would have just made Stevenson take that out of his file anyway.”

“But maybe the department would have taken a closer look at put the Meta Unit on it. If she’d been a supervillain they sure as hell would have been on it. But taken by her mother the supervillain, that’s just typical divorce stuff. She’ll turn up someday.” Brian snaps, his voice rising in volume. “They all have their heads so far up....”

Corcoran interrupts him. “Bender. Now I’m not one for sticking up for the department any more than you are, but seriously. You need to step back.” He hands Brian a stack of files. “Work on something else for a while. Clear your head.”

Brian looks at the files with distaste. “But, we’re actually getting somewhere,” he protests.

“Like hell you are.” Brian winces slightly, and Corcoran softens. “You aren’t doing anybody any good if you burn yourself out. If you chase a case until there’s nothing left to chase, you’ll just end up banging your head against a wall. Take. A. Break.”

Brian actually respects his senior detective, knows he’s the kind of cop who gives orders only when they need to be given, the only kind of cop that Brian would actually obey as it turns out, so he takes a seat and starts working other files.

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He works other files for weeks, but in his free time, his thoughts always wander back to Colleen Mosley. He spends nights after work on his laptop in his tiny apartment, searching for anything he can find on the Citizens. He collects piles of articles detailing Citizen strikes, whether large-scale invasions or seemingly insignificant break-ins that only involved one or two known citizens. He starts with the founding of the Citizens, a date that law enforcement DOES know⎯one of the few things they know about the Citizens⎯and works his way forward, one week at the time. It’s a laborious process, but not every act of terrorism committed by the Citizens was labeled as such. To make sure he doesn’t miss any, he checks articles that don’t blame another known villain too. He keeps the print-outs in an expanding file folder, which is rapidly expanding beyond its capacity. He carries his folder everywhere and works whenever he has a few moments to himself.

Patterns start to emerge. The Citizens will strike against large visible targets to make a statement, standard terrorist activity. Citizen Dawn makes an appearance at all of those incidents, and they always take credit. The second type of Citizen strike seems to be preparatory. They hit a target that might have supplies that will help their primary goal. Again, this is fairly standard. Supervillains hit jewelry stores because they need the diamonds for their death rays.

The third type was harder to spot. They steal things necessary for survival, like clothes, usually by sending younger members on shoplifting sprees. He only recognized that pattern when he realized that coastal cities were being hit with newsworthy levels of shoplifting every few months like clockwork. When he did some photo comparison, familiar faces showed up, and he extrapolated that the rest were connected. They seem to be operating individually, and powers don’t make an appearance. He’s impressed that the Citizens are working with that level of sophistication.

The fourth type was the hardest to identify: kidnappings. Brian knows it’s probably premature to label them kidnappings, because he’s got no evidence that none of them went willingly. And they mix up their style: sometimes people really are grabbed off the street, others seem to go missing directly after an appointment with a new doctor or at a new school or an interview for a new job, and some just leave everything behind and never contact their loved ones again. The hardest part about finding these cases is figuring out who had powers. Colleen was the only blue file, but once he started digging deeper, he found six more people in Megalopolis alone with clear evidence of powers, and another thirty or so who he couldn’t immediately rule out⎯whether due to suspicious circumstances of disappearance or due to bizarre descriptions. Realistically the number could be much, much higher once you factor in everywhere else.

How many meta-humans are there? No one knows. Experts assure the public that it is very rare, less than a hundredth of a percent. There might be hundreds, even thousands in the United States, but certainly not millions. You probably don’t know a single person with superpowered abilities. Furthermore, the government knows who has powers and who doesn’t. They keep track of it, and no one slips through the cracks. It’s not that hard, right? There aren’t that many. That’s what the experts say. Brian’s gut says it’s a lot more common than you’d think, and Brian’s collection of files suggest that not only are there meta-humans who aren’t being identified by the government, they ARE being identified by the Citizens of the Sun and they’re being recruited for...

An army.

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One week, while suffering through an obligatory family dinner, his brother asks him what he’s working on.

“Oh, you know. Going through case files. I think I found a pattern. A group of people who might be meta-human who disappear, usually after meeting someone new or starting a new job or school. Plays like someone’s identifying meta-humans and making them disappear.”

Matt smirks. “You’re turning into one of those vast, government conspiracy nuts. You really need to get out of that office and breathe the fresh air. Mothballs, manila folders, and lead paint can really mess with a guy after a while.”

Brian has long ago learned that the best way to deal with his brother’s ribbing is to take it at face-value and proceed as if he’d said nothing. “Nah. We link our database of open files with the FBI’s national list of missing persons every quarter. If they were making people disappear to create some super army, they’d be able to list those people as found through their database and we’d stop looking. No, I’m thinking this is a conspiracy outside the law.”

“What? Supervillains recruiting? Baron Blade can’t afford to pay the going rate for minions so he just kidnaps people off the streets. Makes sense. Pension plans are a real drain on the evil R&D budget.”

Everyone laughs, and Brian can feel his face reddening. He knows better, but he’s just so sick of his brother’s crap. “No. Citizens.” The laughter stops, and Brian continues. “I have this girl who went missing fifteen years ago. Her mother was dating a guy named Kevin Slate.”

Matt interrupts, his tone hard. “I’m gonna stop you right there. First, you can say this stuff to us, but talking about Citizens kidnapping kids to the wrong people will be a career-killer guaranteed.” Brian’s father and uncle nod seriously. “Second, you don’t have the training or equipment to even think about tangling with Citizens or any of the other costumes, so do yourself a favor and stick to the wives who ran out on their husbands and the runaway heroin addicts.”

“Just because I’m doing the job that the rest of you are supposed to be doing...”

“I’m serious, Brian. Messing with costumes is a great way to get dead. Your vest and .357 aren’t gonna do you any good against someone who can pick up a car or make your brain seep out of your ears. We don’t even approach a Code Gold without full tactical gear and air support, and even then, we take the time to tell the Freedom Five what we’re up against. You dreamed of being Legacy when you were a kid, and now you get to protect and serve, but you can only do that when you aren’t a grease stain on the pavement. You gotta cut this shit out.”

The atmosphere is tense. “...Who wants dessert? There’s cherry pie.” Brian’s grandmother defuses the tension with the practiced ease of a veteran bomb technician.

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That night, Brian relaxes on his couch back at his place, drinking a beer. A Megalopolis Icebirds hockey game is on, but he can’t concentrate enough to follow it. Colleen’s file is sitting on his coffee table (a cast-off from his older sister’s first apartment, with one wobbly leg and a large gash across the top). He picks it up and fingers the photograph.

“Twenty-four. People don’t look the same after fifteen years, especially not if they were kids. Wonder what she looks like now?”

Using his camera phone and laptop, Brian transfers the photo to a website that promises to age people⎯see what your kids will look like as adults! The resulting picture is stunning. Elfin features in childhood turn into high cheekbones and a delicate nose. Large, arresting green eyes challenge him, and her mouth and pointy chin seem fixed in a teasing smile.

Brian instantly regrets doing this, but he prints the computer image anyway. He can’t tear his eyes away. This was a bad idea, he thinks. This is what Corky was warning him about, getting too emotionally invested in a case. Well, maybe Corky didn’t see him falling in love with the victim. Good. Lord. Falling in love with the victim. That’s what this is. That’s what he’s doing. Brian picks up the beer bottle and throws it in the recycling with unnecessary force.

Dammit, yes he is falling in love with her. No, no. He’s falling in love with what he imagines she’s like. He found a nine-year-old and guessed what she’d be like at twenty-four and he fell for THAT person. He gets another beer, opens it, and takes a long swig. He’s being an idiot. No way she’d actually be anything like what he’s picturing. Hell, she’s probably dead.

No, she’s not, his gut says.

He takes another look at the photo. She’s not his usual type. He likes them blonde and tan and unchallenging. Brian’s got a lot of challenges in life and he doesn’t need that when it comes to girls he sleeps with. He focuses on that. Anyone who spent her whole life with the Citizens would be a challenge. Gotta be screwed up, probably unfamiliar with modern life. Didn’t her dad say he thought the boyfriend abused her? That’ll screw up anyone. This girl would be nothing but issues and brokenness. Challenging. Not for him.

Then his mind sabotages him. He imagines that wry smile turned on just for him, laughing about a secret joke they shared. He thinks about those green eyes dancing in delight. He can feel the texture of her enormous, glossy black curls. In his mind, she smells like sun-warmed bricks and daisies.

“Get it together,” he tells himself. Brian purposefully puts the picture in the back of the file and shuts the folder. But that night, he dreams about holding her, talking to her, kissing her. He doesn’t want to wake up.

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Almost three months after Colleen’s name went on the whiteboard, Brian finally finishes the background research during his lunch break. “See, it’s just like I thought. Colleen hasn’t ever done anything. There’s no mention of anyone doing what she can do. And you’d think people would mention it....”

Corcoran watches Brian from the other side of his desk. He’s seen this before in other guys new to Missing Persons. It’s such a... it’s like... like that guy who pushes rocks up a mountain every day and every night they roll back down. You think you get somewhere, you close a file, you solve a case, only to look around and realize that the files you haven’t closed just multiplied while you were busy. It’ll drive a man insane. Especially the good cops, Corcoran thinks ruefully. The good cops, the ones who are here to actually protect and serve, rather than for the pension or the ego boost. They can’t handle all those pictures of people who’ll never be found. It mocks them. And it always starts out like this. They find a case that gets under their skin, and next thing you know, it’s bulletin boards and red twine and newspaper clippings.

Corcoran almost hates it when the suits send him good cops. The other dregs of humanity who are “assigned” to his unit he could care less about. They can’t be ruined. But Brian, and all the good cops who came before him, he could have a career, but only if he doesn’t drown in the riptide of Missing Persons’ unsolvable cases. Corcoran isn’t going to watch another good cop sink his career.

“Bender, what are you doing?”

“...Checking articles to see if someone matching...”

Corcoran leans across the desk and sees Brian’s expanding file. He catches sight of the computer printout of Colleen at twenty-four and inwardly groans. It’s worse than he thought, going to need a soft touch. “Why are you checking articles, Bender, when your brother is the LT in Meta Unit?”

Brian doesn’t look up from his articles. “I’m checking other locations too, not just Megalopolis.”

“Meta Unit can access files from other departments easy. You’re not going there because you don’t want to ask your brother.”

“Lt. Bender is not worth the starch that goes into his collar.”

“Bullshit. You can drop the maverick cop crap with me, Bender. You aren’t going there because you don’t want to tell your brother why. Because you know what he’ll say.”

“My brother has the policing instincts of a ham sandwich. He’s there because he knows how to brownnose.”

Corcoran scoffs. “If you’d do on a little brownnosing, you’d probably be right behind him instead of trapped in Missing Persons.”

“And be that kind of cop? No way in hell. My brother wouldn’t know a crime if he’d taken it to prom. He can’t even get a perp to lie, let alone tell the truth.”

Corcoran decides that it’s time to move on from the soft touch. “Your brother would say that you are too involved in this case. Cops get emotionally attached, they make mistakes.”

Brian is on his feet. His chair would have dramatically rolled backwards, but the room is too tight, so it just slams into a filing cabinet. “Cops that treat cases like it’s the DMV are the reason Colleen’s gone!”

Corcoran’s eyebrows shoot up beneath his hairline. “Colleen? Jesus, Bender. This case is hell under your skin. I’m reassigning it.”

“REASSIGNING IT?!” Brian practically screams, slamming his hands on the desk. “To who? Sforza, Jones? O’Neil? Colleen Mosley isn’t gonna be found at the bottom of a whiskey bottle, and she isn’t gonna show up on a bar stool down at McDougal’s.”

Corcoran responds calmly. “Yes. Reassigning. You are too wrapped up in this case, and you’ll get sloppy. You’ll get sloppy, and you’ll do more damage than Sforza, Jones or O’Neil ever could.”

His protest dies on Brian’s lips, and he sits in his chair heavily. “...You’re right.” His voice and posture promise acquiescence.

Corcoran relaxes slightly and sits as well. “What is it about this case? The girl? People always get their heads screwed up about pretty little girls...”

“It’s the dad. He believes so much...”

“There’s always a dad. Or a mom. Or a sister. They always cry and they always keep photos and they always cling to hope and they always greet you at the door like you’re their best friend. And you’re always going to be the one that breaks their heart. Because this doesn’t end well, Bender.”

“She’s still alive. They don’t have any reason to kill her. This isn’t like the typical creep who takes kids...”

“This doesn’t end well. A. She’s dead and has been. B. She’s not dead but whatever they did to her killed the girl that her dad knew so she might as well be. C. She’s not dead but isn’t coming home because she doesn’t want to.”

“D. She is alive, is still the same girl, and isn’t coming home because she’s still being held by the Citizens.”

“Fifteen years, Bender. From nine to twenty-four. All her teenage years, when she’s deciding who she wants to be and what she wants to do with herself. Years when people change a lot, even without supervillains pulling their strings. Years where she didn’t try to escape. You haven’t found anything suggesting that someone tried to escape, have you?”

Brian doesn’t respond, because no, he hasn’t.

Corcoran continues. “So either they have her locked up or beaten up or both, and she’ll be so traumatized she won’t even be able to function⎯you see that in heavily abused or neglected children, they just aren’t human any more, can’t take care of themselves. That’s your best-case scenario. Worst case, she hasn’t left because she doesn’t want to. She doesn’t want to because she’s just like them, and you haven’t found her in your articles because for whatever reason they’re holding her in reserve. Then, the day might come when you have to pull a gun on her and stand between her and some of your taxpayers and you have to be prepared for that.”

“Or she could be just stuck there because they live in the Arctic Circle and it’s probably not easy to travel.”

“God help you, Bender, you are a tenacious one. I’m doing this for your own good, you know that, right?”

Brian doesn’t have a chance to respond, because the P.A. system calls out a Code Gold⎯major superpowered event, all officers on duty.

Part III: The Defection

Brian and Corcoran both spring into action, checking to see that they have their guns before racing to join their fellow officers. They wear their badges on chains around their necks so that they are identifiable as police officers in plainclothes. Their job, along with most of the other detectives⎯except the Meta Unit, of course⎯is to oversee evacuations into the subways. Everyone has an assigned area and they run drills frequently, so the MPD can respond to superpowered events with fluid familiarity. Preparation saves lives. To tell the truth though, they don’t even need the drills, they have active events all the time.

Brian makes sure his buildings get the evac order and starts clearing people from the streets. Buildings are supposed to run evac drills the way they have fire drills, and, like its police, the citizens of Megalopolis are well-trained. All around him, civilians are filing below ground in a quick, but orderly fashion. It’s a game of averages, really. It’s a big city, and the chances of the violence actually hitting your sector aren’t huge. Even in Megalopolis, an individual civilian might go their entire lives without ever encountering superpowered violence directly. So while people understand the risk and realize that casualties remain low because of the drilling and precautions, no one is out-of-their-mind terrified.

Brian runs to a pair of uniforms who are directing people to leave their cars and head to the subways. They nod to him but keep working. He joins them.

“Who is it?” one of them asks.

“...Citizens.” Brian follows the other officer’s index finger down the street.

His eyes widen as a group of six Citizens march toward them. They’re still a few blocks away but closing fast. Brian looks around; a handful of civilians are still running on the street, and they’re now sprinting for cover. Brian draws his gun and nods to the other officers as well. The three of them stand shoulder-to-shoulder, guns drawn, and start walking steadily toward the Citizens, providing cover and some psychological support for the civilians still in harm’s way.

Then the Citizens attack. Their service revolvers aren’t powerful enough to reach them from four blocks away, but the civilians’ screams have no trouble traveling the distance. One of the Citizens has a group of civilians on their knees, clutching their heads. Three others are rounding up other stragglers and kicking and punching them in a circle.

“What are they doing...?” the uniform on Brian’s left asks, her voice shaking. Brian doesn’t answer.

 A fifth, larger Citizen⎯with a sword strapped to his back⎯lifts a car and throws it through the third floor of a nearby building. Everyone ducks as a shower of glass rains down. The last Citizen, who looks like a purple featureless mannequin, flies up and enters the building through the hole.

Brian keeps his officers moving forward, occasionally stopping only to render aid. They stop two blocks away, taking cover behind an engine block. Brian and the male uniform watch the Citizens while the other tries to convince a woman to leave the backseat of the car.

“What’s in that building?” Brian wonders aloud.

“It’s one of the Megalopolis U science labs,” the officer responds. Brian trusts him, this is his beat and he probably knows it like the back of his hand.

The female officer, who got the woman out of the car and into a nearby store, swears. “That’s JUST what we need. Costumes and science never mix.”

Brian’s inclined to agree. Like most cops, he thinks it’s a Faustian trade-off. You get a cure for cancer and high gas mileage, but you also get crazies bringing the Moon into the Earth. His father would always grumble that people would have lost out on the good stuff if they’d been given a choice, but no one ever thought to ask the average Joe if a cure for cancer was worth being blown to bits by an incendiary device.

He reaches for his short-wave radio to call it in. The male officer yells, and Brian looks up. It happens so fast he’s almost not able to register it at all. The large Citizen had picked up another car and just heaved it toward the three cops. They’re pinning against another parked car and have nowhere to run.

Then the car is surrounded by a sparking blue field of energy, and it stops three feet away from them, hovering.

“Assault. Stop it.” A chill runs down Brian’s spine. He knows that voice.

There’s a sickening sound of flesh hitting flesh, a woman cries out, and the car drops to the ground with a thud. Citizen Assault is looming over a figure crumpled on the ground, his fists clenched. The purple Citizen returns, holding a metal thermos-like object.

“Perfect timing, Energy. Your partner just joined us. Matter, I’m gonna assume you interfered because you want to try out your new toy on those human cops over there.”

He takes the thermos from the purple Citizen. The purple Citizen dissolves into a diffuse purple cloud and moves toward the woman on the ground. The cloud surrounds her, like a personal force field, and she stands up.

“Welcome back, Matter.” Assault has his back to Brian, so he can’t see his face or what he’s doing. But something about his tone makes Brian feel queasy. He’s also too far away to see the woman’s features clearly, but she seems to stiffen under the purple field. “Here, try this,” Assault continues.

Assault seems to hand something from the thermos to Matter. He steps aside and Brian can see her more clearly. She’s gripping something in her hand. Her entire body is shaking. Her eyes are solid green and glowing, just like a glow-stick, actually. And her hair... her hair is a mass of jet black, glossy curls.

The shaking gets worse and she cries out. She tosses whatever she was holding away, almost as if by reflex.

The resulting blast is so loud and so bright, Brian and the other cops lose several seconds of sensory perception. When sight and sound return, the Citizens are standing right in front of them. Assault had moved cars around into a circle, two cars high, so now they are truly pinned with nowhere to run.

Assault is smirking. “Alright, boys and girls, what we have here are some human cops. What do we do with them?”

Brian realizes that he was entirely correct. The other four Citizens, besides Matter, Energy, and Assault, all look like teenagers. This is a rookie training mission, he thinks in horror.

One girl grins predatorily. “We turn their brains to butter.”

A boy with severe acne holds his hand out, creating a fireball in his palm. “Roast them.”

The last two Citizens look like twin brothers, and they say in unison, “We make them beg for mercy.”

“Good ideas, all around. But this one, I think, is Citizen Matter’s fight. If you would?

She’s still surrounded by the purple force field that seems to actually be Citizen Energy, and she glides forward, stopping in front of the female uniformed officer. Her eyes are still solid radioactive green, and Brian feels an uncomfortable heat radiating off her. Her left hand is clutching another one of the objects from the thermos, and her right arm slowly raises toward the officer’s forehead. Brian watches, transfixed. Her arm shakes, and her entire body tenses. The purple force field withdraws from her hand so that she can touch the officer’s forehead. As soon as her fingers are free of the purple field, she makes a fist, pulling her hand as far away from the officer’s face as she can.

A shockwave reverberates through the purple field and she moans in pain. Her fingers open again and she makes contact with the officer’s skin. She squeezes her eyes shut. First, the officer’s skin blisters, like a terrible sunburn. The woman starts screaming. Then smoke starts rising off her skin, and it sloughs off. The screaming stops. Her muscles and tissues are incinerated, turning to dust and blowing away. Finally, her skeleton also dissolves into dust. When Matter retracts her hand, all that’s left of the officer is whatever metal she had been wearing, and that metal is glowing red-hot. It was like watching nuclear bomb test footage limited to a single person. The whole process took less than thirty seconds.

She turns to Brian. In a brave but ultimately pointless act, the other uniform empties his gun at her. All the bullets hang mid-air in a shimmering blue field. One of the young Citizens, one of the twins, calls down a lightning bolt, electrocuting and killing the officer instantly. Brian doesn’t even flinch. He knows he’s dead, but at least he solved his mystery. God, she looks just like the website said she would, he thinks. Corcoran was right. He’d fallen in love with her, and even if he’d had something that could kill her, he wouldn’t use it. The only thing he regrets is that he was wrong about her.

But you’re not wrong, his gut whispers.

She raises her hand, this time without the compulsion of the shockwave. Brian looks her right in the glowing eyes, his chin raised and posture firm. “Please don’t, Colleen.”

She freezes. Her expression registers shock, confusion, and something close to anger, in quick succession. Her eyes glow brighter, and a concussive blast knocks him into unconsciousness.

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“Oh good, here come more.” Tachyon stands next to Legacy long enough to take in a full view of the chaos before heading back out to knock Citizens off balance before they can cause trouble. She has to be careful. If she treats combat like a demented game of pinball and barely grazes her targets, she manages well. But force equals mass times acceleration, so if she makes anything more than incidental contact with someone at her top speed, she could do more than break a few of their bones. Not to mention Newton’s Third law. Part of her exposure to tachyon particles increased her body’s ability to withstand forces, but she doesn’t like pushing it over a drawn out fight. So, she’d rather wait for the perfect moment, then put the pedal to the metal.

Five Citizens... no, six because one⎯Assault, she remembers him⎯is carrying a sixth, are joining the fight. Right now, Bunker is laying down suppressive fire, and Absolute Zero is providing cover for the Wraith by freezing any Citizen who gets too close. Wraith is trying to figure out why they’re focusing on the water treatment plant. And Legacy is standing on a building, intervening when necessary, but primarily looking for Dawn.

“Where is she?” he mutters. He’s seen too many fights like this to have any reason to think Dawn won’t be showing up, and he’s got too much experience to be lulled into a false sense of security. Until Dawn makes an appearance, he won’t be able to focus on anything else.

The new arrivals ignore the Freedom Five and head straight for the roof of the treatment plant. The plant, like every vital infrastructure in Megalopolis, has intense anti-supervillain protocols, and the foot-thick doors protecting the entrance are essentially impenetrable. The Citizens aren’t even bothering. The others provide cover while their comrades get into position.

Wraith checks her infrared and runs the calculations again, swearing. This isn’t good. She pulls out her grappling hook and swings up onto the roof next to Legacy and Tachyon.

Legacy doesn’t take his eyes off the horizon. “What is it, Wraith?”

“Picking up radioactive isotopes, looks like plutonium. Coming from the group that just arrived.”

Legacy turns to Wraith. “They’ve got a nuclear bomb?”

She shakes her head. “Not that I can tell. Where would they be holding it? No, all I know is that they have plutonium.”

He glances at Tachyon, glad to have Dr. Meredith Stinson on his team. “What could they do with that?”

She shrugs. “Plutonium alone can cause radiation sickness from long-term exposure. Short term, it isn’t anything but a nasty sunburn. It could definitely slip into fission or fusion, but even plutonium needs an energy kicker to get the reaction started. Like a few pounds of dynamite.”

Legacy nods. “Let’s try to interrupt them before they have a chance to get a few pounds of dynamite.” The other two agree, and Wraith radios the information to Bunker and Absolute Zero. Bunker acknowledges in military fashion, and Absolute Zero grunts. Legacy takes off, and Wraith shoots her grappling hook after him, hooking him on the foot. They’ve practiced this.

Legacy lands on the roof of the plant, while Wraith swings and grabs onto the roof-access ladder below the Citizens, retracting her grappling hook. She throws knives into the calves of the last two Citizens, and they let go of the ladder in surprise. They hit the ground hard, but Citizen Spring takes care of them. Wraith starts climbing and grabs a third Citizen by the ankle. The Citizen looks over her shoulder and swears, trying to hit Wraith with some psychic attack. Wraith mentally recites the speech from Act 3, Scene 1 of Henry V, reaches into her utility belt, and pulls out zip ties. She quickly ties the Citizens ankles to the ladder, while the Citizen is still trying to crack through her mental defenses. Wraith swings out to the side of the ladder, holding on with one hand and one foot, and yanks on the back of the Citizen’s uniform, hard. She loses her balance and flops backwards, like a kid hanging from a jungle gym, only being held by her ankles. The Citizen yells and waves her arms helplessly while Wraith climbs past her.

Assault reaches the top, carrying unconscious Matter⎯who seems to be faintly purple⎯and the lead containment tube with plutonium fragments they’d stolen from the university. The last Citizen-in-training follows right behind. The young Citizen sends a wave of flame at Legacy, who adjusts his resistance to flame-proof. The teenager stares at his hands when he realizes Legacy isn’t screaming in agony or spontaneously combusting, but he doesn’t have enough time to ponder it before Wraith knocks him out from behind.

Assault looks between Legacy and Wraith and drops Matter onto the roof with a thud. He raises his hands. “Oh no, it looks like I’m surrounded. I surrender.” His voice is dripping with malice and disdain. No one moves. The purple cast to Matter’s skin is becoming more pronounced, and suddenly a six-foot high, man-shaped figure coalesces over her. The figure first slams into Legacy’s chest, sending him stumbling backwards. Then it circles around and covers Wraith in a purple force field. It sends a pressure wave inward, and her heart skips a beat. Her eyes roll in the back of her head and she collapses as the field withdraws.

Assault draws his sword and tosses the container to Energy. “Get her started. I’ll take care of that one.” He advances on Legacy, who manages to shake off the hit from Energy in time to roll out of the way of Assault’s sword strike.

Energy unscrews the lid and retrieves another piece of plutonium. He presses it into Matter’s limp hand and re-forms around her, forcing her fingers to close around it. Her eyes open, glowing.

There’s a sudden boom, and Assault is reeling. Tachyon just grazed him, but grazed at Mach 1.2 will send anyone for a loop. She scoops up the case of plutonium too, wishing that she could have gotten the piece the purple Citizen had taken out. She would have slowed down to pick up Wraith too, but she can see what the unconscious Citizen is doing. At faster than the speed of sound, the beginnings of a nuclear reaction look like a vinegar volcano going off. She isn’t sure if it’s fission, or fusion, but she can feel the sudden, intense heat coming from the woman. Whatever the reaction, she knows that she needs to get the rest of the radioactive material as far away as possible. And pronto.

By the time she’s thought of all these things, she’s already well behind the perimeter maintained by Bunker and Absolute Zero. She hands the container off to one of the MPD Meta Unit officers with terse instructions. Then she turns back to the plant roof.

Legacy ignores Assault, who is possibly unconscious, and tries to reach the female Citizen. The heat is visible, glowing red. Legacy might have been able to get through it anyway, but then the purple energy Citizen rises up and slams into him. Legacy recovers and dives into him from several feet in the air. They start fighting each other mid-air. Tachyon frowns. How thick is that concrete? A thought strikes her and she again races to the top of the plant.

She passes the woman and glances down. The concrete is glowing red. The woman’s entire body is glowing, and if Tachyon weren’t wearing protective eye gear, she would have blinded herself. As it is, even with her resilience and special suit, she can feel her skin blistering. Meltdown. She slows down enough to scoop Wraith up and delivers her back to safety.

Wraith was far enough from the woman to end up with only a severe sunburn. And just in time too. There’s an intense light on top of the plant and the woman burns through the concrete. A few seconds pass, then the explosion knocks everyone to their feet. Water shoots upward and rains down, and the plant’s windows shatter.

“...What just happened?” Wraith struggles to sit up. She really ought to just lie down, but Tachyon has long ago learned better than to suggest it.

“China syndrome. She started a nuclear reaction, a fusion reaction, and she just burned through the concrete into...”

“Into the water treatment plant.” Wraith swears. “They just contaminated Megalopolis’ water supply with tritium.”

“Well then, we’ll just have to contain the damage.” Tachyon has no idea where the emergency shut-off valves would be, if there even are any, but she has to try. She races into the plant, heading straight for the control room. She stops when she gets there, and looks around. The plant is deserted, and there are no signs saying “In the Event of Heavy Water, push here.”

...What is she worried about, she’s a genius. She quickly studies the schematics and finds a way to create backflow. She manipulates the pumps so that the water, instead of flowing into the pipes, flows out into the river, downstream from the city. The time elapsed from incident to solution is less than a minute. She waits until the entire tank is emptied before shutting the river-bound drain and reversing the pumps. Some heavy water must have escaped, but the majority of the damage would be contained.

Feeling relieved, Tachyon returns to the fight. She notes that a group of Citizens are giving Bunker and Absolute Zero trouble, so she decides to play villain round-up. She circles them, not touching them, but providing enough wind to knock them off their feet and leave them stunned. Bunker thanks her over the radio, and she goes back to see how Wraith is.

Meanwhile, Citizen Energy abruptly disengages with Legacy and soars down into the plant after Citizen Matter. Legacy lands on what’s left of the roof, advancing on Assault. Then the horizon fills with light.

“Dawn breaks,” smirks Assault. Legacy punches him without taking his eyes off Dawn. He tracks her as she flies over and lands in the center of the Citizens. Her eyes are glowing gold and she’s clearly not holding back. She starts in on some speech about the superiority of the Citizens. Legacy’s heard it before.

The woman reappears from the hole in the roof. She’s surrounded again by the force field, and Legacy wonders if she creates it or if it’s a separate person who’s just attached to her. Her eyes are solid white, and her hair and loose clothes are floating slightly. Legacy notices something that he doesn’t believe at first. Her face is contorted in a scream, but she’s making no sound. Is she hurt? He tries to reach out to her, but Dawn drags him off the roof and onto the pavement with the rest of the heroes.

The woman lands on the ground next to Dawn and sinks to her knees. Dawn laughs, and every Citizen races forward to attack the five of them, all at once.

There’s something about being outnumbered. It doesn’t matter how strong you are, or how strong and well-organized your team is. When you’re outnumbered 3-to-1, you can’t help but feel like you’re just barely keeping your head above water. Every time Legacy thinks he’s put one of the Citizens out of commission, another one takes his place, and then Citizen Spring is healing them in the reserve lines. And every once in a while, Citizen Dawn hits them all with something nasty. They can’t even get to her right now. And of course, he’s really down a teammate. Wraith is holding her own, but she isn’t quite as quick as she usually is, and Legacy thinks he can see her wincing when she throws a Citizen over her shoulder.

Then the Citizens step aside. Dawn strides forward, one arm raised. Here it comes, thinks Legacy. It’s that aurora thing. He steps in front of Wraith. She’ll be furious with him later, but it’s a price he’ll pay to have her around to be mad.

Behind Dawn, the Citizen from the roof stands up shakily. Her eyes are that solid white, like before. She holds a hand out, and just as Dawn is about to release her Devastating Aurora, Dawn is thrown into the atmosphere. Legacy doesn’t see her reaction, but he thinks he can hear her yelling furiously as she floats upward. He can’t see exactly where she stops, but it is above the clouds. He can only see the light radiating off her through a cloud. A few seconds after she was send into the ionosphere, the aurora releases above their heads, like a solar flare. The sky fills with fire, like burning cloud lightning. The electricity briefly shorts out all across Megalopolis and the surrounding regions, and the communications are knocked out for a second.

Before anyone has a chance to relax, Dawn releases a rain of fire on the Freedom Five and surrounding cops. There are several seconds of absolute chaos. Legacy takes the brunt of it for Wraith. The fire creates a curtain between them and the Citizens. He thinks he sees one or two attack the woman from the roof. Dawn descends and gives an order. They’re running, Legacy thinks. Whatever they had planned, they decided against it. Or maybe the Freedom Five interrupted it.

When the fires die down, Dawn and most of the Citizens are gone. A handful of Citizens are left behind, all severely injured. Everyone picks themselves up from behind partially-melted vehicles or other forms of shelter. Wraith dusts herself off and brushes past Legacy to go zip tie a Citizen. Legacy expected that.

They left the woman from the roof. Legacy kneels next to her and checks her pulse. She’s alive, but bleeding heavily. Her right arm looks shattered. He carefully picks her up off the ground and looks around for an ambulance.

“...Aren’t you going to wait for the Block’s transfer team?” Wraith is kneeling next to another Citizen, tightening her restraints.

“She needs a hospital.”

“She needs a lawyer,” counters Wraith.

“She’s hurt, and I think it’s because the Citizens attacked her. She’s not on their side. She saved us from the Aurora. It would have been way worse if it had happened at ground level.”

“She just went China Syndrome on the water treatment plant. Who knows what she’ll do unconscious.”

“I don’t think she wanted to do that.” But he knows that Wraith has a point. Injured, scared, or unconscious meta-humans are dangerous, even if they don’t mean any harm. To be on the safe side, he stays with her until meta-human containment teams can arrive. He hands her over and she’s taken away in a specially-designed truck.

Part IV: Doubt

A woman uses her sniper scope to watch cable news in a coffee shop. She likes this particular shop because it has large plate-glass windows and a convenient, easily accessible roof across the street with excellent line-of-sight. If it weren’t for that shop, she’d probably never see what was going on in the world outside her narrow purview. She’s generally unconcerned with the political grandstanding and scare-mongering that populate cable news, but today she’s very glad to catch the breaking story.

She can’t hear what the anchor is saying, but she doesn’t need to. The surveillance footage is all she needs. A young woman blows up the water treatment plant over in Megalopolis. Citizen Dawn arrives. The same young woman sends Citizen Dawn into the sky. The camera feed cuts out.

Ex-Patriette lowers her scope and sits back on her heels. She’s not one given to much reflection, and as far as she’s concerned, the past is a different country⎯one she never wants to go back to. But now the anchor is showing a picture of the woman who blew up the plant, and the ticker is saying that she’s in custody. Good for the people of Megalopolis. Bad for Colleen.

What does she care? Gunning down goons, taking on costumes who think they’re invincible⎯those are all activities that Ex-Patriette can get behind. Dashing off to rescue a damsel in distress? Not so much. She runs through the scene again in her mind. The conclusion is unshakeable. Colleen Mosley up and attacked Citizen Dawn, straight up, no chaser.

“Shit.” She checks her watch, mentally running through the train tables to see how soon she can get to Megalopolis. Rescuing a damsel in distress? Hell no. Helping someone else get away from the Citizens of the Sun? Maybe something could be arranged.

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Brian wakes up under fluorescent lights with a heart monitor beeping in his ear.

“You are one lucky son of a bitch, you know that?” Matt’s voice cuts through the fog of the medication.

Brian sits up slightly, rubbing at his eyes. His brother and sister-in-law are sitting on either side of his bed. He instantly regrets sitting up as searing pain shoots through his side and legs.

“...Why don’t I feel lucky?”

His sister-in-law, a perky, six-months-pregnant brunette, hops out of her chair. “Lemme go get the nurse.” His brother watches her go instead of insisting on doing it himself.

“Brian, I’m sorry... the other two officers with you didn’t make it.”

This isn’t news to Brian. God, he doesn’t even know their names. Come on, Brian, he thinks to himself. Gotta focus on what happened and be a good witness. Only thing he can do for them now. He concentrates. He remembers the female uniform screaming, he remembers the gun shots, he remembers....

“Colleen, I think found her, one of my missing person cases. She was there.”

“You mean you know the woman who attacked you?”

“Attacked me? Matt, Colleen didn’t....”

Matt interrupts. “There was a bank across the street, with an ATM. They checked the footage, saw the whole thing.” Brian’s face falls. “Brian, don’t beat yourself up about this. Everyone saw what happened, you couldn’t do anything. It’s a miracle you made it out at all.” Matt’s trying to comfort his brother, but he’s hitting all the wrong points.

“It wasn’t a miracle, Matt. It was Colleen. She tried to not touch the one officer, but they made her. And then she blew us up instead of touching me. She sacrificed herself to save me.”

“Wasn’t much of a sacrifice, because then she destroyed and contaminated the water supply and helped Citizen Dawn attack the city.”

“What? No, she wouldn’t. She looked so scared. Did you see the car? The car that almost hit us? She stopped it. She stopped it and the Citizen who threw it punched her in the stomach.”

Matt stands up, eyeing Brian with concern. “Brian, she murdered a cop. She abetted an assault against the Freedom Five and the Meta Unit. I was there, I saw it happen with my own eyes.”

Brian can’t shake the look that was on her face when he spoke her name. He shakes his head furiously and yells, “No. No, you’re wrong. She was trying to HELP. She’s being held hostage by them, and she was doing everything she could to mitigate the damage.” Brian’s heart monitor beeps loudly.

Matt softens. “I’m sorry, Brian. She’s in custody, not a hostage of the Citizens of the Sun. I shouldn’t have said anything.” He glances at the door. “The nurse is coming. Get some rest, okay?”

Brian doesn’t want to rest. He wants to find Colleen, to talk to her, to tell her that her dad hasn’t given up on her. He knows that Matt speaks for the Meta Unit, he figures Matt speaks for the Freedom Five too. They think she’s one of the Citizens. They think she murdered a cop. She’s gonna get crucified.

The nurse comes in and checks Brian’s vitals with a disapproving cluck. Nurse Ratched’s sister, Brian thinks bitterly. The nurse fiddles with something on an IV drip, Brian’s veins feel warm, and he lets his mind sink into a soft nothingness.

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Brian wakes up again several hours later. The sharp pain has dulled into an ache that permeates to what feels like every muscle.

“Hey, Bends. I stopped by to give your family a break.” Corcoran stands up in a corner and moves so that Brian can see him. “How you feeling?”

“Like I got hit by a truck.”

“Try a nuclear bomb. CSU went through the video⎯it cut out right after she hit you⎯and went over the scene. Looks like she released some sort of small nuclear device.”

“So it really was Colleen then? No question?”

Corcoran pulls a chair over. “No, no question. I handed over the files to Meta Unit, they’re confirming, but it’s pretty certain. That accelerated aging picture you made? It’s a perfect match. And she’s got all the powers that Colleen had as a little girl.”

“Corky, you gotta believe me, she wasn’t trying to hurt me. She was trying to stop it.”

“...That’s really not what it looked like.”

“How would you know? You didn’t even see her!”

“Well, she killed a cop, she released a dirty bomb in the city water system, she helped Citizen Dawn attack us. Stockholm Syndrome is a thing, but this is going Patti Hearst and it goes way beyond Stockholm. She committed crimes, Bender. She’s looking and acting a lot like a supervillain.”

“That’s what Matt said, but I thought you’d know better. You’ve read the file...”

Corcoran sighs. “You know what I know? I know that you just had a near-death experience and I know that you were really caught up in this case to begin with.”

“This isn’t in my head, Corky.” Brian falls into cop-mode. “There was a Citizen who was like a cloud or something, and he was there before she showed up. One of the Citizens called him ‘Energy.’ He slipped into the university lab and took a container. Then, when Colleen came, he stepped around her. I don’t know how else to describe it. It’s like she was wearing him or something.”

Corcoran narrows his eyes. “What did he look like?”

“Purple. Featureless, like a mannequin. He could fly and could drop his shape entirely and just be a cloud.”

“And you saw him?”

“Yeah, he surrounded Colleen like a force field. Then she started walking stiffly. Almost like he was making her move. He had to pull back for her to touch the cop she killed. And she balled her hand up, like she was trying to keep from touching the cop. He hit her with something, her whole body shook. THEN she killed the cop.”

Corcoran digests this information. “Okay, listen. This stuff is the kind of secret that I’m not even supposed to know about, but there WAS something around her at the treatment plant. Purple force field around her, like you’re describing. It could separate away from her too. Strong enough to hold its own against Legacy. Beat him up, and then took off after her when she landed in the plant. Meta Unit thinks it comes from her, like her own personal force field or something.”

“No. The Citizens definitely talked about him like he was a separate person. Called him her partner. He killed the cop, using Colleen as a weapon.”

Corcoran leans on the edge of the bed, resting his chin on his hands and looking off to the side. Brian can practically hear the gears turning in his head. “You really think this?”

“Corky, I swear, I’m right about this.”

“Your gut?”

“Yeah, my gut. My gut and my own damn eyes.”

“Damn your gut too.” He sighs. “Shit. We gotta do something about this. When are they gonna let you out?”

“Docs haven’t said exactly.”

“Okay, look, a guy I know at the Meta Unit let slip that there’s gonna be a big confab at the Freedom Five HQ and Meta’s gonna be there.” Corcoran puts a hand up. “Don’t get too excited, we aren’t Meta. And frankly, they’re pretty sold on this ‘New Citizen’ angle. When was the last time we actually got ahead of one of them? It’s like Christmas and prom night all rolled into one, they’re so eager. We gotta get you there.”

“Yeah. That’ll work.”

“Don’t get sarcastic with me, Bends. This is your story, your gut. It’ll sound better coming from you. We get you in there and you can sell your version. Someone might even buy it.”

“You’re pulling a ‘Hunt for Red October’ on me, aren’t you?”

“You’re the one talking about people with nuclear weapons defecting. Not my fault you shoulda written a memo.”

“Fine, my story, my ass. Doesn’t change the fact that I’m not in Meta Unit and I doubt I’m invited.”

Corcoran gives Brian an exasperated eye roll. “Your story, your ass, your brother.”

“I am NOT going to Lt. Bender for this. He already thinks I’m nuts.”

Corcoran gives him his sly smile. “You leave that part to me. You just get your head together so you tell a more cohesive story than what you’ve been passing along so far.”

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“You want to do what?” Lt. Matthew Bender, Meta Unit, can’t believe that his brother is standing in his office two days after being blown up by supervillains, let alone that he’s demanding to be brought to a briefing with the Freedom Five. Matt shoots a glare at Detective Corcoran, Brian’s superior, for bringing him here in the first place.

“I’m a witness. I saw a lot of stuff that those security cameras can’t pick up.” Brian is pale, but on his feet. If he’s on pain medication, it isn’t affecting his tone or demeanor. He looks unwell, but serious. Whatever is making him lose his damn mind, it isn’t Vicodin.

“So tell me, Brian, what you saw and I’ll get it in.”

“Won’t do, LT,” interjects Corcoran amiably. “What Brian’s got to say is... politically sensitive.”

The lieutenant frowns. “You saying I’d hedge the truth to spare some feelings, Detective?”

“Oh, no, sir. But it’d be better to present the information directly from the witness, wouldn’t you say? No accusations of pot-stirring⎯everyone knows Brian says whatever the hell he feels like⎯but also, if it turns out the Brian’s right, you’re a hero for recognizing it. You don’t want to be the man to present a crack-pot theory to your superiors, but you also don’t want to be the man who let critical info slip through the cracks because he was afraid of damaging his career. Basically, lose-lose if he doesn’t go, win-win if he does.”

Brian watches his brother struggle, admitting to himself that perhaps his brother is less about the career and more about getting the right info to the right people. He did at least seem to perk up when Corky mentioned that Brian could be right. Brian has to grudgingly accept that sometimes careerism and the hunt for the truth line up⎯it’s a lot better to be both right and in favor with your superiors, if you can help it.

Corcoran pulls out his final flourish. “Lieutenant, it’s Brian we’re talking about. You *know* he’s right.”

After a few more moments of silence, Matt swears. “Yeah. Damn it, but yeah. Of course he’s right.” He rubs his forehead like he just developed a sudden, job-related migraine. “Alright, you’re coming along. We leave in an hour. You screw up, and I throw you to the wolves, you understand? Jeez, you’re a lot of trouble. And you, Corcoran, don’t think I don’t know what you were up to.”

Corcoran smiles innocently.

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Meredith Stinson, Ph.D, is balancing on one leg of her chair while she waits for the debriefing conference to begin. A minute to go⎯Paul always starts things on the dot. These conferences were Tyler Vance’s idea. Usually, they’re a chance for everyone to compare tactical notes. Wraith and Tyler do well together in that regard. Meredith likes to play matchmaker with her colleagues, if only by making imaginary pairings to amuse herself. Of course, Wraith keeps her identity a secret, even from the rest of them⎯Meredith is pretty sure Paul knows who she is, but he’s way too polite to out her⎯so she can’t guess what Wraith’s like outside the uniform. On the other hand, she’s found that people are generally the same in uniform and out.

Right now, the two of them are discussing strategy for tackling large numbers of dangerous individuals all at once. Is it better to hammer them simultaneously, or single out one for immediate neutralization before moving on to the next? Wraith is advocating for single targets⎯find the one who’s causing problems right now and handle them. Tyler would rather mow ‘em down. Easy for him to say, he has a machine gun attached to his suit.

Watching them bicker good-naturedly gives Meredith a slightly queasy feeling. She looks down at her high-protein salad (lots of soy, nuts, and turkey). She’s eating this because her wife wants her to be “healthier.” It was their last big fight, actually. Meredith needs to put away 6.000 calories on a normal day, even when she isn’t running around saving Megalopolis from nuclear meltdown, and frankly it’s hard to get those calories in without straying into pizza and hot dogs and other processed junk. She’d said as much. “It’s not like I’m gonna get fat....” Then her wife had said that it wasn’t *about* being fat, it was about cholesterol.

Meredith then said the sort of thing that you really want to take back hours, days later. “I’m going up against supervillains with evil robots, who consume people’s souls to stay alive, and who possess the powers of Elder Gods. Cholesterol is the least of my worries.”

Lord, the look on her face. Meredith can’t believe she didn’t figure it out until *after* she said it. Of course her wife knows that’s the danger. She can’t control that. She can’t keep Meredith safe from supervillains, but maybe she can nag her to improve herself in a little way. It gives her the illusion of control over Meredith’s otherwise volatile vocation. And Meredith managed to throw the reality of it all right back into her face.

She’d pulled Paul aside right after that fiasco, for a little heart-to-heart. How do you make it work, she’d asked.

“Never leave the house mad. Make sure the last thing you say to her before going out, for any reason, is ‘I love you’,” he said. “Paranoid? Probably. Superstitious? Maybe. But let’s face it, we’ve got dangerous jobs, and it’s just asking for disaster to leave things unsaid. Then, when you do get home, be there. Turn off the superheroing and the science and just be with her. She didn’t marry Tachyon, she married Meredith Stinson, and she deserves some time with her wife.”

Turn it off. Yeah, that’s simple. She glances up at the clock. It’s been fifteen seconds since she last checked the time. Chalk time dilation up along with the intense caloric needs and danger of killing anyone she touches as a side effect that no one thought of. She reaches up to her ear, brushing her fingers against the pen she has tucked behind it. Then she pulls her hand away forcefully. The last time she gave into the nervous tic, she put a half-inch divot into a table. That’s what happens when you tap a pencil at supersonic speeds.

Paul comes in, carrying a stack of papers, and stands at the head of the conference table. “Alright, we’re going to start a little early, because we have some men from Megalopolis Meta Unit coming in. They’ve got intel on our new Citizen that they’re gonna share. Until then, Dr. Stinson, you want to give us what you’ve found out?”

Meredith nods. “Well, we’ve spent the past two days cleaning up, checking radiation levels. Everything seems pretty safe. Dumping the heavy water into the river diluted it enough that it’s only slightly above naturally-occurring levels, so while we’ll want to monitor the region for possible ecological effects, there’s not much to worry about. To give you an idea, your average old-time polluting chemical plant posed a much more immediate and severe danger to the health of the public. It coulda been worse, but it wasn’t. We also have been taking Geiger counters to the plant and the pipe system. We haven’t found abnormal levels of radiation, so I think we were able to contain it in time too. Contaminating the infrastructure with radiation would be much worse, since the pipes are made out of materials that absorb and hold on to radiation easily. If it had leaked out, we would have had to replace everything, because otherwise Megalopolis would just be slowly poisoned.” ...Oversimplification, Meredith thinks.

There’s a knock on the door, and four police officers come in:, the Deputy Chief of Operations, the Deputy Chief’s secretary, Brian, and his brother. Brian walks stiffly, still feeling the effects of his injuries. Brian glances around at the people gathers at the table. He recognizes Legacy easily, the uniform’s a give-away. Tachyon’s there, but she’s in black workout clothes. Wraith is in a costume that covers her face. She’s not as instantly recognizable because she tends to keep a low profile, but everyone knows the Freedom Five. Absolute Zero, in a strange containment suit, is slouched in a corner, apparently not intending to participate. The fifth person is a man in a military uniform. That must be Bunker when he isn’t in his armored suit. Brian supposes he wouldn’t sit around in that all the time, but it does look weird. Tachyon’s at the front of the room, in the middle of a presentation. Legacy comes over to shake their hands. Brian tries to not look like some hayseed meeting a movie star. They then take their seats at the opposite end of the table.

After checking to make sure Tachyon said her piece, Legacy hands the floor to the Deputy Chief. The gray-haired, powerfully-built man stands up.

“Deputy Chief of Operations Spinelli,” he introduces himself. “Megalopolis Police Department interviewed witnesses and gathered footage of the attacks to analyze. The basic pattern is that several groups of five to seven Citizens spread out over the city before converging on the water treatment plant. Witness testimony and surveillance footage are giving us all sorts of new intel on the Citizens’ individual MOs. We’ve long maintained files on known Citizens, and we’ve added the new information into those files, plus opened new files for the previously-unknown citizens.” He nods to the secretary, who passes around files for the Freedom Five to look over.

Wraith flips through hers quickly. “What about the nuclear girl?” She recognizes an attempt by a bureaucrat to curry favor and garner bonus points, and she doesn’t appreciate it. She doesn’t take self-congratulations from her employees, she won’t take it from the MPD.

The officer clears his throat, and the secretary turns on a video. “Well, we’ve gathered the footage of her to show you....”

They all watch for several minutes in silence. Brian closes his eyes when Colleen touches the female officer. When he opens them, he realizes that the Wraith is watching him. He feels exposed and very uncomfortable. Then, he’s riveted by the events at the treatment plant. This was the first he’d seen of it. The footage isn’t all that clear, but the obvious conclusions are there to be drawn. She’d blown it up; then she’d joined in the fight with Citizen Dawn. The footage cuts out abruptly when the power is knocked out.

“I’m going to turn the floor over to Lieutenant Bender of Meta Unit and let him present their investigation.”

Matt walks to the front nervously. He nods to everyone. “Well, we’ve identified four primary power forms: magnetism, from the street fight footage; gravity, from the fight at the water treatment plant; radiation, clearly...” He glances at Brian before continuing quickly, “and electricity, from some research. We know that the Citizens stole some research-grade plutonium from MegU, which is what they used to charge her up.” Matt’s decided that he’s going to stick to the facts, and if anyone brings up questions about the explanations behind the facts, he’ll turn it over to Brian. But first he wants to get what he knows for certain out on the table.

Tachyon’s mind races, pondering the possibilities. Someone who could control electrostatic force and gravitational force and has some sort of effect on nuclear physics, at least of radioactive materials.... Wait. She looks up. “Lieutenant, we’ve been scouring the treatment plant. There was no plutonium. At all. And did you say ‘research-grade’?”

The lieutenant nods nervously. Legacy meets Tachyon’s eyes. “Dr. Stinson, what are you thinking?”

She stands up, slipping into science lecture mode. “Research-grade plutonium is like nothing, barely enriched at all. And we didn’t find any plutonium in the water....”

The man in the military uniform shrugs. “So? She blew up the plant. Must have used it all.”

Tachyon chuckles. “It doesn’t work that way. Our most efficient, modern reactors leave 40 percent behind, and that’s with enrichment. Research-grade plutonium is barely radioactive. There shouldn’t have been enough for her to blow up a car, let alone that whole plant.”

Legacy watches her, recognizing “figuring-things-out-mode.” He smiles slightly, “I guess you’ve already worked out the science?”

“She did it. She’s not just able to withstand radiation or channel it or something. She can control the four basic interactions of nature: gravity, electrostatic force, strong nuclear force, and weak nuclear force. She was stripping neutrons out of the air to enrich the plutonium while she was working. And then she pulled it apart all the way down to nothing. She was able to achieve 100% efficiency.... And that explains the fusion reactions.” Tachyon hits herself in the head, admonishing herself internally for being blind.

Wraith, who has an engineering background but tries to keep quiet about it, steps in. “Fusion happens in a meltdown. That’s what she was doing. Doesn’t seem like it needs explaining.”

“Yes, fusion is definitely a thing that happens. But if she’d been fusing the way say, Chernobyl fused, you would have been toast, Wraith. You were ten yards away from an unshielded fusion reaction. You should have been incinerated. No, she achieved cold fusion because she could use gravitational or electrostatic containment to stabilize the reaction and apparently can play with strong nuclear force without trouble.”

“It would allow her to jump the Coulomb barrier without the substantial energy input. And she’d be able to make it self-sustaining too, stripping neutrons and keeping everything all locked up.”

“Exactly. Cold fusion.”

Legacy frowns. “It seemed fairly hot to me.”

“It’s relative, Legacy. The difference between the sun doing thermonuclear fusion and a wood fire, in terms of temperature gradient.” Tachyon turns over the possibilities in her mind. The young woman is walking String Theory, a living boson. The insights she could provide to quantum mechanics....

The soldier clears his throat. “What about that purple thing?” He’s less interested in the science and more interested in the practical realities.

Before Lieutenant Bender can respond, the Deputy Chief says, “She can do all those things. Probably made it herself.”

Legacy shakes his head. “It attacked me separately.”

The soldier shrugs. “So? She was busy, trying to do her thing. Who says it couldn’t have gone after you while she wasn’t able to defend herself directly?”

Matt takes a deep breath. This is it. “Actually, sir, we have a theory about that too. This is Detective Bender, the only surviving officer from the incident in front of MegU.”

Brian stands up to speak. He’d been given his marching orders. Stick to the facts and resist the urge to editorialize. They’ll believe you if you don’t sound like you have an agenda. He calmly describes what he saw: the theft at the university, the car, the attack on the civilians, the death of the officer, her reaction to her name.

Legacy interrupts him at that point. “You know her name. Is that part of the research your brother was talking about?”

Brian is startled and impressed. He hadn’t thought anyone had picked up on that part of Matt’s presentation, and Legacy picked out their relationship immediately. He decides to take a different approach.

“Yes, sir. I’m a detective in Missing Persons. I’ve been investigating a cold case for the past three months, the disappearance of a nine-year-old girl fifteen years ago. It didn’t get attention back then because the complaint was taken out by a non-custodial parent accusing the mother of kidnapping. Turns out, the mother and the mother’s boyfriend are Citizens Fortune and Bold. And the little girl had powers, even back then.” He lets that sink in.

The Wraith speaks first. “And you know it’s this girl?”

“Well, the power profile matches, and she definitely reacted when I said ‘Colleen,’ but I also put her photo into a program that guesses what a person would look like, and it’s uncannily similar.” He holds up his print-out from the file. Legacy nods in recognition.

Legacy leans forward. “Anything else you find about her?”

“Well... she had been asked to join before she disappeared and she said no. Her father suffered a... suspicious accident, considering Citizen Fortune’s powers, soon after the girl’s abilities manifested, and he lost primary custody because of his disability. That made me think she was being pursued by the Citizens, not just being offered a position. So then I started looking at other cases. I found six in Megalopolis alone that were of previously unknown metahumans disappearing under suspicious circumstances.”

Legacy frowns. “You’re saying you uncovered a pattern of the Citizens kidnapping people?”

The Deputy Chief looks stricken, and Matt is internally groaning. Brian presses forward. “Yes, it appears that way.”

Legacy considers. “So there might be a lot more of them than we’d originally thought, and perhaps she wasn’t participating willingly.”

The Wraith interjects, “She killed a cop, Legacy.”

“She was beaten until she was bloody,” he counters. “Then they left her. Before that, she was screaming when Citizen Energy pulled her out of the water treatment plant. The detective saw her fighting it.”

Tachyon speaks up. “Legacy’s got a point. She had to be fighting it. She could have destroyed the whole city with those powers. But instead, she kept things fairly contained. Citizen Dawn could have had her wipe out all of us in one go, no problem. But she didn’t.”

Legacy nods. “I don’t know exactly what Dawn was saying when she got thrown into the air, but it wasn’t ‘Good job, team!’ Colleen attacked Dawn and the Citizens retaliated. So maybe Colleen’s been resisting the whole time and Dawn meant for her to do more damage than she did.”

“Excuse me, sir, but that’s not how I read it at all.” The soldier sits up straighter and clasps his fingers together. “It’s a common tactic, sir. She’s a plant. Left behind for us to take in so that she can attack from inside.”

Wraith nods. “Given what she can do, she’s a danger all on her own, even without the support of the Citizens. We keep her anywhere close to an inhabited area and she could blow. They leave her here for us to take in and then they have her destroy us later.”

Tachyon shakes her head. “If she was a plant, why did they hurt her?”

Wraith gives her a wry look. “Because it makes it more believable. They’re playing up to our sympathies by making her seem like a victim in need of a rescue.”

Brian listens to this exchange in silence, fighting to avoid yelling at them all and completely destroying his career. But this sends him over the edge. He shouts, “She was kidnapped when she was nine and kept there away from her dad ever since. She *is* a victim.”

The soldier looks at him in sympathy. “Or, she’s been brainwashed for fifteen years and she’s as dedicated a follower as a terrorist organization could ask for.”

Brian refuses to quail, but he does catch his brother’s glare from across the table. That was probably editorializing.

Legacy sighs. “Right now, she’s in the hospital wing of the Block. They’re furious, by the way, because she’s destroyed half their equipment and she isn’t even conscious. We can’t do anything until she wakes up, in any event, so we’ll just have to wait to see what she says.” With that, the meeting ends.

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Wraith takes the roof-top path back to the train station, in case of crime. It’s good to stay in the habit. She sees the hot pink crosshairs freshly spray-painted on a rooftop two blocks away from HQ and swears.

“Took you long enough.” There’s a sound of someone dropping down onto her feet behind her. Wraith whirls around, knives ready.

“Ex-Patriette. You ready to turn yourself in?”

“...Not today. You’re getting rusty, Wraith, letting yourself get snuck up on like that.” She lowers the .45 she had trained on Wraith.

The two of them orbit around each other in Rook City, always aware of the other’s activities, but rarely touching. A few months ago, Ex-Patriette had started leaving calling cards in various locations where she’d know Wraith would be. Their tête-à-têtes walked a very thin line between hostile and cautiously helpful.

“Didn’t expect you so far out of your home turf.”

“Well, people get bored.” Ex-Patriette casually leans against the door to the roof, crossing her arms.

“You come all this way just to have something to do?”

“No. I’m here because of the Citizens.”

Wraith keeps her tone light. “Oh, really? You have some special insight into the Citizenry?” Ex-Patriette may be able to track and sneak up on Wraith, but Wraith has made some headway into the mystery of Ex-Patriette. She grew up on Insula Primalis; that much Wraith was certain of. She was always trying to figure out the details, but Ex-Patriette was not forthcoming.

“You arrested the girl who went nuclear on the plant?”

“Pretty much. She’s in hospital, but yes. She’s in custody.”

“You think she’s safe there?”

“Safe?” Wraith challenges. “She looks like the kind of person you’d *love* to see in prison. Why are you coming all the way over here to defend a Citizen?”

“I pay my debts.”

“Well isn’t that beautifully cryptic. Honor among murders, huh?”

“She killed someone?” Ex-Patriette can’t keep the disbelief out of her voice.

“You saying she didn’t?”

“Look. I’m not saying anything one way or another. But look at it this way: she’s got the kind of power the Citizens aren’t just gonna let go of. So either they’re gonna take her back or they’re gonna kill her⎯and probably trigger an explosion in the process. You guys better do everything you can to keep either of those things from happening, if you’re gonna keep her in prison.”

Ex-Patriette moves to leave. Wraith calls out, “There’s something you’re not telling me! You don’t think she’s playing a role in this?”

She pauses and turns around. “You’ve got someone who’s got the guts and the wherewithal to go toe-to-toe with Citizen Dawn and live to tell the tale. And you’re all wasting time wondering whose side she’s on.”

Wraith tenses. “Are you telling me that cop was right, and she’s on our side? What about his theory that other people had been kidnapped also? Did that happen, too?”

“That cop sounds like he’s a smart one.”

“Is that all you’re gonna give me? If you’re right, she’s in danger and others are too. You’ve *got* to help. At least give me the info for me to act on.”

Ex-Patriette gives Wraith a slight smile. “Sorry, Maia. This is as close to the Citizens as I get. Take care of Colleen. And for the love of God, don’t let Energy get to her.” Then she jumps off the side of the building and is gone before Wraith can catch up to her.