

# H.E.R.O. - METAMORPHOSIS



KEVIN RAU

# **H.E.R.O. - Metamorphosis**

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H.E.R.O. - Metamorphosis  
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All characters are original and fictional. Any likeness to real people is purely coincidental.

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The H.E.R.O. series includes:

H.E.R.O. – Metamorphosis (1) <http://www.amzn.com/B005GM3PV8>  
H.E.R.O. - New Markets (2) <http://www.amzn.com/B005NBLWW6>  
H.E.R.O. - Rise and Fall (3) <http://www.amzn.com/B005QNS4ZY>  
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Wondering what the characters look like in detail?

<http://www.kevinrau.com> has images of many of the heroes.

Please "like" H.E.R.O. Superhero Novels on Facebook! You'll get the latest news and character renders (pictures) as they are made:

<http://www.facebook.com/herobooks>

Thanks to Dan Henry, Christina Aspen, Bob Bintzler, Jody

“Bud” Smet and my online friend, Pach, for being all too willing to club the seal sitting on my head as my fingers typed away with a mind of their own, in some cases putting down the strangest things...

## **Chapter 0 - Forward**

### **Kev's (Author's) Viewpoint**

Thank you for buying H.E.R.O. - Metamorphosis! This novel is the first in one of the most extensive superhero written novel series in existence! At this point of this revised edition of this first novel in the series, there are 12 books in the series, with more to come. (9 novels, 2 shorts stories, and the illustrated guide, which has background information on superheroes, the world, etc.) Each novel has a standalone story, but works much like a television series, with ongoing plots and characters.

It serves as an introduction to three of the most common characters in the series, how the "supers" work, etc. More superheroes are introduced as the series progresses.

I hope you enjoy it as much as I've enjoyed working on it!

By the way, my Facebook page has hundreds of pictures on the heroes (and some villains). H.E.R.O. isn't a comic book series, but I've worked hard to provide a lot of images of the characters to hopefully enhance the experience for you.

Here's the link: <http://www.facebook.com/herobooks>



**Did you know the Facebook page for  
H.E.R.O. has hundreds of pictures of  
the characters?**

**"Like" it!**

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## Chapter 1 – Food Courts and Untimely Explosions

### Stephanie's Viewpoint

*Twenty, and my life is ending.* I lay there in a pool of blood, and thought that this life was too short. My name was Stephanie Quinn, the only name I had at the time. I couldn't believe I might die without doing anything really cool with my life. It was just wrong.

It was late Saturday afternoon. A few minutes prior, we'd been sitting in the food court of the local mall. The place bustled with a crowd hitting up the fast food joints. Much of the crowd watched the big screens mounted up above us. Breaking news warned the public about a new meteor shower coming down over Metrocity's region. They expected it to cause a renewed outbreak of the gene “supervirus” today. That's not a virus that spreads, by the way. We just called it that because it infected people and significantly changed their DNA, their connection to the universe, their life.

It was always an interesting topic to my friends and me, considering my dad was a super, though I wasn't. In fact, my two best friends had a parent who was a super. One might think the fates conspired to push us together, but in reality, it was more of a plan by our parents.

I was enrolled as a junior at Metrocity University in the genetics degree program. We'd watched the media on this event as it approached, and hoped to study a super, or metahuman at some point.

My eyes were glued to the news report, so I asked Rael if he'd be a dear and get us all some nummy flavored coffee from Gloria Jeans. Lance would do it, but I just loved twisting Rael around my finger, even more so considering he was such a tough guy. He loved it in secret, and it gave him a chance to hover behind someone in a line and intimidate them. Like I said, tough guy. I grinned at him as he headed off.

Fireworks in the sky interrupted us as we watched the news. The glass dome over the food court made it a good vantage point to sky watch, and some rather spectacular detonations occurred directly overhead as meteors exploded up in the sky. One made it very low over the city, perhaps even the mall, and we felt and heard the boom as it burst low overhead. The din from the crowd buzzed with awe and excitement. The lights dimmed momentarily in the mall; it appeared to affect every business visible to us. I was struck with a headache, perhaps from the flashes and booms.

I rubbed my temple as Lance and I returned to watching the live news coverage of the tiny meteors burning up and exploding as they entered the atmosphere. The anchor on TV began a discussion with some scientist about radiation testing when I heard a scream behind me. Lance looked past me, and I turned my head to see some guy in a strange contorted position. He stood with his back arched, hands clenched in fists, his face a mask of great pain. The guy's body actually glowed. *Either he's a supervillain about to do something nasty to us all, or he's being affected by the meteor virus.* For a moment, I was jealous. I didn't have much more than a moment.

The table and chairs nearby began sliding back toward the man, as though he were pulling everything to him. From off to the right, Rael sprinted toward him, leaped over a few tables, and people too. I think almost every face in the entire food court either turned toward the screamer, or watched Rael move through the area. I wondered if he'd help the guy, or perhaps get him on the ground, but no, in typical Rael fashion, he threw some kind of flying ninjitsu punch at the guy's head. The guy exploded right where he stood when the punch landed.

I don't mean an explosion of blood or some such.

No, he literally blew up, like a grenade or dynamite. Chairs, tables, people, everything was thrown away from him. I flung my arm up to ward off a flying chair, and a huge man's body slammed into me. The wave of concussive force followed a fraction of a second later, blasting me backwards. I felt energy pass right through my body, and I must have lost consciousness for a minute.

I came to and found myself lying on the ground. Something held down my lower body. Moving my head a bit, I could see it was some really fat guy. My vision was blurry. I felt blood dripping down my head and my left arm bled from a massive gash along it.

Lance lay near me. He was a huge guy, probably 6'6" and 300 pounds of gorgeous muscles, brunette with medium wavy hair and steely gray eyes. He was a heavy weight lifter, rugby and football player. Lance's back arched, hands clawed at the air, and his face contorted in great pain. His skin split apart along muscle groups, new muscles bulged out, and the skin re-grew over the new muscle. Blood flowed from dozens of locations on his body. Some of the blood I lay in appeared to be his.

*Wait a moment, why am I not feeling pain?* That thought snapped me out of my fugue, as I suddenly became acutely aware of a dozen wounds doing everything from causing stabbing sensations, to a sensation similar to someone punching me repeatedly in the back. My head throbbed badly.

I lifted my head to look around better, and saw people lying



scattered about the food court. Many lights were out, and furniture had been flung in a wave away from the blast guy. Cries of pain, screaming and moans seemed to be coming from everyone. It was like a war zone.

My forehead hurt, I put my palm against it, and accidentally exacerbated a wound there. Liquid ran down over my eyes and I realized my forehead was split open.

I tried to find my purse to get my phone out. I wanted to dial 911, people needed help here. I saw the purse; it was just past Lance, out of my reach.

*Great.* I felt rather drowsy, but very warm; perhaps that was the pain. *Aren't you supposed to feel cold as you lose blood?* The sensation of heat grew, and I suddenly had the feeling of fire coursing through my blood. You ever really feel your blood pump through your system after inhaling a strong coffee? Yeah, similar to that, but on fire. My back arched, I lost control of my arms as they clawed at the floor, and heard exceptionally loud screaming. *Wait, is that me?*

As the pain roared through my system, all I could think of is fire, pain, and the sense of being burned at the stake. I felt great empathy for anyone caught in a fire at that moment. *Dying would be fine right about now, just end the pain, please!* I felt a wave, or pulse of something from my center. It pulsed through me, and I felt a little less pain. My skin tingled, and a wave of goose bumps went down my entire body. I felt a strange combination of pain and pleasure. My skin continued tingling for a while, but the pleasure receded, leaving only the pain again.

I wanted to hold Lance's hand, but I fought against the contorting of my own body. It probably didn't help that the fat guy kept me from moving half my body, and my left leg didn't appreciate all that weight on it.

*We're changing, I'm sure of that. Hard to think clearly though. I need to do something here...*

I had just enough awareness to notice Lance's thrashing slowing to a stop. A few moments later, he sat up with a surprised look on his face. He saw me, and reached over to grab my shoulder. I heard, wait – no, I **felt** a crunching in my shoulder as he crushed the muscle and bone without effort where he grabbed me, and I screamed. I reached toward his arm with my left hand, but adding this new pain to the mix was just too much. I think I heard him say something, but everything went black...

## Chapter 2 – Escape from Authority

### Lance's Viewpoint

Normally, I'm not a big fan of going to the mall. However, when one of my best friends wanted Rael and I to join her to do some clothes shopping, I wasn't about to resist. Yeah, yeah, normally I'd avoid shopping with most women like most other sane men, but Stephanie was beautiful and fun to be with, and I knew that she knew that shopping was boring for guys. So she flirted a lot with us while picking out clothes. She was a tiny gal, about 5'3", brunette with shoulder blade length hair, hazel eyes, slim but not skinny, and busty. *Yeah, shopping with her was downright fun. Literally. No joke there. Gotta say, I wondered if she used me as a giant bag carrier at times, though...* Rael mentioned to me in the past that it's better than watching porn, but I left that assessment to him.

We decided to eat at the food court first, and met at a table near the center, where we could watch a television. Big news was up about a new meteor shower happening today. Not like they figured it would drop basketball-sized lumps on us or something, but the exciting thing was the radiation from these things. Apparently, saving the world back in the 80s with experimental nukes against a big asteroid headed toward earth made strange things happen. Something about the nuke energized the matter in the asteroid, and a cloud of small asteroids floated around the planet now. When meteor showers occurred on occasion, irradiated particulates in the air caused some rather spontaneous mutation in humans. *Interesting stuff.*

My mom was a super, as were Stephanie and Rael's fathers. They guessed that we had a high likelihood of becoming 'gene activated' at some point. I knew for a fact that my mom hoped for it. To that end, she got me into classes and training most of my life for that possibility. Nothing special had worked out so far for me, but I wouldn't be surprised if her genetics hadn't given me an edge up on my physique – that and a lot of weight lifting, exercise, martial arts, and sports. I worked as a bouncer, a pretty easy gig for a big guy who was well built and towered over normal sized people.

One segment of the news was very cool. A lightning-blasting super named Hellshock was interviewed about tonight. He mentioned that all supers and authorities were on alert and ready to handle any problems that occurred. I couldn't get enough of comic books, news

on supers and the Homeland Extraordinary Response Organization, or H.E.R.O., and even the tabloids that specialized in supers. I'd been a huge fan of heroic type supers for as long as I could remember.

So we watched the news, and Stephanie asked Rael to go get us all some flavored coffee. Yeah, she gave him that sweet face, too. I chuckled as he stood up. I think it made him unhappy, he glared at me a moment and stalked off toward the coffee shop. *Sucker! Not like I'm immune to that look. She just somehow makes you feel so damn good about helping her with something.* We'd all been friends for over ten years, and she knew the buttons to push.

I watched him head off. It was like watching a cat that's always ready to pounce. He was only about 6' tall, black hair that was a few inches below the shoulder, and weighed perhaps 190 or so, but he had plenty of muscle on that frame – lithe muscle. His skin was decorated with a tattoo of a dragon's claw on each forearm, and little demons on each biceps. It was funny watching her eyes follow his backside until he got out of obvious sight. He tended to do the same thing to her. *Wait, I'm pretty sure that's always, not tended, hab! Man, I hope I'm not that obvious. I find it interesting that people tend to part the way for me because I'm darn big. They part the way for him I think because he projects an aura of danger. Or is that hostility?* Rael loved to fight; he was the only one in the dojo that commonly fought multiple opponents at a time.

A little boy and his mom sat next to us. He stared at me, and finally poked me in the arm as I'd been watching Rael. I smiled at him. He looked at my arm, so I flexed for him. Having 22" biceps attracted attention, I guess. I said, "Hey, buddy, drink lots of milk and stay active, you can get as big as me." *Well, maybe not, but hey, gotta have something in life to shoot for.*

We watched the news until a meteor exploded overhead, causing a boom and mild shaking in the area. The lights actually dimmed from it. *Very cool. This is going to be a killer night for news on supers!* My shoulder suddenly hurt - I must have strained myself when I worked out in the morning; I massaged my biceps as I watched Stephanie. My friend appeared to have a headache. I was about to ask her if she would like me to go get her some aspirin or something when I noticed a guy stand up a few tables behind Stephanie. His eyes glowed, and his head twitched. He did an odd pose with his arms out, almost like you'd see a wrestler do after winning a match. Then he screamed, arched his back and made fists with his hands. I blinked, a bit surprised at the raw agony of his scream. Then his entire body began to glow. Tables and chairs began sliding slowly toward him.

*Wow, this guy is a super, or he's about to be, as a result of the meteor shower!* That screaming and the glowing didn't look like a good start

though. I tried to think of a way to help someone change, but couldn't recall mom ever mentioning what the experience was like in any detail.

Practically everyone turned toward him at this point, and no one moved. Wait, one person did. Rael sprinted toward the guy. It only took him a few seconds, and he leapt at the guy. I figured he'd tackle the man. Instead, he threw a haymaker at him. Good punch; he landed a solid score on the side of the guy's face.

The guy blew up. I didn't have enough time to think. I moved in front of the boy right next to me and shielded him, and tried to grab for Stephanie's arm to pull her to me. I was far too slow for the distance, for she had twisted in her seat to watch the guy as well. A fat guy flew through the air toward us, and the blast, table, and what seemed like everything else impacted me. It felt sort of like a really aggressive fullback plowing into me at top speed. The energy of the explosion went right through my body.

While lying there thinking about the damage I might have sustained, I heard people screaming and crying all over the place. The little boy sat up next to me, nothing had hit him. I said, "Good kid, find your mom." *Hmm, this is going to be ugly. Hey, most of the lights are out again.* I leaned up to check on Stephanie and felt a burning sensation. It grew until my entire body felt like I was thrown into a fire pit. I couldn't help but thrash on the floor. Then on top of the burning sensation, I felt muscles and skin tearing.

When I slammed one arm against the floor from the agony, I dimly heard tile shattering. *Hope that wasn't expensive...* I realized that we'd been gene activated. Made into supers. Mutated. I would have cheered, if this hadn't hurt so darn much. Through pain-filled eyes, I saw how bloody my arms became, as the muscles bunched up, grew, and split the skin. It seemed to be healing over, but wow, I had never felt pain like this.

Stephanie reached out toward me, or at least tried to. I wanted to reach out, but my arms kept flexing of their own accord. They weren't in my control due to the pain ... and the growth.

Her expression changed as though she was in deep thought and the pain rapidly faded. I smelled something pleasant, like a flower. The scent faded, and the screaming and moaning stopped from the people in perhaps a thirty-foot radius of us. Everyone except her. A quick glance around showed everyone else changing from pained expressions to confusion or relief, but her face was still contorted in pain though.

I sat up, reached out to her, and grabbed her shoulder. I felt something give when my hand closed, like bones crunching under my fingers. She screamed and passed out. *Damn. I think I'm gaining some kind of super strength, but I feel bad.*

My thoughts were to help the people here, but I already heard sirens. If they found new supers of any type here, they might think we caused all this damage, not to mention all the injuries. *Oh man, battery on a crowd scale. They might even call it terrorism or something.* For that matter, they might lock us down to study us, dump us in some government test program, or heck, just put us away all drugged up. *I'd rather things be in my control than someone else's. I need to get stabilized, and then head to H.E.R.O. headquarters to sign up as a new hero.*

*Therefore, the most immediate concern was to get out of there before people could remember our faces. Dang, I hate feeling guilty when I didn't do anything wrong. Well, except smashing the floor. I'll have to find a way to pay the mall back for that.*

Stephanie had lost a lot of blood from the head and arm wounds, not to mention, she had to have some broken bones. *I feel so bad about the shoulder damage – nothing like piling crap on the dung heap. I'm glad she's unconscious right now.* I saw her wounds closing even as I watched. *She got regeneration at the least, pretty decent too, from what I've read about supers.*

Looking around, I saw that people were now sitting up, panic starting to set in on some of them. *I can't worry about Rael. He's a fighter; he'll get out.* That and he'd be pissed if I worried about him, instead of taking care of Stephanie. *Man, I can't believe I just crushed her shoulder. That had to hurt like heck! God, I suck.*

I rolled the big guy off her, and picked her up carefully, snagging her purse with my pinkie on the way. *Won, she feels extremely light. Damn, she weighs, what – 110 pounds? She feels like she weighs almost nothing.* I felt the fire going through my body again. My muscles bunched up, and before my eyes, my forearm tightened, the skin tore open, grew, and healed over. It created a bloody mess on my clothing and the floor. *Holy crap.* I was glad I didn't feel pain anymore, but I kept my main concentration on holding Stephanie safely. If my muscles exploded again, I'd rather not crush my best friend. For that matter, I noticed her skin moving, and could tell she was gaining a little muscle as well. *Not enough to break the skin, or bulge her arms or anything, but extra toning. Her bod's tightening up even more. She'd probably be hoping for an even higher I.Q. to do even better at college. Nerdy sometimes, but she's still my pal.*

As I moved, I almost slipped and fell. I had bled through all of my clothing and made a mess on the floor. Many people had obvious cuts and some broken limbs from objects crashing into them, but none had blood absolutely coating them. *Man, people were lying around everywhere.*

If I could, I would really rather have stayed and helped. Even though I had first aid training, if I could break Stephanie's shoulder just

by grabbing it, I was more of a danger than a help to these people. Plus, I believed most people would be more frightened of Mr. Blood Covered Horror Film Dude at that point anyway. My shirt and pants felt soaked. Steph was not so blood soaked, though she would probably have looked good even like that.

I glanced around the food court area. *Hmm, I think the authorities will focus on the food court entrances.* I jogged down a side tunnel, looking for one of those emergency exits set between stores. People stared at me as I ran with her. *Must be the blood on us both. Man, people are mental; they should have cleared the darn area when the explosion went off.*

I pushed the door open with my back to prevent damaging it, or leaving fingerprints, and jogged down the hallway. I tried to keep her steady in my arms. *Yeah, that'd look good; bang her head on the doorframe as I run through or some such. So Mr. Casey, how did your friend sustain these injuries? Uhh. I clubbed her on the door because I'm an oaf? Yeah, not good.* I got us through the outer door as squad cars pulled up to the food court entrance off to our right.

I felt the painful fire go through my veins again, and it was all I could do to prevent myself from crushing Steph to my chest as my arms spasmed. It was like being clawed all over for some reason. *What happened to that pain resistance? Darn it, this hurts again.* Falling to my knees, I did my best to keep Stephanie off the ground. I watched the skin on my fingers rip open; muscle and tissue grew as I watched. My body began glowing yellow from the inside. I could see some kind of fumes coming out of my mouth and nose. My hands ... actually **grew**. *I think I just gained an inch or more of hand span on each hand right there.* For the thirty seconds or so it took my hands to rebuild, I couldn't move.

The pain hurt so much, I pounded on the concrete sidewalk with my right fist. It shattered as though hit by a piece of construction machinery. Fresh blood trickled down my body in a dozen spots, ensuring my clothing stayed drenched in blood. Talk about major hurt. *What, did I ask to super size the pain?* Only my fear of attracting the attention of the police kept me from screaming during that process. I knelt there panting, Stephanie held in one arm, the other hand on the ground to keep from falling. I saw the last of the skin seal over and the pain from that round of transformation stopped.

The changes continued as something new occurred. I felt heat, or energy, something I could not understand coming from deep in my core in a new round of ... change. Rather than pain this time, a rush of power flowed out into my limbs. It was as if I had the biggest weight lifting rush in my life. My body felt energized ... powerful. Shadows danced around us as my own body lit the area, and people stared our way from the odd light. Some people in the parking lot

walked toward us and the lights flashing on my right. *Great. Now I glow?* I had become a beacon in the darkness, attracting the attention of everyone within sight due to the oddity. My body finally felt right, more than right, it felt powerful. *Come on, Lance. We have to get out of here now.*

I leapt to my feet, only to go airborne. *Holy crap, can I fly?* I reflexively clutched tighter to Steph, and felt her upper left arm snap. *Darn it, I'm a freaking brute now.* We went up into the air a hundred yards or so as we flew across the parking lot and continued over the buildings across the street. The experience thrilled and terrified me, all in one.

Our upward flight slowed, and our angle changed for the worse. We were headed back down. No flight. I started to panic as we rapidly descended. The light from inside faded. This landing couldn't go well. I twisted my body so I would land on my back. *We're goners here. I hope I can cushion our fall.*

We came down a few streets from the mall, in a residential area. I could only pray that all this muscle gain also meant I was becoming armored, like most brick supers seemed to be. If so, perhaps we could land safely and get the heck out of there.

We crashed on the ground behind a house. The hard concrete patio we landed on shattered as my back smashed into it. Her head cracked against mine and the lights went out.

## Chapter 3 – Pain is Good

### Rael's Viewpoint

*Coffee duty. Just call me the damn butler already. Babe asks me to get some Gloria Jean's coffee for the group, and sucker that I am, I go do it.* Truthfully, I could not help but feel pretty good about doing what Stephanie asked, though. *Sure, she's one of my best friends, but she's smokin' hot.* Brunette, shoulder-blade length hair, buns that just made you want to grab them every time you see 'em. When she bent over, I think I had a habit of stopping and drooling, slack-jawed. *I try not to, but I'm not sure I succeed.* Sometimes, I didn't bother trying. I grinned to myself. *Well, she's also my best friend, so I guess I'd do it for that reason too. I wish she'd get the hint and go out on an official date with me though.*

My bud Lance stayed at the table. *Probably a good idea. If I saw some jerk hitting on her, I'd probably start a fight. Hey, she's not my girlfriend ... yet, but Lance is built like a brick shithouse. No one will come close with him sitting there in his under armor body fitting shirt. People probably think he's a pro wrestler or something. For that matter, he could do it, he's athletic enough. In better shape than most of those guys, anyway. Hell, if he ever does go super and wear tights, women will swoon over him. Screw that, **men** will swoon over him out of jealousy.* He and I rented a house together, and I had learned that he would probably have heart failure if that actually happened. *Straight as an arrow.*

He definitely got his build from his mom. She was a super – a brick to be precise. She did reconstruction of damaged buildings and new hi-rise construction work. Big woman, she was about 6' tall and for a woman, had bulging muscles, although her build isn't really broad or unusual other than the height. Really good looking, you'd think she were at most twenty-five. Lance inherited those looks, the muscles and the unusual height, but no super abilities yet.

*That warm and fuzzy feeling I had didn't stop me from the desire to smack the punks in front of me at the store, but that sort of activity doesn't go over too well with the AUTH-OR-I-TAY. Sure would make me feel better though.*

For a moment, while I stood in line, I thought the day over. I found it kind of odd that Steph's dad, Caleb, actually called **me** up, and mentioned that she really wanted to do some clothes shopping at the mall. She was not the least bit shy, if anything, she knew that she was hot and flirted due to it. I was not stupid though, I told him that of course we would go with her. I didn't even know her dad that well. He



had always sent her over to play with Lance and me over the last ten years, and was always out of town for his job. *Whatever, it got her out with us tonight.*

The wait in line for the coffee annoyed me more than normal. Something had put me in a bad mood, and my blood pounded so much I had to focus on a mental kata to calm myself down. After picking up the coffee, I walked back toward the table Lance chose, when I saw some dude stand up and scream. I figured he was a druggie of some sort. For a moment, I kind of hoped for a chance to help mall security beat down some punk. *That'd be fun.*

Anyway, he arched his back, arms out, hands forming the shape of claws. *Man, I wish I had claws, just not the freaky huge bug claws some mutants have.* I had cool dragon claw tattoos on my forearms - dragon claws would be awesome. A nimbus of light glowed around him, and the tables and stuff nearby slid toward him. *Oh, a super of some sort!* I lost it at this point. I wanted so bad to beat on somebody that I didn't think. No idea where the drinks ended up, because I hauled ass at him.

I had trained extensively in martial arts and gotten very good at street acrobatics, so getting past the people and tables to the dude took a few seconds at best. I leapt completely over one table, ran past a few others, plus plenty of people who all just stood or sat still watching my target. Everyone had stopped. *Act people! Get off your butts and quit watching him and me!* I used a hand for leverage as I leapt over another larger table, and closed the distance between us. I went for a simple, yet powerful roundhouse to the face in an attempt to put him down fast. I figured security would not mind me helping, what with him glowing and all.

It was a beautiful roundhouse. Of course, he barely moved, and he had not reacted to my swing at all. My fist connected, his head snapped to the side ... then I thought he exploded. Hard to explain, he had this glowing effect around him. Then, when I hit, a concussive wave blew out from his skin. It felt like I got hit with a hundred punches all over my body. A sensation of fire tore through my entire system, and I flew through the air.

All that training sure was worth it. I instinctively rolled when I hit the ground. My body stopped in a crouched position, I tried to shake off the feeling of the blast, but didn't succeed overly well. The fire ripped through me, but felt ... **good**. Yeah, it was painful, but it was a good pain. *Though, kind of like being on some good drugs, perhaps. Wait, not drugs ... Red Bull, an entire four pack of them at once.*

I couldn't concentrate, due to all the energy coursing through me. An almost bestial rage tore through my mind. Sure, sure, that was almost normal for my rather hostile-oriented mind, but this was ...

exceptional. Pain tore through my body as well, but I was into that on a normal basis. *Friends think I'm twisted, but hey, I'm okay with that.* That, and I liked to train my martial arts against multiple opponents; a person got hit more often doing that.

The pain was focused more in my hands than most of the body, and the last digit on every finger split and lengthened. They mutated into ... claws? *For real? You've got to be kidding.* Something was up with my mouth as well. My jaw popped painfully. I tasted blood. The liquid ran out of my mouth, I wiped my hand across my chin, only to add a lot more blood to my already bloody hand. *Aw crap, I better not change into some kind of werewolf.*

The skin on my forearms and hands split, new muscle grew, and the skin reformed over it. It hurt like hell. *This is amazing.*

I tried to focus on something other than my hands and jaw, and realized there were people screaming and whining all over the food court. People lay about everywhere, as if a bomb went off in the center. A woman was twisted into what had to be a horribly uncomfortable position next to me. I reached over and straightened her out.

I was pretty sure that dude was the bomb. If the popping, fire, and wracking pain weren't going through my body, I'd so have been all over the bastard. *If not for the pain, this rush would be great. Must be all the Red Bull. Wait, I didn't drink any Red Bull. Adrenaline must be pumping through my system. Humph.*

I looked for Stephanie and Lance when it suddenly felt like someone stabbed me in both of my eyes, and I could barely see. I felt blood ... or something ... run down my face, and couldn't help but let out a howl of pain and anger. *Okay, **now** I'm worried. I've never heard of a blind super though, so I'm really, really hoping this is a temporary thing. Better not turn into a freakin' bat either, that'd piss me off.*

I smelled something, amongst all the blood. The pain faded away in a wave. Very strange, I couldn't understand what would cause that to happen. The Red Bull and fire were still in the veins though. The screaming and whining stopped around me. Well, not all of the whining. *Stupid people.*

I blew a lot of blood out of my nose. I think it got broken in the blast, or when my mouth changed. Afterward, I could smell more clearly. That odd flowery smell was gone. I smelled blood, which wasn't a first for me, but I could tell there were **different** blood types in the room. *Holy crap, I can smell the difference in different people's blood, I think. Am, man, I **am** becoming a werewolf.*

I still had problems seeing, and my eyes didn't feel right. I blinked furiously in an attempt to clear out whatever was in my eyes.

Like my jaw, I could tell my body was reworking something there, just not with the bone structure. I touched my face ... there was a lot of blood on my cheeks. *That really does rock, growing claws, but won't if I can't friggin' see.* My skin split under my finger where I touched my face with the claw. Sharp. I growled out of annoyance at the pain in my eyes. I certainly was not about to dig my fingers into them.

Sirens blared in the distance, plenty of them coming. It struck me that my fingers were now claws, and I was drenched in blood. *Great, I'm the hero of the day, and I'm probably a poster child for some kind of murderous supervillain. A bloody chin and wolf fangs would probably fit right in to make them just gun my ass down.*

I decided I would rather not be arrested, or brought to a hospital. *Dumbasses would probably try to cut off my new claws in an attempt to "help" me, anyway.* The blood mixed with a lot of saliva in my mouth. It suddenly struck me that all this blood smelled good. It made me run my tongue over my lips, only to discover that I had fangs. *What the hell is happening to me? Yeah, Rael, you know you're going super, but this feels more like a horror flick.*

*Fine, figure it out later, Rael. For now, get the hell out of the initial zone. Can't even see well enough to try to get with Lance and Steph.* The fire in my blood had mostly cooled by now. I still had a lot of energy though. I blinked until I got the rough visual of one of the fast food joints in the food court. I crawled over to it, and climbed over the counter. Nothing like the sound of hard claws as they scraped across a metal counter to raise the hair on the back of your neck. *No bitching, so I'm guessing the counter workers were knocked out from the blast ... or were hiding.*

I crawled toward what I hoped was the back of the shop, and felt a body ... female. Damn it, I couldn't see well enough to see if she were awake. Chest was moving up and down, so she was breathing at least, and I felt a heartbeat. She lay mostly flat, and didn't move at my touch, so she had to be unconscious. I figured her chances would be better if the police saw her soon rather than wait for them to look behind counters. I picked her up carefully, being mindful of the claws. I moved backward to the counter until I bumped it, and carefully laid her on it. At least, they would see her now. *Hey, I'm a bastard at times, but my old man raised me to want to be a good guy too. Actually, since he was a H.E.R.O. back in the old days, it might just run in the family after today.*

I quickly scrambled in the other direction, again noting the disturbing sound of my clawed fingers on the tile flooring. I found a swinging door. Some crawling took me toward the back, and I successfully found a back room. I hoped they would have a door back there. I rubbed my palms against my eyes, they burned, and I hoped the dimness would fade soon. What with the carnage in the main food

court, I bet that the police wouldn't look there. Fumbling around, I knocked over a few boxes of supplies. A little additional searching and I found an external door for incoming supplies. The claws made opening the handle a real pain until I grabbed the handle with the upper segments of my fingers. The fingertips, or claws in my case now, just didn't grab overly well.

Suddenly, I decided to try something radical. *There has to be a rooftop over the ball or room I just came from, if I can get onto the roof I can hide and hopefully heal or finish changing.* I couldn't see for shit, even outside. Just outside the door, I tried leaping up at the mall roof. Pretty hopeful, being as how I couldn't see much, but no good alternatives came to mind. Running out into a parking lot while nearly blind seemed pretty stupid to me.

I jumped up at the wall, but there was some kind of overhang on the roof. My head smashed against the overhang and I flopped back down, landing on my back. I rubbed my head with my palm. *No one better have a cell phone camera on me right now, I'll be pissed off.* When I put my hand down hard to get back up, I heard a crunching noise and felt my claws enter the concrete of the sidewalk. I stretched my neck to get the kinks out after that blooper. When I ran my palm against the sidewalk, I realized it was definitely made of concrete. *What the hell?* I ran my new claws along the concrete, and scored a series of grooves in it easily. *Enough playing, Rael, get out of sight.*

After backing up about five steps, I easily made the roof in one jump. *Won, this will rock ... if my eyesight comes back. I want to lie down and just rest for now. At least the damn cops have turned off their sirens now that they are here...*

My eyes tingled, and then felt itchy. *Yeah, I'm wise enough to know not to try to touch my eyes with these new pokers, but damn, this is annoying.* It made me clench my fists, hard, and I realized that I was stabbing my own palms. Adrenaline must be what stopped the pain in the food court, because I began to hurt all over again. *Since when does adrenaline completely wipe out pain for a while? Something else is at work here.*

A dim light appeared in my vision, and it brightened as I waited. *Hot damn!* After a few dozen seconds I was able to crack my eyelids open a notch. I could see again. It seemed damn bright out, but I was positive it should be dark by now. The parking lot lights were all on, but it just did not seem that dark. I whispered thanks to multiple religions and deities at that point.

*Sweet, if I decide to be some kind of mole man, I might be able to see in the dark. Wait, can't werewolves see in the dark? Damn it all.*

Examining my hands, I saw that the claw damage was almost healed on the palms. Thinking about injuries reminded me of

Stephanie and Lance. *I need to find out what happened to them. I can't very well just walk down there all bloody. They'll want to question me. Can't just go into a store and buy clothes, someone might rat me out.* Frustrated as hell, I just wanted to beat the crap out of someone. I accidentally made a tight fist, and my claws again stabbed into my palms. I gritted my teeth and watched as the palms healed. My claws were wicked sharp, and made my fingers about an inch longer than normal. For that matter, I no longer had fingertips -a hard black claw on every finger had replaced the entire last segment.

A pair of police cars tore off out of the parking lot, and I actually saw the lights stop perhaps half a mile away. *Hmm, maybe Mr. Bad Guy is trying to get away. Good, there's someone to vent some anger on.* I hopped down off the roof, and jogged that way, staying out of the bright lights so the blood didn't show so much. The pain was mostly gone across my body, and the activity felt good ... really good. I traversed the half mile in record time for me, perhaps a minute at most.

Finding the police cars was easy enough. When I arrived, small crowds of locals stood about watching some officers heft my friends into the back of the two cars. *What the hell is this? How did they get over here?* From the looks of it, they were unconscious. *Wouldn't they call in an ambulance? Damn you Lance, I don't care that you didn't find my ass, but to go and get both of you arrested...* I growled deep in my chest. A group of four officers was barely able to get Lance into the back of the car; he must be heavier than he was.

*Wait, I bet every ambulance in the city is dealing with situations like the food court mess. They can't be that badly injured to be manhandled like this. They even cuffed my friends. Bastards. And that's not my friends I'm talking about. Hmm, they had to have changed too. Dad was right. No wonder he never gave me crap about getting into such rough, umm, extracurricular activities.* I said a silent thanks to the old man for helping me prepare for this day. *If anyone can prepare for replacing their fingers with claws, that is.* For a moment, I wondered if New York was having a big scene like this as well.

The squad cars both drove off, after the officers obtained statements from a few people. Very carefully, I watched the guy they spoke to the most, and which house he went home to. My plan formed in my mind...

Sneaking around to the guy's house, I knocked on the front door. So the eyehole wouldn't allow a good look at me, I stood off to the side. No need to bother though, the guy must have thought that with the cops around so recently, he could just open the door without looking. *Or perhaps this is just that safe of a neighborhood. Hah, not tonight, buddy.*

I figured that I looked reasonably scary at this point, so as soon

as the door started opening, I pushed it open all the way and walked in toward him. He was a large guy, overweight and middle aged. Glasses, clothes that looked like the casual business type. *Don't people making decent money get laser eye surgery to get rid of glasses?*

The color drained from his face, and a shocked look crossed his face. I smiled wickedly and held up a clawed hand. Damn, I enjoyed intimidating jerks like this. My skin tingled; I felt a rush as I glared at him. "Repeat what you told the police, now," I growled.

"Oh, my god, don't hurt me!" he said.

I snarled slightly and continued to glare. He spoke rapidly, "I didn't see that much. I was watching Wheel, and what I thought was a bird, caught my attention. I looked outside in time to see this huge guy and a brunette girl crash onto Jim's patio. The guy landed on his back, the girl on top of him. She kind of bounced like her head smacked his, and they both just lay there."

"They looked unconscious, and I could see from here that they were covered in blood. I called 911, and went out to check on them. I checked their pulses; both were strong, so I just waited. I think the guy is a super – hero or villain, I don't know, but he was wearing one of those tight form fitting shirts, and has muscles bulging to here." He made a shape with his hand over his arm as if he had a gigantic bicep.

"She's probably one too, not many women have figures like that around here. So then the police arrived, I told them about it, and they picked them up and piled them into a pair of squad cars. One of them called in on his radio that they had another pair of supers near the mall, and that they had lots of blood on them, but didn't appear badly injured and that they'd bring them to the hospital in the squad cars."

*I don't recall hearing the glass shattering in the ceiling of the food court, so I'm not sure how the hell they flew here, but he says they both had strong heartbeats in their necks, so falling dozens (hundreds?) of feet didn't do them much damage. Nice. I hope I'm an armored jumping frog too. Wait a second, that's just not right, if pretty little Stephanie gets armored up and I don't. Hmm. And not the frog part either. Cricket maybe? Bah, what jumps that isn't lame? If they were flying, why did they crash like this?*

I told the guy, "Thanks for your cooperation, and have a great life," then headed out. *I need to find out which hospital they'd bring potential supers to. That might be why they shoved them in the back of the squad car as well, they want to restrain them or test them. Oh, hell.*

I checked my cell phone; it must have broken when I got blown back. *Good thing I have insurance on the damn thing.* I decided to get my car and head back to our place to change.

The pain in my body had gone. I actually felt extremely good. It didn't take as long to get back to the mall parking lot. *Won't, I'm a lot*

*faster. The police appeared focused on the food court, so it was easy enough to get to the car from the outside of the lot. Glad I got out while I did though; it looks like they are questioning every damn person leaving the mall building. I almost wish I had criminal inclinations; the city is relatively unprotected right now.*

*My eyes narrowed as I thought about that. I need to get them out of wherever they are being held as soon as possible. Once the police aren't so focused on the mall, they can put more security on the hospital, unless there is some kind of dedicated security force there.*

*Speaking of which, what if they are sedated? I'm a strong guy, but Lance is BIG. The dude is about 6'6" and weighs a good 300 pounds. If I have to get rough, I might have to save Stephanie first and then have the two of us come back for him. Do comic book heroes ever get drugged? Damn, I should have read that crap more often. Lance was always the one so goo eyed over superheroes.*

## Chapter 4 – I'm Not Going Down

### Lance's Viewpoint

I came to, and realized something jolted me. *The fire's gone; I only feel a dull ache over most of my body. That was probably the impact from the huge fall. I'm hungry too, famished actually. I'm in the back of a car.*

I barely had time to look around before the doors on both sides opened up, and a couple of guys grabbed my arms. They dragged me out, but at this point, I didn't like what was happening. Someone grabbed my neck in a sleeper hold. My hands were stuck behind my back for a moment, and I felt a momentary restraint as I pulled my arms apart, then my hands were free. As soon as my feet hit the ground, I bunched my legs to push off and try to tumble this group of guys. Someone dressed in white dove at me right when I pushed, and I felt something sharp jab at my left bicep, but it didn't hurt.

Then I was airborne, along with the guy who had his arm around my neck. The other guys on my arms couldn't keep their grip and I slid out of their grasp. *It felt like wrestling with oil slathered on me. Wait, that'd be blood. Oh, crud, I'm flying through the air with someone attached to me, he's going to get squished on impact.*

The guy on my back screamed, and I think he tightened his elbow grip on my neck. It was hard to tell, because it didn't hurt or cut off airflow.

I twisted my body, hoping to get my body in the way of the ground. I caught a momentary glimpse of something in the air, and then my head impacted with a light pole. My only thought was to grab it and stop us, and I succeeded in hooking my right arm around the pole, causing us to twirl around it multiple times on the way down. I yelled, "Woohoo!" as we spun around. *Odd, my head doesn't hurt from banging into the pole.*

*Dude's got a death grip sleeper hold on my neck.* He didn't fly off while we spun around, although he screamed the entire time. There were cars at the bottom of the pole, and we spun around toward a SUV too fast. I extended my legs, hoping to reduce the shock as we hit. One leg smashed into the side of the SUV's door, the other went into the window, but the leg on the door slowed us down.

The window shattered loudly, the door side crumpled inward, and my gut slammed into the top of the vehicle frame, denting it slightly. Apart from the momentum, it felt like a weak punch, nothing



severe. The weight of the guy on my back doubled the strength of the impact, and I felt the frame at the top bend in further.

The guy dropped off me, and I tried to extricate myself from the window. Glancing down, I saw that the man, who was actually an officer, laid below me, and that stopped me from just flopping out to the ground. I grabbed the SUV's top and felt it dent in where I was gripping. *No wonder I hurt Stephanie, I'm bending car parts, though most cars aren't heavy metal these days. Wait, the glass isn't cutting me. It's making a mess out of my jeans though. Hey, I have cuffs on me, or at least I did. When did I break those apart?*

I dropped to the ground next to the officer. *Oops, I hurt a cop; this isn't going to be good.* I went down on one knee to check on my flight partner. He was stunned, but didn't look obviously injured. *Bet he pulled the shoulder of the arm he held me with though.* "Don't move, I'll get you some help." *Wait, I'm running from these guys. Darn it.*

I heard a bunch of footsteps as people ran over to the area, and as I stood up, a group of police aimed their weapons at me. A hospital doctor, nurse or some such was with them.

Quick internal assessment... I really didn't feel hurt, even the impact with the SUV had not hurt me. I glanced at my left bicep, and saw no fresh blood from being stabbed – *but then again, it didn't really feel like being stabbed by a needle or knife.* In fact, apart from that general soreness I had felt earlier, I hadn't felt injured since waking up.

I could have run, but that would have left Stephanie here somewhere. I could fight, and rescue her, but I knew for certain that she had a broken shoulder and arm just from me. I sighed. *Heroes don't run. Not to mention, I want to get into the government's H.E.R.O. system, and fighting them now would probably prevent that. Mom always taught me to be the good guy, be a hero if I get a chance, there aren't enough of them.*

I put my hands up at chest level, palms out in an attempt to look less threatening.

I said, "Sorry, guys, I didn't mean to fly like that, and waking up to people manhandling me wasn't conducive to being calm."

One of the officers in back talked on a cell phone. I got the sense that he was recanting the story of what just occurred to someone. He scowled, snapped the phone shut, and walked forward. "Put your guns down, guys. You, don't move. You aren't under arrest ... yet, but if you take any more actions, you'll be charged with everything from resisting arrest, battery, assaulting an officer, and anything else we can pull out of the book. Do you understand that? Are you willing to comply?"

Another officer, who had his revolver aimed at me said, "What are you talking about? This guy almost killed Johnson." Cell phone

man stepped up and whispered something in the guy's ear. I caught the word "armored" when he gestured toward me, and the words "fight" and "brick." The second officer lowered his weapon, but didn't put it away. He didn't look happy.

I doubted that I could hide the shock on my face. I said, "Yes, sir. I'll comply, though can we get some assistance for the officer here? He might have some internal injuries from the impact." *Never hurts to show concern for a downed officer, and I really was concerned about him.*

Cell phone officer said, "My name's Thompson, what's yours?"

I replied, "Lance, Lance Casey." Thompson was a small guy, perhaps 5'6" tall, and wiry. Glasses and a hawk nose completed the look. *He doesn't look hostile at me right now though, that's good.*

"Well, Lance, come with me. You two and the nurse help Johnson. Tim, you're with me." Tim turned out to be the last officer.

The nurse looked meaningfully at Thompson, and showed him something in her hand just out of my sight behind her leg. Thompson shook his head, and motioned me to follow him.

Keeping her on the right side, I walked around the far left side of the officers to follow Thompson. She held her right hand behind her leg and watched me as she headed over to Johnson. *Yeah, she's got a needle or something in her hand, I'm sure of it.*

We walked toward the building, Thompson, Officer Tim and I. Tim was uncomfortable, to say the least, and kept his hand on his pistol. The safety strap was off. As we walked I said, "Wait, I need to find out how Stephanie is doing, she was injured when we were at a house near the mall."

Thompson said, "First, you aren't in a position to demand anything. Second, we've been out here dealing with you since you've arrived, so we don't know any more than you do. I know that a woman was brought in a second squad car, and that's it right now. This place is a madhouse tonight."

## Chapter 5 – Cars and Bugs

### Lance's Viewpoint

We almost reached the building when a squad car tore into the parking lot toward us. The top of the car had been dented upward severely ... from the inside. A struggle was going on inside it, and the vehicle showed no signs of slowing down. Tonight was a busy night at the emergency entrance, and there was no way the car would avoid plowing into people, from civilians to nurses to policemen.

*You're armored, and super strong. Now's as good a time to die trying to save people as any other.* I sprinted out in front of people toward the car.

I heard from behind me “Hey, you're under arrest!” A gunshot went off and I felt an impact in my right shoulder blade. It didn't even hurt. *Kind of feels like someone just came up and poked me with their finger, actually.* I ignored it.

Something in the back seat of the car smashed through the safety barrier, and grabbed the neck of the officer driving the car. It pulled him back, halfway into the rear seat. The officer in the passenger seat unloaded his gun into the thing in the back seat.

I shifted into a blocking position, right foot out behind me, left arm up and ready to shoulder block the car. *This is going to hurt...*

Sure enough, the car skipped up over the curb and bounced toward me. I pushed my rear foot down hard for more pressure. The concrete crumbled underfoot, and my foot dug in. The squad car slammed into me, and the front of the car wrapped around me. Metal screeched horribly as the car hit, and it felt more like a running back plowed into me than a vehicle.

The car came to a sudden stop, and I stumbled backward, falling on my backside, due to my rear foot being embedded into the sidewalk. I felt jolted, but nothing really felt damaged or broken. *Hot dang!*

The left rear door of the squad car flung off the vehicle. It banged loudly as it bounced on the blacktop and into another vehicle. *What the heck is that?* Some kind of ... mutant ... crawled out of the car. It was a person gone horribly wrong. Big bug eyes, huge mandibles at the jaw, its skin was dark, and the arms ended in big pincers. *Wasn't there a movie about this?*

He, or it, screamed, looked around, and leapt at the people all standing there staring at it open mouthed. *Oh, crap, it's going to eat*

*somebody*. I scrambled to my feet, right when it grabbed a man, who was holding a woman with a bloody mouth and throat.

She screamed. *Oh. My. God. This is the mother of all screams*. It felt like someone cranked up a rock band's huge speaker system, then let loose a bloodcurdling scream of terror meant to be in a horror flick at the microphone. I felt the vibration through my bone structure. My vision actually blurred. Glass shards flew everywhere as every window in the area shook apart.

Bug man fell back, and all of us in the area dropped to the ground and clutched at our ears. My ears felt like they'd burst, and I now had a migraine headache.

Hands at my ears, I looked around while grimacing. Half the people were unconscious. Screamer woman clutched at her man. *I'm guessing that's her husband. Nice move lady, you took him out too*. Bug man frothed at the mouth. He looked pissed off. Glass lay all over the ground and people.

*He's not going to flee, he's angry. He's going to hurt people here if someone doesn't knock him out, and if he doesn't hurt people, miss screamer will do it. I've got to take him out*.

I rolled to my feet, stumbling a bit. The eardrum damage threw off my sense of balance. Bug man noticed the movement, and must have figured I was a threat, because he stumbled toward me in a stance much like a drunken predator.

I waited until he was almost on me, and then I leapt upward at him as I tackled him. He grabbed at me with the pincers, and caught my right forearm with his left. As I smashed into him, he bit my right shoulder. Those must have been quite the mandibles, they tore into the shoulder, but my leap carried us much farther than I expected.

We flew through the air. *What the heck, does my super name have to be Jumping Jack or something?* My angle took us toward the hospital, and we smashed into a window, handily going through it. *Must have gone some distance, all the nearby windows were shattered*.

We landed on a TV, bounced to the floor, and banged into the bed frame before we stopped. *That didn't hurt either; I'm beginning to enjoy this superhero stuff*. An older lady on the room's bed screamed at us ... about interrupting her TV show? *Lady, we're in a super fight right now, step off...*

Bouncing around the room caused us to lose our grip on each other and we both scrambled to our feet. My inner ear wasn't working with me and I fell over. I grabbed for support and crushed a small chair as I landed. He dove at me, and I kicked up at him as he did. I landed the blow, but he grabbed hold of my foot, and tore off the shoe as my kick tossed him backward. I yelled, "Hey! That was a perfectly

good, well, bloodied shoe you jerk!” It was a good kick. He went airborne, and rocked the door and frame from the impact against it.

He stood there while stunned for a few seconds, and I successfully scrambled to my feet. I rushed him, using the extra force of the rush to add strength to a gut punch. The darn inner ear kept me from running straight and I caught him on the right side of the abdomen.

His body was armored; some kind of chitin covered his torso. My fist went through the chitin and into the meaty flesh behind it. It made a loud crunching sound as my fist went through. The door behind him exploded from the force, and he was propelled through it and the hallway beyond, into the wall on the far side. An orderly stopped in the hallway, just before he flew past her. I was positive she got a case of whiplash as she watched him fly across the hallway in front of her.

My punch embedded him in the far wall at an odd angle, due to the spin the off center punch caused. The mandibles especially appeared to be giving him trouble in extricating himself.

I climbed through the doorway, and noticed that my right arm wasn't working well. He worked at pulling his head out of the wall when I stumbled over to him. *Nice for me, like most people, he worked at getting his head out first.*

I grabbed his hair with my left hand, shoved his head down and plowed my knee upward into his head. I felt a mandible snap upon impact. His head jerked, but my arm strength was good enough to keep him pretty much where he was. His head absorbed almost all the concussive force of my leg. He slumped to the ground, and I was pretty sure I had broken something other than his mandible.

He bled from his face, and one mandible now hung at an odd angle. I checked his pulse, and shook my head as my vision blurred up.

I stood up, blood pounded through my system. My entire right arm felt numb, as did my shoulder and part of my chest at this point. The corridor spun. *It has to be poison.*

I looked at the orderly and slurred, “Aaar youu all riight?” The room blurred even more.

“Poison, hee bit mee.” I pointed at my shoulder, and felt the room spin faster. *Car doesn't kill me, but poison will? This sucks.*

I stumbled down the hallway, when the floor rushed up at my face. Everything went black.

## Chapter 6 – Time to Act

### Rael's Viewpoint

It didn't take long to get home. I threw the bloody clothes in the washer right away and started a cycle. I hoped some of that blood would come out. I flicked on the news to try to catch some useful information while I cleaned up and changed.

Then, I caught my image in the mirror. My iris had become slit, and the color was totally different. They were now green and the pupil was catlike. Some of the light reflected from them, causing a glowing look, as though I had a colored light behind each eye. *Now I understand why I see better in darker areas.*

The nose looked normal, but my mouth was wrong. I had to stare at my image in the mirror for a minute before I realized my mouth was ... wider. I grinned, and ... wow. I had fangs – the upper and lower canine teeth were far longer and larger at the base as well. Damn sharp now too. My jaws opened wider. *That's just strange. Well, it's far better than being a wolfman; I still look human. More catlike than wolflike though.*

*I'm damn glad that pain is gone. Hub, my muscles are larger.* I was still very well defined, and nothing like a body builder, but I liked it. The feet appeared normal and my hair the same. No noticeable changes elsewhere. *Bummer.* Wait, the ears were different. The shape was slightly different, as in the cone area to direct sound, and they had a slight tip to the rear top now. I wasn't up on my biology, so I wasn't sure what that would do yet.

I quickly cleaned up and changed. *Note to self; claws cut yourself.* These babies were not retractable, like a cat's claws. For that matter, they were not like any animal's claws that I was aware of. The entire fingertip was hardened and sharpened into a point, with the lower joint down to the tip now being made of some dark brownish black material. They actually reminded me of what you would see on a picture of a demon or devil. Strong, very strong material – this was not bone, and I didn't have a nail on top of it.

*I don't want to alert anyone at a hospital until I'm ready to break them out, so I'm not sure I want to keep these babies out in the open, they look downright wicked.*

I heard the news talk about the meteor shower while I cleaned up, and discovered that there were other “trouble” spots in the city. New supers that were not in control of themselves were being brought

to Iron Cross General Hospital. One guy apparently created the look of the sun around himself, and let out a lash of fire that set his home on fire.

*I'm damn sure I won't be able just to walk around a secured facility, so I'm hoping that there are still windows, and tall buildings nearby. I changed, and grabbed a pair of binoculars, plus a pair of metal cutters. Yeah, these babies ought to make fast work of most restraints. After a moment's thought, I picked up a sledgehammer to bring along as well. Energy booster pills as well. If either Lance or Stephanie were sedated, hopefully the pills would counteract whatever my friends had been given.*

*Wait a second; now that I've cleaned up, I realize my sense of smell is far more acute. That could help me out. So, that's why I could smell different people's blood so clearly. I'll have to remember to avoid bloodying my own nose when I want to smell something.*

I grabbed a shirt from Lance's dirty laundry basket and put it in a plastic baggie. I couldn't believe how well I could smell, well, Lance. I looked around the living room, but couldn't think of anything here that would work for Stephanie. *Screw it; I'll stop by her house. Hey, I could pick up a change of clothes for her as well, she'd like that, and it'd give me a reason to, ah, look at her things.*

I brought a change of clothing for Lance and I threw in the car as well. *I know Lance; he'd give me an inquiring look, and raise an eyebrow at me if I brought Steph some clothes, but forget him.*

Before I left the house, I tried scratching the concrete on the driveway. The claw dug in easily. Typing would be a bitch without a soft fingertip though. I shook my head and got into the car.

I drove over to Stephanie's house. It was nighttime, so it was easy to nab her hidden key to let myself in. *My car's been here many times before, so that shouldn't raise any suspicion.*

After heading into the house, I looked for her clothes hamper. I smelled a few articles of clothing, but focused on shirts, because if I had to give her a pair of underwear back and explain that I took it to smell and track her down with, I would probably hear a mouthful. Though both seemed to retain her scent pretty well...

I selected a shirt and put it into a plastic bag. *Come to think of it, her entire place smells distinctly of her. Is this what dogs smell? Maybe that'd give me a reason to smell her... No, not going down that road, she'd club me, though I'm sure I'd like it.*

I spent a few minutes going through her drawers, and wished I had more time to lounge around in there. I felt pretty dirty minded going through her clothing, and grinned at the thought. I picked out some skimpy panties, a hopefully tight shirt, some pants and socks, and a pair of tennies. I grinned wickedly.

I threw the fresh clothing bag in the trunk. I headed out then, and drove quickly to the hospital. I parked near a side entrance, parking the car so I could make a fast escape if I had to carry Stephanie, *or in Lance's case, drag him.*

The place was **busy**. The emergency exit had a lot of squad cars already in the area. The police had a heavy presence; it would make this more ... interesting. Smoke came out of one smashed up police car right in front of the entrance. I wondered if a fight had broken out that could provide me with some chaos to work with.

I got this crazy idea of tying a super long rope to me so I could just rappel and run along each level to look in the windows. Doubt it'd work, but I needed to come up with something clever.

*Hmm, I could mug a cop and temporarily use his uniform, but that might cause more trouble later on. I could do the same to a hospital worker. I'm not good enough with computers to try to back into one ... unless I force someone else to log on, and do a search for one of their names.*

I figured I'd try the smell route, being as internal rooms wouldn't have windows. The sledgehammer I left in the car, that'd attract too much attention, same with the binocs. I took the paper bag that contained the plastic bags of the worn clothing with me, and put the metal cutters in the paper bag. I took a deep breath of her shirt before I closed it back up, hoping to memorize her scent.

I was about to take a side entrance when I realized that I'm not doing anything illegal ... yet, and the emergency entrance was the one most likely for her to have gone through if she were unconscious. It would also give me a chance to see what was going on up front. I concealed the claws as much as possible by making a fist shape. The paper bag helped a lot on the left hand.

I walked fast, around to the front entrance, and found a number of police officers standing around a squad car. The engine smoked slightly, and the front looked like the driver plowed into a tree, except there was no tree. None of the windows remained in the car. *I'm surprised they haven't called in a fire truck.* The sidewalk was ripped up, and a spattering of blood lay here and there all over the concrete. I got a strong whiff of Lance's scent in the area. *Did he already get into a fight? Holy shit, did he bash up the roof of this cop car and bust out the door? Great, the shit's going to hit the fan now. I might as well not hold back at this point.*

The windows within thirty or forty feet of the entrance were all shattered. A custodian still worked at cleaning up the glass around the emergency room entrance. I could see a fight damaging a few of them, but every one of them was destroyed. *Very strange.*

I smelled Stephanie's scent as well, but it was faint, confused with the smell of so much sweat and blood. *Damn.* I headed into the



emergency room's waiting area; the place was busy. I went up to the counter, and looked at one of the counter ladies. She was a big woman, real big. Sandy brown hair puffed out like some kind of mane. *Almost scary looking.* She studiously ignored me until she happened to glance up and caught sight of my eyes. Then, her jaw dropped and she stared at me.

"I'm here to check on my sister, Stephanie Quinn. She came in a little while ago."

She looked like she debated telling me to go wait in a line or something, so I stole a line from Lance, "Please, I'm really concerned, and our Dad lives in Boston, so I'm the only one she has around here." *Damn, I'm not smooth enough. I should have brought chocolate or something to try to bribe someone in this situation. I'm too used to intimidating people. Bah, intimidation works often enough, don't kid yourself.*

She looked briefly appeased, did some quick typing, and said, "I'm sorry, she's in the quarantined area due to the meteor shower, and is listed as being allowed No Visitors."

I asked, "Can I get the name of her doctor so I can at least find out her condition?"

"Dr. Antais is her physician, but he's bound to be extremely busy tonight with all the activity." She waved at all the people in the emergency room. "He's also probably staying with patients in the quarantined area and you won't be allowed in there."

I thanked her and wandered for a moment, while I tried to think of what to do next. I overheard some guys talking about how this huge guy charged the police car, and then the 'scream of doom' that shattered every window and laid out every person nearby. He just mentioned the bug man attack on the big guy right out in front of the entrance when I realized he might be talking about Lance.

I couldn't help myself. I needed information. I stepped over to the speaker. He looked like a nerd: glasses, rumpled hair, and he wore ill fitted clothing. His t-shirt had a slogan of some kind that stated "THAC0."

I caught his attention with my right ... claw. His eyes focused on the claw for a few seconds, and then moved up to my face. I gave him a wide smile, and made sure my canine fangs were easily visible. He looked properly unnerved.

"What was the big guy wearing, and what did he look like?"

"He was huge, definitely a super. Way over six feet tall, built bigger than a pro wrestler. His costume was body fitting on the upper body, although I think he wore dark jeans. He was all wet and his face and arms were bloody. Darker hair, and that's about all I got a good look of. There were people in the way, and then the bug man attacked

him.”

“Did this guy bust out of the police vehicle?”

“No, the bug guy busted out of the squad car, and injured two officers that brought him here. The big guy is the one that stopped the car from hitting the hospital.”

A guy a few seats down piped up, “Don't forget the cop that yelled that he was under arrest, and shot the super. They were saying that the bullet didn't even faze him.”

I asked, “The bug guy got shot?”

“No, the big guy got shot.” *Big guy, bug guy, clarify things, book head.*

He continued, “The police are really twitchy tonight. I've already seen some crazy looking people brought in tonight, and at least a dozen injured officers have been brought in just in the last hour. Hell, the news is talking about a bomber at Green Park Mall just an hour or so ago.”

*That makes some sense, confusing a super with a bomber. I hope they don't start treating that as a terrorist action though; they'll dig more, and call in heavier hitters.* “So where are the big guy and the bug guy?”

“Dunno. The big guy grabbed him and leaped out of the crowd out there right after the woman screamed and destroyed the windows.”

*Well, that changes a lot. Lance wasn't being arrested or detained after all. Not only that, but it sounds like he got away. I'll ask the police later what happened with him; see if they'll help me out. Not yet though, in case he's not on good terms with them.*

## Chapter 7 – Rael Stromm, Superspy

### Rael's Viewpoint

Several police officers helped a woman up onto a stretcher just outside the doors. She was as fit as a volleyball athlete was, yet it appeared as though they had problems with her weight. A nurse went to the stretcher to check the patient over. The woman had a lot of blood on her clothes, but what really stood out was the mirror-like silver skin. The nurse and an officer rushed the woman off into the hospital, heading through a double door.

*Wait a second; she's got to be a super, they are likely to bring her to the so-called quarantined area.* I double-timed it after them, and the place was busy enough that no one challenged me. *Rock on, Rael Stromm, superspy.*

They arrived in a secondary area where they worked on emergency treatment of some people, and began cutting part of her clothing off. Then, I caught a familiar scent. I quickly opened the paper bag, the one with Stephanie's shirt, and took a deep breath. I wrapped that back up and started trying to follow the scent.

I didn't get more than twenty feet when I heard the nurse say she couldn't get a needle in. I debated walking away, but here was someone in trouble. *Ah, shit. Dad said to help people out, it builds good karma. But I need to help Stephanie, yet if this chick doesn't get some help...*

I sighed and walked over to them; they both glanced up at me. The nurse was a middle-aged woman, curly brown hair, kind face, looked to stay in decent shape. Her nametag said "Kim." She looked a little wore down, as though she'd been running on high gear for hours, possibly on top of a long shift. The cop was also middle aged, had a mustache and a stocky build, but wasn't really overweight. His brown hair was graying.

They did a double-take when they saw my face. "Let me try to break through the metal skin on the inner elbow, and you try the needle."

The nurse said, "You aren't supposed to be in here, you'll need to leave, now."

I lied through my now-pointy teeth, "They asked me to help out in the quarantined area; with so many officers being injured they wanted a few of us on hand to help out." They picked up immediately on whom the "us" referred to.

The fates smiled upon me. The officer said, "Humph, well that's

a damn good idea. I thought they had everyone on the H.E.R.O. program out helping at the damage scenes though."

I said, "I'm not in it yet. I'm just volunteering for now until I can get in. Shouldn't we focus on her now though?" *Yes, yes, yes! I might just have an IN on this area.*

The nurse said, "Yeah, but I can't find a pulse in the arm. Without that, it won't help to cut through the metal, and we aren't sure how deep the metal goes. The neck would work, but..."

I replied, "But that's more dangerous. What's the alternative? Let her die or something? So I cut her neck, and we try to avoid the jugular..." *Did I just say that? AVOID the jugular? Man, I usually think to hit vital points.*

I made sure the nurse was ready, held down the metal girl's head, and then carefully tried to make a cut down along the neck where the nurse indicated. It made an awful screeching noise, and I'm sure that we got a bunch of nasty looks.

All the while, the metal girl squirmed in pain, and I wondered if she was going through the same fire pain I did. *Why isn't her transformation done? Mine only took a short while. At least it seemed that way to me.* I scratched the metal on her neck repeatedly, wearing away at the metal until a small amount of blood welled up. The nurse quickly jabbed in the needle and administered the drug. *What do you know; claws aren't just killing apparatus after all.*

The girl slumped down to the table. The nurse said, "She looks like she's going through the initial changes, we've had a bunch of them tonight." She did a quick exam of the girl's body, and didn't find any noticeable damage anywhere else on her body. Especially difficult when the skin appeared to be made of metal, and was uniform in color everywhere. The metal blocked the view of potential bruises that would indicate sub dermal damage.

*Wow, metal girl's hot.* It was as if they poured silver over a stripper's body. Her hair was black, still non-metal. She must have weighed a lot, because Kim had problems even lifting the woman's metal arm. I helped, but the arm felt light to me.

She interrupted my thinking. "They appear to change, and heal rapidly at the beginning, so it will be more useful bringing her to a room to see if anything severe occurs rather than try to get through this." She tapped her fingertip on the girl's arm.

I again noticed her nametag said Kim on it, and I asked, "Kim is it? You want help bringing her to a room? I'd imagine you guys want every officer on hand up front."

The officer agreed, and said to Kim, "If you have this under control?" The nurse nodded, and the officer walked back to the front

area. She put a cover over the girl, and brought the clothes she cut off to a bin. I stuck with her to avoid anyone else asking questions of me, and stopped at the trash bin. I smelled something..

Stephanie ... I smelled her. *Wait ... that means they cut off her clothes here as well and probably threw them in the hamper. I'm in the right place, now to get to the quarantined area to try to find her.*

Kim looked at me strangely. My mind raced, and I pointed at my nose. "Acute smell, there's a lot of blood and sweat on the clothes in here. It's distracting"

She nodded, still watching me closely, and headed back to the metal girl. She motioned for me to grab one end and push, and she pulled as we headed further into the section. Stealing looks at metal girl, I considered the possibility of carrying out Stephanie in one arm and the metal girl in the other. *Hell, you could probably drag her out by her hair. Bouncing that metal body around isn't likely to hurt her.*

We took an elevator, headed up several levels, and exited onto the new level. The reception area had four security guards. *Wait, these aren't police, they are private security, armed with pistols and rods.*

I kept my hands around the cart push bar, and kept my eyes lowered and mostly shut, so the slit eyes weren't obvious. The nurse pulled us to the nurse's station, and asked for an open room. She took a quick look in the purse of the metal girl, and filled out a slip with the personal information, handed it to the woman at the station, and pulled us toward the room we'd been directed to.

I helped her get the girl onto the bed; she seemed extremely light for being made of metal, and yet the thump when her arm fell onto the rail told me she weighed a lot.

While Kim did a final check on her, I debated my options. *I could just try walking down the hall, but there are security guards spaced out at regular intervals of these rooms. I could ask the nurse just to walk me down each corridor to see if the security needs my help, but then she might wonder if I'd truly been 'assigned' here. I could confess to her, but that might not go well either. Damn it. What would a comic book hero do? Just bash in to the villain, I'd think.*

I glanced at the nurse, and realized she had been watching me. *Shit. Was I that obvious?* I put my hand down; it turned out I'd been running it through my hair as I considered the options.

Kim said, "You weren't really asked to help out here, were you?"

*Damn. She's smart, and observant.* I answered, "Yes, and no. The hospital and police didn't ask me to help, but there really are a lot of police injured tonight, and I figured you could use the help. But ... I'm really here because a friend of mine was brought up here, and I need to see how she's doing."

Her eyes were large as she asked, "Are you going to hurt me?"

I was surprised, and honestly answered, "Of course not. I was just trying to think of how to find her without having a problem with security."

She stared at me for a long time, debating.

I sighed. "Kim, listen, that's my best friend being pretty much held hostage here. She wasn't brought here willingly. I'm going to do quite literally anything I need to, in order to get to her. I want to do this all friendly like, but if I have to go **through** those guards to find my friend, I'm going to do it. I care about her that much. Does that make sense to you?"

She still looked dubious, but I thought appealing to the heroic guy figure worked for her. I continued, "I'd really love to just get to her room and be with her. If she is going through the same thing I did when I ... changed ... I'd like to be there to hold her hand." *I must be channeling my inner Lance; I barely recognize the words coming out of my own mouth. God, I sound like such a suck up.*

"What is your friend's name?"

"Stephanie Quinn, two n's."

"All right, you follow me to the station, stay outside the desk area itself. I'll see if she's in the computer, and bring you to her room. If someone comes after me for helping you, I'm going to tell them you threatened me. We'll stop at a few rooms before hers, so as to not attract attention if her room is too far away."

"Fair enough, and thank you."

"What's in the bag?"

I almost forgot I'd been holding it. I said, "A shirt of hers, and metal cutters in case I needed to rescue her."

"You really would break her out of here, possibly hurting others in the process, and endanger her?"

"Yes. Why are all the new supers being kept in a 'secure' area? Why so many guards? Why sedate them all, like you did this girl? When I changed, the pain was immense, but it went away after a little while."

"Blasters, mutants, and psychics. A new super that can't control their power can do a lot of damage to others just by getting angry. Others become ... monsters. They just attack others; some even try to eat people. And every new super being brought in tends to be in pain for a good hour or more. That's a 'little while' to you?"

*Damn ... monsters? Blasters. That would be like Hellschok, he blasts lightning from his hands.*

"Err, no. I thought it was only a few minutes. Well, I'm pretty normal, barring the odd hands, eyes and teeth. My friend Lance just changed, and people downstairs are talking about him stopping some

mutant bug guy. That's two out of three of my friends that have changed tonight, and we aren't attacking people."

"But you are willing to."

I shook my head. "No, I was willing to before, but not just to fight with people, or start a problem. Certainly not to eat someone. I would have done it to protect or save a friend. Well, anyone really, but especially a friend."

"Not to sound negative, but you've got the characteristics of the mutants, or monsters. The claws and teeth. Most of those that look similar to you get ... bloodthirsty. You might be more dangerous to others than you think you are."

*Great, I might have an inner demon. Guess I'll have to watch my anger management issues.*

She asked, "What's your name?"

"Rael."

She edged past me to the door, opened it, and walked out. I watched her, and after a moment, followed. She walked around the counter to the empty seat at the nurse's station. I figured I ought to play up the role I'm playing here, and headed over to the security guard nearest me.

I nodded to him. He watched me closely. He noticed the claws and eyes after all. I could see the look in his eyes change to one of caution.

I said, "Man, all these people changing, it's making it a hell of a night, huh?"

"Yeah. Why are you up here?"

*Damn, talk about being blunt.* "Police are dropping like flies out there; they don't have the personnel to deal with this wide of an outbreak. They thought it would help having one of us up here in case a freak goes crazy. No use getting more people hurt up here."

"We're equipped for it. So long as the docs keep the freaks drugged up, it's all under control. We really don't need ... **you** ... up here."

*Nice to know they aren't biased, pfab. I'll have to keep that in mind – they sound more likely to attack on sight than to talk. Fine by me, it's your ass, jerkoff.*

## Chapter 8 – Mutant Breakdown

### Rael's Viewpoint

Kim finished her computer work, and said, “Rael, you're with me on this round.”

I headed over to her; she walked down the hallway a few doors, and entered a room. I followed, and she checked the chart of the “patient.” She examined the IV and equipment, made a note on the chart, and headed back out.

“The next one's a mu ... unusual.” She glanced at me, and quickly away when she caught her mistake. A pair of security guards watched me closely as we passed them in the hallway. *I suppose there isn't anything else worth really looking at here, but I feel like starting something. Jerks are annoying me.*

A few doors down the hall we headed up to another door. Just one more door down, another pair of guards also watched me, as I entered the room. This guy was a mess. His jaw was longer, and monstrous fangs actually came out of his mouth and went up and down a good half inch outside the mouth. His hair had mostly fallen out, and it lay in clumps on the pillow, with perhaps half of it still on the scalp. Spikes came out of the scalp, not sharp enough to tear up the pillow, but odd looking. The knuckles and elbows had short spikes coming out of them.

Kim says “Good timing to check on him, his vitals are above normal. I'll adjust the drip.” She tweaked a small knob on the bag of liquid next to the bed.

*I wonder why I've seen so little information on these, or **we** ... mutant supers. I'd think they'd be all over the news if they are as wild as Kim is claiming. Also useful to know which drip bag has the sedative...*

Kim jotted down some notes on the chart, and headed back out. I kept an eye on the guy as I went to the door, and exited.

“This one next,” Kim said. She gestured toward the door after the guard. *Wait, where'd the other guard go?*

The remaining guard rested his hand on his handgun; the safety strap was off. “Why aren't you wearing a hospital uniform?”

Kim stopped, looked at me, and said, “Rael was sent here to assist in case of problems. I just brought up a new super, and he's doing my rounds with me.”

“Still doesn't explain why he isn't wearing a uniform.”



Annoyance must have flashed across my face, and I clenched my fist ... clawing myself slightly. *Ouch. Watch yourself, Rael.*

The door we were about to enter opened, and the other security guard exited. I got a strong scent of Stephanie.

The first guard said, "What's wrong with you, **Rael?**"

*Crap, I need poker lessons to maintain better facial control. They already know I'm a super, might as well play on it.* "Nothing, I just have a strong sense of smell."

The guard that just left the room said, "What? I didn't cut one."

I rolled my eyes, "No, I'm not smelling you."

"Oh, you must smell the hot ... err, super in there."

He pulled his hand out of his pocket; I caught the sight of some strands of brunette hair coming out of it.

I pointed at his pocket, "What the hell are you doing with her hair in your pocket?"

"I, what? Shit. She's losing it anyway, and it'd just get thrown away. I'm not even sure why I grabbed some."

Kim got a really, really pissed off look on her face, and stormed into the room. I figured I better stick with her, or I'd end up maiming this guy. I glared at him as I walked by.

Sure enough, it was Stephanie on the bed. I walked over to the top of the bed to see what the guy had done to her. Her hair was a mix of shiny metallic gold and brown. Kim walked around to the far side, and pulled some of the brown hair off the pillow.

"Oh, he's right. This isn't too unusual. Her hair is being replaced with the new color and texture. Kind of like your fingers. Creepy to take some of it, though."

I'd have agreed with her, but I was distracted by the smell. Stephanie smelled really, really damn good. I couldn't help but inhale deeply. It was almost intoxicating. Then I noticed I had leaned over her head, and had been about to dig my face into her new, golden hair. I stood up abruptly and blinked a few times.

Kim watched me closely, with her head cocked to the side slightly. She leaned over and sniffed. "Wow, she really does smell good. I wouldn't think it's perfume, they've washed off the blood and such. New hair won't have any shampoo or conditioner on it yet."

I blinked a few times, and tried to clear my thoughts. "Yeah, it must be the changes to my nose, she's distracting. Is she okay?"

Kim looked at the chart, then the vitals on the screens. "She had a broken right shoulder and left humerus when she was first brought in. I don't see any bruising now; she must have healed the wounds. The vitals look good."

I looked closer at the new hair. It really was pure golden, not

just blonde. *Interesting.*

*My sense of smell is better, or more acute, but why does she smell like this? Wait a second...* I opened the bag with the shirts, opened up the plastic bag with Stephanie's shirt, and smelled it again. It was almost the same, but somehow different. Her shirt didn't have this intoxicating scent that just made me want to put my nose to her hair and skin and breathe deeply. *Maybe she was sweating in the shirt? Something's different. It can't just be my sense of smell, can it? That, I could test.*

## Chapter 9 – Bloodthirst

### Rael's Viewpoint

I studied Kim's face for a moment, and asked, "Do you mind if I test my nose on you? I'd like to see if this is me, or something with her." I gestured toward my sleeping friend.

Kim gave me a suspicious look, but said, "Ooo-kay, but she does smell good even to me. Much better, or something more than most people."

I walked around to the other side of the bed and came up behind Kim. She stayed facing the bed, but turned her head slightly to keep track of my movement.

Without touching her with my hands, I slowly lowered my nose to her hair and neck. While she was distracted, I used the opportunity to reach over and turn off the drip on the meds going into Stephanie. *Might as well kill two birds with one stone.*

When my nose was actually in her hair, and just about touching her neck I took a deep breath. *Wow, this feels pretty intimate.* I could smell a faint touch of perfume, her deodorant, the shampoo or conditioner she must have used, and the scent of her skin. She'd been sweating slightly from all the running around she'd done tonight. Kim didn't smell intoxicating to me, but she did smell good, in an odd way that I couldn't put my finger on.

I could smell her blood under the skin. I realized I was **so** hungry. I hadn't gotten a chance to eat since midday, and it was late in the evening now. My stomach rumbled loudly as I ran my nose across her neckline. Her skin tasted good as I licked her neck. My hands slid across her upper arms. *They feel soft in my hands.*

My teeth brushed across her skin as I licked, I could feel how tense she was in the arms and shoulders.

My prey suddenly screamed, and I jerked my head back, startled. I realized I was holding her arms and released her. The taste of blood was on my teeth as I stumbled backward. It's as if I came out of a thick fog, my brain wasn't thinking clearly.

The door burst open and one of the security guards barged in the room. I stared at Kim's neck, there were a pair of thin red lines on her collarbone area, but nothing appeared deep. She fell back against the bed, and looked at me with a horrified expression on her face.

The security guard must have seen the blood on her shoulder,

and my position, because he immediately raised his pistol toward me. Everyone moved in slow motion. I raised my hands in the air toward her to show her I meant no harm. She scrambled onto the bed in an attempt to get away from me, shifting the entire bed frame.

I forgot about the look of the claws until I saw them in front of me. They actually looked more like a threat, than the non-threatening sign I meant to portray. The guard fired the gun. My head whipped toward the sound, and everything cranked up into high speed. The bullet slammed into my chest just below the left collarbone. My left shoulder jerked back slightly from it, and I felt a rush of adrenaline like I had never felt before.

I bared my fangs and growled as I rushed toward my new aggressor. He fired again; the bullet caught me in my right abdomen. It slowed me down slightly, but not much. *Not too much pain is coming from the wounds, adrenaline must be reducing it.*

I hit him with a snap kick, and it threw him back into the hallway. The other security guard had just come up behind him, and provided a nice cushion. They both fell back into the hallway. I heard the shouts of other guards out in the hall.

I looked at Kim and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." Another shot went off, and this one hit me below the left collarbone. "Damn it all, come **on**!" *Shit, I've been shot three times already, though I must have some kind of armor or something. They don't hurt nearly as much as I'd expect.*

I dodged to the right, toward the bed and Kim, to get out of the direct line of sight of the two downed guards. I had enough of being a standing target.

The sound of wood smashing came from out in the hallway, and gunfire started up. An animal screamed, although it could be human ... or mutant. Then, the gunfire started up in earnest, and men screamed in pain.

*One of the other mutants is awake. More than awake, it sounds like it's tearing into the guards. Do I stay with Stephanie and Kim, or head out to fight it, and risk the guards trying to gun me down at the same time? Men might be dying out there; I need to help them.*

I sighed, looked at Kim and said, "Hide, one of them is loose."  
"You've been shot."

"It doesn't hurt." *Too badly.* "I'll see if I can stop the mutant before they hurt too many other people."

I headed out the door. *At least most of my fingers and palms work as normal and could use things like doorknobs.* Then it struck me. *I actually get to go all out on something.* A wicked grin crossed my face. *Man, I hope these bullet wounds don't slow me down too much...*

There were four guards on the ground already; two more came

from well down the corridor. The two outside my door were changing their clips now. They glanced up at me, one of them said, "Shit."

The mutant was the one we had just checked on a few minutes ago. He roared and rushed at us.

"I'm going to help you." I said to the guard. Then I rushed at the mutant, but slowed as he neared me. I let him throw a swing at me, and grabbed his arm as he did. I used his own momentum to throw him behind me against the sidewall. He gouged into the drywall and stumbled. I noticed he still wore the arm straps from the bed. *He must have bent the metal frame of the bed to get loose.*

I used the time to throw a side kick at him, but he blocked it with his left arm. *He's faster than he looks, damn strong too. I think I'm moving slower than I should be as well. Bet that's from the gunshot wounds. Sure enough, I was bleeding from my chest. Probably from the other gunshot wounds as well. Thanks much, assholes.*

He threw a wild swing with his right arm. I easily dodged it, swung upright and punched his underarm as the arm passed. It threw him off balance, but he didn't react like a normal person getting hit there. *Maybe he's armored, or just that hard to hurt.*

Before he could turn around, I kicked his right leg out from under him. He fell to the ground, but instead of rolling upright, he dove on one of the two guards near him on the floor. In one relatively smooth motion, he ripped the arm off the guard.

I grabbed his left shoulder, and noticed that my claws dug into him reasonably easily. His attention immediately turned back to me.

He leapt to his feet, somewhat slowed by his right leg being injured. I punched him in the face as he rose, but he didn't fall back. Blood ran from his mouth, and I'd broken at least one of his teeth.

*He is definitely slower than me.* I punched him twice in the gut, but that didn't appear to do a lot of damage. *He's not taking a lot of damage from my punches; I need to use the claws more.*

He slammed a fist into my left shoulder, and I created a big dent in the drywall behind me. Those short spikes on his knuckles drove into the muscle. *It's only hurting a little, that's something at least. But, man, this guy hits **hard**. Every punch he lands knocks me back much more than I'm used to in a fight.*

He punched at me with his left hand, and I successfully caught his hand with my right hand. Again, the knuckle spikes drove into my palm. I clamped down on his hand, and my claws stabbed into his left hand. My claws were much longer than his spikes. He howled in pain, and pounded me again with his right fist and spikes. I grimaced in some pain at that one. *I've had people punch a prior wound before; this isn't nearly as bad as those times. Can't have armor, I'm taking damage from even the*

*smaller bits. I just don't feel it as bad.*

One of the guards unloaded into his back, but one of the bullets missed and hit the left side of my torso. The mutant slammed his right elbow into my chest, and the spike there drove into me as well. I felt trickles of blood running down the left side of my chest. The power of the elbow embedded me in the drywall, and I heard the supports behind it bend.

I slammed my right knee into his torso, and my claws embedded in his hand prevented him from moving much. I saw the second guard aim and fire, as the mutant power punched my head and shoulders back through the wall. I couldn't move much in this position. The top of my body extended back into Stephanie's room, my torso in the wall, and lower body was still in the hallway. *Not an ideal position to fight from. Been shot four times now, and have at least three blood wounds from his spikes. Shit. Big superhero I am.*

He leaned back to grab at a guard, so I twisted my claws in his hand. He growled and said, "Asshole, you're going to pay for that." *What the hell, he's been shot a good dozen times now, and he bitches about my claws?* He punched me in the gut with his right hand, which was generally what I had been hoping for, barring the stabbing pain when the spikes hit my stomach.

I grabbed his right bicep and crushed my claws into it, and then yanked him forward into the wall. He faceplanted in the drywall just above where my body went through. I wrapped my right leg around his left, and yelled "Take him down; I don't know if I can hold him here!"

I ripped my claws completely through his upper arm, so there was no chance of him freeing himself of me. I heard a veritable hailstorm of lead blasting off out in the hall. His body jerked a bunch of times. He still had plenty of life in him, though, and he kneed me in the privates. Spike there too. I coughed and choked while I tried to hold him with his face in the wall. This time, I tried to crush his leg between mine to prevent another knee. Another bullet impacted my right side. *Can't these guys hit from a few feet away?* I yelled, "Go to target practice, you miss too damn often!"

My right shoulder and arm hurt by now, as did my sides, right hand and groin. I had no idea how much blood I'd lost, but I saw spots, and it had gotten harder to breathe. I was certain by then that even without feeling the pain to its full effect, my body was being affected by the damage.

*This guy's barely slowing down. I can tell the claws are tearing up his hand and arm, but the bullets either aren't hurting him, or are doing minimal damage.*

I looked over at Kim, and choked out "Take her and run, we aren't winning this fight. You shouldn't die here..."

## Chapter 10 – Just a Small Shot

### Stephanie's Viewpoint

*I'm having a wild dream. I know it's a dream because guys with guns are shooting as if they are trying to win a record for most shots fired in a movie. The dream keeps shifting focus to various gunman's viewpoints.*

*I'm getting a horror film confused in the mix, because a woman in a hospital is watching this gunfight, all the while these guys with fangs, claws, spikes and whatnot are fighting in a melee. What a dumb location for such an outpouring of firepower. A hospital? Come on, why would so many security be at a hospital?*

*I even get the image of one of the monster men greeting the wall up close and personal with his face. That's a strange image to dream up.*

*The hero monster's viewpoint is interesting, if sad. The bad guy's got him in a bad spot; the so-called good guards are shooting him along with the bad monster. He seems to be losing.*

*Should be interesting seeing someone crazy show up to save the day. Perhaps this was an Arnold movie?*

I felt a sharp, stabbing sensation in my chest. My eyes flew open as my back arched and I tried to scream and suck in air at the same time. My heart kicked into overdrive, and thumped as if it wanted to leap out of my chest. My blood pounded in my veins.

Images flashed before my eyes of some guys fighting halfway through a wall, and security guards shot their weapons in many of the images as they flickered in and out of my vision. I shook my head to try to clear it of these images, but they continued appearing and disappearing.

Standing over me was a nurse. She pulled a big needle out of my chest. I tried to reach for it, but my hands were restrained at my sides.

Gunfire went off near me, and I heard something *or someone* growling or yelling something. A bunch of people were screaming “Shoot the mutant, we need more men!”

The nurse grabbed my face with both of her hands and yelled, “We can't fight the mutant. Rael is dying. You need to do your thing and stop the mutant!”

*What? Rael? What mutant? Where are all the people yelling? They sound like they are right next to me, but I only see the nurse. Why am I tied down? Wait, isn't this my dream? What the hell is going on with my eyesight? What are these flickering images?*

She slapped my face. “Focus! Help Rael!” She pointed across

the room, and sure enough, Rael laid half out of the wall, and he had blood on his chest. It stood out against the drywall dust nicely.

The nurse unbuckled the straps on my wrists. *Why is Rael in such bad shape? He's one of the best fighters I know of.*

She shook my leg briskly as she unbuckled my ankle. “Come ON! You're a super; you aren't a mutant or a brick, so you must be a blaster or a psychic. Focus on the bad mutant and **HURT HIM!**”

*Wait, that's right. We were at the mall. The guy exploded. Lance was there. Where's Lance now? He somehow crushed my shoulder, and now I'm waking up here. Oh, he brought me to the hospital. The nightmare hospital. Thanks, Lance!* I rolled my eyes.

She got the last restraint off, and I slid off the bed and rushed over to Rael. A hand had forced its way through the hole in the wall and grabbed him by the neck. He choked out “Come on Steph, either run, or hurt the bad guy, I'm seeing spots.”

His right shoulder jerked forward a little, and then the hand around his neck dragged him back through the hole completely. I opened the door just in time to see Rael be thrown across the hallway to smash into the other wall. None of the guards moved their mouths, yet I clearly heard them shouting to shoot the mutant, kill the mutant.

I got the strangest image in my mind of wanting to punch my spikes into the guards. *Kill the threat. Kill them all.* These damn annoying images kept appearing. I mentally screamed. **Stop appearing, damn it all!** Two guards near me grabbed their heads, blood ran from their noses and ears, and they fell over.

The image that wanted to kill everyone stayed overlapped on my vision of the mutant, as he leapt on a guard and punched him hard. Blood sprayed out from the massive head wound. *Oh my god. I'm seeing what he's thinking. What was the movie Rael and I watched with all the psychics? Scanners. Crud, what do I think of to attack him?*

*I can't think of anything, and he's hurt or killed three guards. The nurse said to blast them? I know I'm a super, so fine, I'll blast.*

I screamed, “**Stop attacking anyone!**” I really focused on the thought, and felt that tingling wave through my body that I felt in the food court. My skin, even my hair tingled and I got goose bumps.

Endorphins rushed through my body, down my neck and back. This happened several times, and all of the guards in the area lowered their guns and clubs. *Nooo! Not you guys!*

The big guy with spikes stopped with his arm cocked back. He was about to punch a guard, but looked momentarily confused.

*It's working!* “Lie down and stop everything! You will give up now!” The rush of endorphins happened again, and yet again. The tingling waves that crossed over my skin were very odd.



Mass confusion erupted as guards, the nurse, and the big super all attempted to get one another to cuff them. A few of the guards lay down and just cowered on the floor. The flickering images steadied, and separated into a dozen floating TVs showing what they were thinking about or looking at. Others I 'heard' thinking that they wanted to be arrested and taken into custody. The nurse and two of the guards wanted me to cuff them. It felt like an entire room full of people shouting at me at once.

I ignored them. I noticed on several of the images that Rael crawled up out of a prone position. Blood dripped from his mouth. I could barely see on my own with all of the images floating around. He gave the super a hostile, but tired look. Rael moved very slowly. *He's thinking that he needs to knock out the mutant while he still can, before the bullet wounds knock him out. Everyone needs to stop doing anything, just lie down and stop!*

This guy hurt my friend, along with many others quite badly. Some people in the hall appeared dead. He really pissed me off. The mutant, as Rael called him, looked at me, and the image overlapping my vision warped and distorted.

Everything got darker. He saw me with a strange light behind me. My image shimmered, golden hair shining, and my eyes had a horrible, terrifying glow about them. The darkness encompassed everything, and I grew and became more frightening. His chest clenched from the fear. There was nothing left, his life was over; this dark goddess commanded me to give up. Her visage was beautiful, yet unbelievably horrifying. She could command my death with a word.

*That's right, you asshole, feel the fear. You hurt Rael, but I don't want you to die, fear me ... grovel.*

The tingling happened again. I heard several horrified screams from other men, most of the images looked at me, and I progressively looked more and more frightening. *That works.* I slowly stepped toward the problem mutant, wanting him to feel so much fear he would be a quivering mass on the floor. Every time I thought it, a new wave of goose bumps spread across my body, and the images of myself all became larger and darker.

I looked like some kind of unearthly goddess. A cold white light shone behind me, and everything else was dark. My skin had become very pale, and my eyes had grown larger, glowing gold from within to match my backlit hair. I had a nimbus of light around me. It looked like a really neat horror flick.

I barely heard the footsteps behind me, or felt the power behind the slap on the side of my head, and everything went dark.

## Chapter 11 – I Think I'll Just Bleed Here

### Rael's Viewpoint

I lay on the ground, feeling the pain. Guards were sprawled all over the place. Stephanie stood in a hospital gown, hands clenched, and her face was screwed up in anger and concentration. She focused intently on the mutant. I had trouble focusing on anything much right now. The one thing that stood out was her smell; it was very strong to me, and pleasant. Like a fan blowing on roses at times, very strange.

*Good, figure out your power, and give him hell.*

I shook my head in an attempt to collect myself enough to crawl up to my knees. My body felt sore all over. Not massively painful, but nothing wanted to work well. *Wonder if there is a limb that the damn guards failed to shoot. Wait, my ass doesn't hurt – anyone want to shoot a butt cheek?*

I heard her say to give up, and I felt this ... urge to give up. *Holy crap, I ... I need to give myself up to a guard.* I finally crawled to my hands and knees, but didn't have the energy to get to a guard. I caught sight of the mutant, and thought that I really needed to kick his ass and knock him out before I keeled over.

The mutant stared at her, and the urge to get to a guard faded from me. His face was a mask of terror. He was really frightened. He curled up on the floor and continued to stare at her. I'd never seen someone truly in a moment of terror, but here this immensely tough guy looked like he was ready to die of fright.

I looked at Stephanie. *She's doing something all right.* Her eyes were golden, backlit, and she had this pissed off look on her face. *Hub, glad I didn't bring worn undies; I think that's the look I'd have gotten.* I kept getting this feeling that I should fear her, but she was my best friend, it just didn't seem right.

I smelled something in the air. The mutant actually wet himself. For that matter, every guard, and Kim all cowered against the walls and looked up at her. *Wonder what she's doing?*

I heard heavy footsteps approaching behind me, and I barely had the energy to shift so I could see down the hall. I recognized the guy; he was the head of the regional H.E.R.O. program for the government. *Captain something or other.* He was a big guy. *A brick super himself if I recall.* Likely 6'3" tall or so and heavily muscled. His skin had a slightly rough look to it, like aged, thick leather. He wore a business style suit, tie and all, no jacket though. He had sandy brown hair and blue eyes.

He noticed that everyone cowered from Stephanie, jogged up, and I could see the intent on his face. *Crap, no...*

He slapped her on the side of the head ... hard. She didn't even move until she was hit, she was focusing so hard. She collapsed to the floor. If I weren't so beat down I would have appreciated the view I got from the back of the hospital gown more.

I croaked out, "She was the good guy here. He was tearing us all up." I gestured toward the mutant.

He sighed loudly. "Damn. I'm Captain McCain, who are you?"

"Rael, but lock him down first. I think he's already killed some of the guards." I painfully shifted so I was sitting down, back against the wall. I felt something heavy roll down my chest, fall onto the floor, and rolled around on the floor, making a small metallic ringing sound.

*It's a bullet.* I looked at my chest, and one of the bullet wounds near my left collarbone sealed over. "Holy crap, a bullet came out."

Captain McCain looked over from restraining the mutant and narrowed his eyes. "Why were you shot if the mutant didn't have a gun?"

"The guards sucked. I fought him in hand to hand, and they hit me some of the time. The bullets didn't have a lot of effect on him; he must have been shot twenty or thirty times." *That's my story and I'm sticking to it, no need for him to mark me as a biter.*

Kim must have been used to seeing traumatic situations; she recovered enough to talk. She stared at me for a number of seconds, and then seemed to make up her mind on something. She said, "One of them mistook Rael for one of the dangerous mutants." I smiled at her.

A group of doctors and nurses finally made an appearance from down the hallway. Most pushed wheeled carts and carried emergency bags.

The guards were recovering from their shock, at least those that were still alive or awake. There were still about ten down.

The Captain finished restraining the mutant and quickly checked on the guards that were down. A small metallic ding and rolling sound came from next to me, and my right torso wound appeared to have expelled the second bullet.

Captain McCain looked at me and said, "Healer ... nice. Regeneration is a useful ability, especially if you don't have the body armor to stop a small caliber bullet. That or if you are clumsy with fingers like yours."

I was definitely feeling better. Not really chipper by that point, but considering I thought I might have been on a river trip down the Styx, I was happy with the results.

I gave an evil look at the nurse who attempted to check on Stephanie, and crawled over to her. *Won, these are some efficient people, once the shooting stops. They descended like a flock of vultures on the injured and dead. Well, except without the intent to eat them and all.*

I moved into the nurse's way, and she backed up a few feet. I carefully picked up Stephanie under the legs and back, and was extra cautious of the claws. I rested her head on my shoulder. *Okay, times like this might just make me want to do the hero gig.* The nurse said, "You might be injuring her by picking her up like that."

"Or I might be protecting her from people whose only interest so far has been to drug her, restrain her, and club her on the head."

McCain scowled at that line, and told me to hand the girl to one of the nurses and come with him.

"No. I'll either bring her with you and me, or ... wait, I'm not leaving her with drug happy medical technicians again."

He looked at me, looked at Stephanie and asked, "What is your relation to her?"

"She's my girlfriend." *Yeah, okay, she's not, but I think they'll understand being overprotective of a girlfriend faster than a best friend.* "By the way, I'm guessing he ripped the bars off his bed that were restraining him, and obviously the drugs weren't working, because Kim here checked on his med drip just a few minutes before he broke free." *Three cheers for deflection!*

He narrowed his eyes again and said, "At least you weren't lying **that** time."

*Doh, busted. He's good.* "I'm not leaving her."

A metallic ringing came from the floor as another bullet fell to the floor. My strength returned quickly as my body healed.

A doctor walked up to me, took out a small flashlight and checked her eyes and the side of her head. He said, "She's got some nasty bruising on the side of the head, but clearing up a bed might be useful tonight. If she isn't awake within an hour, then check with a nurse. Supers heal most things quickly." *Ab, someone with some diplomacy skill, heading off a potential showdown between stubborn people.*

*Hey, I just realized that I get to carry around a barely clad Stephanie. Won, of all the places that suck to do that.*

I stepped over to Kim and whispered, "Hey, I'm sorry about earlier. I wouldn't have done that if I'd known..."

"I warned you, at least now you know with no harm done. Be careful around others. Also, watch how you hold her, you have sharp claws now ... perhaps you should use a gurney or a wheelchair..."

I glared at her a second and she said, "Or not..." She put her hands up. "Just don't hurt that which you protect."

*Ouch.* I grimaced at that line. “Does she have anything left in the room?”

Kim stepped in the room entrance and glanced around the room. “No. Yes, she had a purse.”

“Hook it over my head, if you would...” After she did that, I headed over to Captain McCain.

He shook his head, “I’d be more upset if so many supers weren’t such a pain in the ass. I need to get this one down to secure lockdown before we have our chat.”

*Chat? Ah, guessing he wants to question me about the combat. Speaking of...* An officer approached the captain, and McCain told him to interrogate the uninjured security guards to get the details of what had occurred.

I lamented the fact that my hands were claws now. It’d be nice to hold her ... better.

We made our way to the elevator, and by the time, we stopped at the bottom, he said, “Listen, do that out of the public eye, and when she’s awake.” He startled me, I hadn’t realized I’d closed my eyes and leaned down to smell her neck and hair. So good. *Odd that I have no desire to eat her ... for dinner.*

“This is something like the third time tonight she’d been knocked out ... that I know of.”

“Then why are you chancing hurting her by carrying her around?”

“Because all of the so-called authorities in this hospital believe in treating people as if they are in an asylum prior to being committed, and I’m willing to bet that once being put away, the key is conveniently thrown away.”

“You’re a little paranoid, aren’t you?”

“Do you deny that’s the way many new supers are being treated here tonight?”

“I’ve been too busy to look, but it’s not the intent. We’ve been swamped with new supers running rampant or being injured. This whole thing was supposed to cut down on the damage to the city.”

Another metallic ding sounded off. He said, “Almost out of bullets I think.”

McCain leaned over and picked up the bullet with a tissue he had in his pocket to cover it.

“You already know the guards shot me up there.”

“It’s always a good idea to collect additional evidence on the chance it may be needed. The time you don’t is the one time you kick yourself later on.”

*Claws suck; I’m so tempted to let my hands wander under this hospital*

*gown. Okay, so I was wrong about having claws all the time. I'd rather have normal hands most of the time.* It struck me then that my touch was more sensitive than it had been upstairs. I touched my fingers to each other and realized that my fingers were normal again. *Whoa! They can change back?*

“Yes!”

McCain studied me for a moment. “Yes?”

“My fingers have returned to their normal shape.”

“And they haven't until this point?”

*Doh, he's gathering information.* My eyes narrowed. *Well, I've already blown this much.* “No, since I changed, they've been claws.”

“That's a great sign. Either you are gaining control, or you have another power that's helping you. Has anything else changed shape on your body?”

*Mr. Blunt now, are we, Captain?* “Not really, though I gained muscle.”

We continued to an underground area that appeared heavily built and reinforced, until we reached some rooms that were built more like heavy prison cells. He stopped and used heavy metal shackles to restrain the mutant, and pocketed the cuffs he had put on the mutant. The mutant still looked ... shell shocked.

“Your ... girlfriend ... did quite a number on him, if he did all that damage upstairs and no one else took him down.”

*Oops, I just realized I forgot the paper bag with the used shirts and the metal cutters up in the room Stephanie was in. Ah well.*

“He did it, all right. If the damn guards hadn't shot me...” *Oh, shit. Bad slip.* “...during the fight I might have done better at taking him down.”

“You know, you're a fairly good liar. Unfortunately **for you**, I'm used to dealing with people who try to be sketchy quite often.”

He entered a room and gestured for me to enter. It had a table with four metal chairs around it, two on either side. *Hmm, it'd be damn rude to set Stephanie down on a cold metal chair with her ass hanging out of the hospital gown. Much more gentlemanly to rest her on my lap, I think. Yeah, that's the ticket.*

I sat down carefully in one of the metal chairs, and rested her butt on my lap. Again, I got distracted for a moment by her scent, and found myself leaning my head across her face, smelling her hair and neck.

Then she giggled and squirmed.

*Doh! BUSTED!*

I lifted my head back up abruptly. She looked into my eyes. I turned multiple shades of red. “Uh ... welcome back to the land of the

living?”

“And what were **you** just doing?”

“Eh, uh...” *Do I mention the smell thing? Is that a good point thing or a bad point thing doing that when she's out? Gaabb! Females!*

She got a crooked grin on her face “Oooh, I've got you now. Cough it up.”

I sighed. *God, I'm a sucker.* “My nose is more sensitive. That and you smell unbelievably good. I got distracted.”

## Chapter 12 – Of Heroes and Villains

### Third Person Perspective

Stephanie couldn't help but pick on Rael. She was happy he was all right, happy she was all right, etc. She'd come to, as Rael and Captain McCain walked down the hall, and cautiously acted unconscious to not let on that she'd been awake. Two floating images appeared in her visual space. Now that these floating images weren't flickering into and out of existence, and there were only two, she realized that she saw through both Rael and Captain McCain's eyes.

She believed she'd woken when a hand slid along her leg. It didn't bother her, she was a terrible flirt, and knew it. She thought that she would have done the same thing to one of the guys had she the chance.

However, when he dug his nose into her neck when she didn't expect it, it tickled so much it ruined her secret. She giggled.

Now she sat on his lap, wondering for a moment why he put her on his lap, and then quickly realized the reason why. It made her grin again. She noticed he didn't move his left hand, which went under the gown on her upper back, and went around her side. She could tell she wasn't wearing a brassiere.

*What happened to the mutant? Why isn't Rael acting injured now – was I out that long? So, I'm in a hospital gown, but this looks more like an interrogation room. There's no window in here, we can't be at the police station. After the food court problem, someone got us here after all. Why am I in a hospital gown and Rael isn't? And where's Lance?*

Captain McCain removed a tiny portable computer from his pocket along with a stylus, clicked a few times, and looked at them.

He stopped for a moment to watch Stephanie, who appeared to be touching different areas of her body as though to check for damage.

Rael spoke up, "You were injured when they got you here. Broken shoulder, left upper arm, forehead. By the time I found you, you'd already healed up those injuries."

McCain waited for them to finish, and began, "Full name, Rael?"

"Rael Stromm."

"Miss?"

"Stephanie Quinn."

"I'm glad to see you awake, Miss Quinn. I apologize for striking you up there. Now, why were you at the scene, Rael?"



"I went up there to find Stephanie. Just after we found her, the guy woke up and started attacking people. The guards opened up on him almost instantly. I went out to help, and got into melee with the mutant. We smashed back and forth a few times when he knocked me through the wall and we kind of got locked up. The guards kept opening up for quite a while on him, hitting me on occasion during the fight."

Stephanie saw a flashing of images through Rael's mind as he quickly reviewed the situation. *Oh my god, I can hear and see everything as he's thinking it!* She noted that he didn't mention that he was shot prior to the mutant breaking loose, nor his encounter with Kim. She stared at him, and raised an eyebrow.

*Stephanie's staring at me in a strange way. Hey, her eye color has changed; it's more of an amethyst color now. She almost has a backlit glow to her eyes, it's a beautiful effect. She's so close, and smells so good.*

She sat there and listened to him think about her, and smiled. She didn't move as he leaned his head close to her left cheek, and moved down to her neckline to inhale deeply. *Well, it's one thing for someone to say you smell nice with some perfume on, but hearing them **think** about how enrapturing you smell and not be able to control themselves is pretty awesome.*

"Mr. Stromm, if you'd restrain your extracurricular activities to when you are at home... At what point did Miss Quinn become involved?"

It startled Rael. His nose was against her neck. He sat back up straight, and she chuckled. *Wait, she hadn't pulled away or pushed my head back when I did that. She usually does that when we go too far with her. That, and her head shifted when I moved my head back, she'd actually tilted her head to give me better access. Oh, evil wench!* His skin darkened, as he turned red.

"What? I'm sorry, what was the question again?" Rael shook his head a little to clear it.

"I said, at what point did Miss Quinn become involved?"

"Umm. I was still stuck in the wall and having trouble. The nurse, Kim, woke her up and got her involved. I remember seeing her awake, the mutant threw me through the other wall, and next thing I know she's standing in the hall, everyone's laying around, and you came up and knocked her out."

Stephanie said, "I remember getting stabbed with a needle and ... Kim was it? ... being over me. Her shaking me and releasing the restraints. Wait, why was I restrained?"

Captain McCain said, "Everyone is tonight right after being found or rescued to keep the mutants, psychics and blasters from accidentally hurting others. Please continue. I'll go over the classification of supers at another time, but we don't have much time

right now. Tonight too much is going on, and I have a reason for having you both here.”

“Just after Rael was thrown across the hallway I went out into the hall, and tried to make the ... mutant ... give himself up. Soon everyone was trying to give up to each other or to me. That was strange. Then I just kind of shifted into making him afraid for some reason. It was really weird. I ... I was able to lock him down and make him very, very afraid. I must have some kind of fear aura or something. Then, I think I got hit.”

Captain McCain studied her closely. “You aren't telling me everything.” McCain was mildly irritated. Like so many other supers, they kept some things close to the vest, and he bet it had to do with her powers. He would rather have that information on file.

“Oh, before I could figure out how to stop him, he started killing the guards in the hallway. Punching them, I think. That's all there is.”

What she declined to mention is the power that was at work even now. She could hear their thoughts very clearly. Oh, yes, she liked this already.

It was as if they just said and pictured everything they thought, and she had full access. Much like having several televisions hovering in the air around her. She discovered that Rael moved his hand position on her side because he wanted to stroke her back and side, but he wanted her to think he did it for comfort. The hand on her left thigh was placed as high as he felt safe doing, without her or the captain reacting to it. *He's a naughty thinker. I wonder if Lance thinks this way, I'm not sure if I hope he does or not. He's such a noble man.*

Captain McCain thought that she wasn't telling everything, but not outright lying to him. However, he was more interested in recruiting people for the H.E.R.O. program than in charging them with a crime that they didn't initiate, and in fact had helped on. Just what he needed, people who are willing heroes, willing to risk danger to help others. Those were too few and far between, even with the commissions.

He thought that she looked at him with too humored of an expression. She knew something and wasn't bringing it up.

“Something humorous, miss?”

“Yep.” She couldn't wipe the big grin, but didn't elaborate further.

He scowled, and narrowed his eyes, but he didn't sense that she was doing anything out of hostility or to cover up anything dangerous. His sense of that sort of thing was quite good. He had to be, considering the odd situations and people he worked with and on. Rael

looked back and forth at them. He knew something was up, but couldn't put his fingertip on it.

"I need to see some identification from each of you."

Rael shifted so he could pull his wallet out, using it as an excuse to shift his left hand accidentally some more. Stephanie thought that this would be an unbelievably fun new "toy" to hear what naughty thoughts people were thinking, especially her friends, if this is what Rael was always like.

She decided to do a test. She purposefully adjusted her position on his lap, wiggling slightly too much to distract him. Rael's mind immediately jumped to the distraction, wondering if Stephanie had any clue about how enticing she was being. She noted that he didn't mind it in the least though.

She grinned and watched Rael's expression. *She moved on my lap on purpose. She's flirting again – and doesn't mind the contact!* He stroked up and down her back and side as nonchalantly as he could.

She thought, *this could make for some interesting psychological tests on people. Do something to them, like the squirming, then watch their reaction, and see what their real thinking is behind it. Wow, I bet I could write an article on something like that for a psych magazine, even if I'm not in a psych class.*

Rael threw his license onto the table, and watched as Captain McCain wrote down the information off it.

The captain's phone buzzed, he glanced at it, and then did a double-take while reading a message that came across. "There's someone named Lance who was brought in at the same time as Stephanie. He's been asking for Stephanie. Does that sound like you?"

Stephanie could see what Lance looked like from Captain McCain's mindview. He already knew what Lance looked like, but Lance was unconscious on a hospital bed when the Captain last saw him. "Yeah, that's our friend. Is he okay?"

Rael added, "I've been looking for him as well."

Captain McCain asked, "Do you mind if he joins us here?"

She said, "Not at all. We'd like that."

Stephanie pulled her purse off Rael's neck. "While we wait... As cute as you look with a purse, I believe this particular one is mine." She dug out her I.D. and handed it to the officer. He again copied down the information off it. While she leaned over her purse, her head and neck were directly in front of Rael's. He stopped thinking about anything and focused on resisting this irrational desire he had to hold her down and run his face and nose across her body.

Her eyebrows went up as she heard his thought, and she quickly went back to leaning back slightly again, watching his expression. After a few moments, he opened his eyes and blinked them several times.

A few moments later the door opened, and an officer entered, escorting their huge friend. Lance walked in, although he looked somewhat peaked. Stephanie could swear that his arms were larger than before. He wore a hospital gown as well, but also wore a pair of sweat bottoms. The gown didn't go down very far on his tall torso.

Two more floating images appeared in Stephanie's vision. It seemed that the power connected with those near her and linked to their mind.

Lance stopped abruptly, looking at Stephanie's hair. She saw through his eyes that she had a mix of golden hair and brown hair; it was in a disheveled state. The brown hair was loose and ... not attached.

A horrified expression crossed her face, and she grabbed some of her hair and pulled it in front of her face. A handful of brown hair pulled out completely. The hair still attached to her head was solid gold in color, true gold. It was long and wavy, already to her shoulder blades in the back.

Captain McCain, saw her consternation and stated, "It's pretty common for people to have body parts change when they first 'activate' as a super. With hair, it's not unusual at all for the old hair to come out en masse, as the new hair comes in. I don't often **see** that change, because I'm not with them when most people change, but it happens. Skin can look ... disconcerting if it changes."

She combed her fingers through her hair multiple times, pulling loose a large quantity of her former brown hair. She looked frantic for a minute until she was sure that the gold hair was securely attached to her head. "Whew, at least I have a strong heart..." Rael felt her heart racing under his hand, even with it on her side.

Lance almost clapped Rael on the shoulder, and then caught himself, with his hand hovering above the shoulder. He slowly sank down in the metal chair to the right of Rael, looked at Stephanie, and stated, "You look great; a good shower and you'll be fine." She could see in his mind's eye, he thought she looked better than great "even with" only the hospital gown on. In fact, he thought she was distractingly beautiful.

To herself, she thought, *Wow, I better never get a big butt. I'll bear what they really think about it. Speaking of distracting, seeing a floating image for every person in the room is awfully busy. However, it should be really useful in class to get information directly from the professor's mind. Whoa! I can't wait to get to the labs and sneak in some tests on myself!*

She looked at Lance and asked, "Are you alright? You look ... off?"

"I'm fine now. I had a fight with this guy that changed into a

bug man – a super with mandibles and large claws for hands. Similar to the movie *The Fly*. He bit me, and his fangs had poison in them.”

Rael asked, “You regenerate?”

“I heal fast it seems, but for the most part I just take a lot less damage than normal. My shoulder still has some damage from the bite. Poison still affects me; it knocked me out after being bitten. I woke up in a hospital bed upstairs a few minutes ago.”

It struck Rael that he no longer hurt from any of the injuries he sustained upstairs.

“I have the reverse. I get hurt, but I heal fast. And claws.”

Lance glanced at Rael’s hands. Rael added, “No, they went away. I’ll try to bring them out later on. I’d rather not stab Steph.”

Captain McCain chimed in “I’m Captain McCain, Lance.” He held out his hand to Lance. Lance carefully shook it, the Captain wasn’t so careful. He shook, and squeezed his hand, watching Lance’s expression. Lance’s right eyebrow went up, but he squeezed back. For a minute, they stood there just grasping hands and increasing the pressure on each other, staring each other in the eye.

Stephanie watched the mindview, as she dubbed the mental images she was seeing of both of the men, and just sat there with her mouth open. She couldn’t believe the machismo of men in something like a handshake.

They seemed to reach an impasse for a moment, then Lance’s eyes glowed yellow, and his body suddenly glowed from within. Yellow fumes of energy came out of his nose as he breathed. They heard cracking, and the Captain cried out in pain. His hand was practically crushed before Lance caught himself and let go.

Captain McCain grimaced, “Wow! Ouch, you go beyond even a ‘normal’ brick’s strength. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He rubbed the injured hand.

Lance stared at Captain McCain for a moment. “Sorry about that. By the way, we’ve met, sir. It was probably about four years ago. My mom brought me through a tour of H.E.R.O. headquarters when we visited Metrocity.”

Captain McCain looked at him. “Is she quite tall?”

“Yeah, she’s about six foot tall, and well muscled. She’s a brick.”

“That’s quite a coincidence that you happen to have gone on a tour through H.E.R.O. HQ and then later turn into a super.”

Rael said, “I don’t think it’s chance. Steph’s dad knew something would happen.”

Everyone stared at him.

He continued, “He called me ahead of time to make sure we’d go to the mall today. He was strangely adamant about it. Why the

mall? Plus, my dad's made a few remarks over the years that make me think that all of our parents knew this would happen. They may not all have known when, before today, but I think they knew."

Captain McCain said, "Rael, you look familiar, but I don't believe we've met."

"My dad was in the H.E.R.O. program years ago. He looks similar. Well, and he has much shorter hair."

Captain McCain nodded, "That might be it. All right, let me get down to business. I'm short on time, so I want to get this done. I'm the government's head of the regional H.E.R.O. division. All of you were willing to act in the midst of danger to save lives. Are you looking to live a normal life, or are you willing to risk your necks on a regular basis to help people out every day or week? The H.E.R.O. program does reward heroes with a kind of commission by helping at incidents."

He continued, "I say incidents because they can encompass aiding people in danger, to stopping a crime or natural disaster. However, there are some classes you have to complete before you are allowed to enter the program officially."

Lanced looked excited, his hand closed slightly on the metal table, and the metal groaned as it bent to the shape of his fingers. "Has the class list changed in the last year? If not, then we've all completed the required courses as shown on the H.E.R.O. website."

"There are optional and required classes, but there is a hard set list of required classes. That hasn't changed in the last year. First aid is one of them. One reason is that either you, or someone you stop is likely to be hurt, the other is that we've found that supers in our program often encounter injured civilians, or even officers and such while in the line of duty."

Stephanie said, "We're all certified in CPR and first aid, and all of us are a black belt in at least one martial art. Rael is a black belt in three. What are you, a fifth or sixth Dan in one?"

Rael nodded.

"There is a required course in criminal law, and the procedures to use as they apply to apprehension of potential criminals, and arrest of such. If you choose to carry a firearm, you must be certified in the use of whichever type you carry. Some weapons that are illegal for civilians become available for H.E.R.O. members as well, due to the dangerous nature of super criminals. You **are** aware that some supers out there won't hold back against you, and may attempt to kill you while you attempt to stop them?"

All of the friends nodded at that.

Rael asked, "Wait a second, what does H.E.R.O. stand for?"

Lance responded, "Homeland Extraordinary Response

Organization. You should know that.”

Rael said, "I never paid as much attention to the details as you did."

Captain McCain continued, “While not required, I suggest going through additional classes at a college for law enforcement. You would end up working with a lot of police, federal agents, and even some military. The more you understand their procedures and requirements, and respect them, the better you'll get along. Rule benders are bad enough; rule breakers just tick people off”

He continued, “We've found people in official positions sometimes resent the ability for a person to 'magically' gain super powers, take a few classes, and in effect be given a badge to enter nearly any crime scene. It's important that you respect their authority and don't tread over people. Otherwise you'll make life difficult for yourself, others in the H.E.R.O. program, and me.”

Lance said, “Sir, like we've said, all three of us had a parent who is a super. They all hoped we'd change one day, and pretty much pushed us into classes and training to prep us for that. Thus the martial arts training, first aid training, etc. We knew this might be coming, and were forced to prep for it. The only thing that has thrown me off so far is that when I try to jump or push too hard with my legs, I literally jump a hundred feet. Or in the case of the first jump, it must have been half a mile. Sorry about that one, Steph.”

“We jumped half a mile? When did that happen?”

“I carried you out of the mall, we ended up jumping away from it, but we landed badly, and I woke up being manhandled here. It made for a tense introduction to the local police. By the way, how is your arm and shoulder?”

“My shoulder feels fine now. Which arm? They both feel fine.” She ran through the process of feeling each arm from the wrist up to the shoulder, and then picked up on his thoughts that he'd crushed her upper left arm. She poked and prodded at it, but it felt fine.

Lance thought, *how did she know where on the arm to focus on?* Her head snapped up to look at him as she realized that she might have given herself away. Lance thought that she was reacting oddly.

*I'll have to watch my reactions. I don't want everyone knowing what I can do. For that matter, it might unnerve them knowing that I know what they know.*

Captain McCain said, “So you are all interested in joining the H.E.R.O. program then?”

All three nodded.

He scanned his H.E.R.O. phone, “I've got it on screen now. I see the courses you've taken. I'm going to make you temporary

H.E.R.O. agents. If you are willing to get involved tonight, I'll give one of you a temporary cell phone so you can be notified of emergencies, and call my personnel when you've encountered a situation. If it is a crime or emergency in progress, you can call in afterward. Do **not** kill anyone, criminal or not. The cell phone is on loan. If you damage it, you pay for it, are you all right with that? Later on, you'll have to buy one for yourselves once you are full, official participants.”

Stephanie said, “I'll hold it. If a fight were to break out, these two are more likely to jump in and have it damaged during the action.”

He took a cell phone out of his pocket. “The only thing I'm going to ask of you is to use this program on it to mark yourself as 'on duty' or 'off duty' when you want to change your status. We might send out an emergency call to you while 'off duty,' but generally will only send out a request for aid to those supers who choose to be active.”

“If you get an emergency call it will come up on the screen and beep. You can push buttons for 'accept,' 'at scene,' or 'unable to assist.' There's also a button for 'resolved' if you resolved a situation. That makes it easy to let one of my agents get to the location of the cell phone to verify your involvement and do the questioning. Other buttons are to call in medical support, normal paddy wagon, or super paddy wagon.”

He leaned over the table, and quickly pointed out the basic options to them. There were also options for easily reporting a crime that hadn't been broadcast, and to call the H.E.R.O. officers to the phone's location to clean up.

“Most H.E.R.O. members use the phone as a way to assist in situations. We've found it works far better than older methods of contacting each other.”

Rael said, “So you mean heroes don't just run around on building tops looking for crimes in progress?”

“No. A few might try something crazy like that, but for most H.E.R.O.s, the cell phone will help far more. The rare exception is someone like Trouble Magnet, who has a power that appears to put him near a problem spot. He's in New York, though.”

Stephanie accepted the cell phone, and put it in her purse. McCain took out some cards and handed one to each of the friends. “These are temporary H.E.R.O. cards. Showing them will help inform local law enforcement know that you are there to assist. Again, don't abuse the privilege. On Monday, call me and we'll meet again to go through the official paperwork for the program. For now I need to get back to the situation at hand.”

“Try not to get hurt or cause any problems, please. You're all



free to go, get cleaned up, change clothes, eat, etc. I'm sure it's been a traumatic evening for you all. Go ahead and mark 'on duty' if you are ready tonight. We have a lot of situations going on. Actually, since you've all just turned, I strongly suggest getting a large meal and eating it. Your bodies need a few thousand calories right now, and it won't matter what type."

Officer Thompson handed him a large envelope. Captain McCain pulled out three sets of paperwork and handed them to the friends. "Fill these out to bring with you on Monday. It'll speed up the process."

With that, the Captain briskly walked from the room to go about his business. He stopped for a moment to say to Rael and Stephanie, "By the way, thanks for helping with the situation upstairs. After I review the information from the guards and nurses, I'll let you know if you are eligible for a reward. Oh, and you for stopping the runaway car and mutant outside, Lance." Then he headed off away from the room.

Officer Thompson says, "Lance, you'll want to make sure you check out of the hospital before leaving, same with Miss Stephanie here if she was checked in. The main desk is on the lobby level."

He opened the door and followed out after the Captain. Stephanie noted that the floating images disappeared when the person moved about fifteen feet from her. Lance stood up, followed by Rael after he slid his hand back under Stephanie's legs, hand resting on the upper thigh. Stephanie smiled at Rael. "So did you plan to carry me around everywhere?"

"I can't say as I'm very motivated to put you down." *Hmm, is there any solid reason to keep her from walking? I could bring up the cold floors...* She laughed at 'hearing' him think this, and both men in the room gave her a quizzical look.

She said, "You know, the floors might be cold and dirty to walk on..." Rael grinned, and Lance said, "We're in a hospital, the floors shouldn't be dirty."

She frowned at Lance and said, "They're cold."

He shrugged and grinned at Rael. "Your arms getting tired yet?" They all laughed, and headed out of the room.

## Chapter 13 – The Voices

### Third Person Perspective

Stephanie asked, “What did they do with my clothes?”

Rael responded, “They cut them off you. It looks like when someone shows up all bloody they do that to find the wounds quickly.”  
*I wonder if I should mention that I've got clothes in the car, being as we aren't trying to escape now, it's not so pressing to get her out of this hospital gown, or at least not into full clothing...*

Stephanie coughed slightly as she 'heard' that line, and looked at him in surprise. Rael narrowed his eyes suspiciously and said, “You're acting strangely.”

Her reply was, “You shifted your hand...”

Lance gave Rael a dirty look and said, “Rael, be polite to her. We're in a hospital.”

Rael sighed. It's something he could have been accused of a minute or so before that, but not at that moment. *She's covering something up. But hey, she didn't want to be put down, so I'll ignore it. Come to think of it, carrying even little Steph in my arms like this ought to be tiring after a while, but she's so light...*

The elevator arrived on the Lobby level, and they walked to the front desk. The lobby was busy, due to the many incidents happening all over the city.

Then, the whispers started, as Stephanie heard the mental voices of every person in the entire lobby. There were a good dozen people in close proximity, causing her to receive mental pictures from them at the same time as well. She was overwhelmed with the max influx of information as a dozen floating televisions filled her vision. Mental voices from everyone in the large room echoed in her mind as though they spoke from immediately next to her. She couldn't figure out a 'switch' to turn it off, and had a difficult time just thinking her own thoughts.

Images flashed in her mind's eye from the recent injury experiences of several people. The sound of voices was loud in her ear. It was as if all of these people crowded in immediately around her and spoke in a normal voice at the same time. She couldn't get her own voice in edgewise to cut into it.

More voices added to it in the background, the whisper of voices speaking from somewhat further way. If she could get in a clear

thought, she would have thought that those sounded like the hubbub of a noisy restaurant.

Rael and Lance arrived at the front desk. There was a brief line, and the group received several odd looks from people. One man, off to Rael's left walked full speed into someone standing there; his eyes locked onto the back of Stephanie's gown.

Then, Rael noticed the expression on Stephanie's face. Her mouth opened and closed, as if she tried to say something. Her eyes now blinked rapidly, and she stared off into space as though she wasn't focused on the here and now at all. Her head twitched occasionally.

Rael said, "Hey, hey are you all right?" No response. "Hello? Anyone home?" Rael shifted position and used her feet to tap Lance. "Lance, something's wrong with her." He shifted his grip on her legs, and slapped her backside to shock her. There was no effect.

He shook her, said her name forcefully several times in her ear, and tried to keep from breathing much when right by her head.

She heard her voice several times, and then more often, as the people in line turned around to look at her group, and question why someone was repeating her name. More and more people had the mental image of her in Rael's arms. Her mind's eye overflowed with 'screens' displaying what they were looking at or thinking. So many that they overlapped, and the sound that appeared to come through them merged with the buzz of mental voices from those further away.

She forcefully thought, *just get away. Get away from me. Everyone get away from me.* Somewhere in the cacophony of voices all speaking, her body reacted, and the tingling sensation rushed across her entire body.

Rael smelled something, and his senses were overwhelmed for a moment. He had to get away from there. People stumbled backward, moving away from them. Lance felt an urge to move away from her for a moment, but he wasn't about to leave his friends now that they were finally together. He shook his head and the effect, off.

People in a twenty-foot radius cleared away from them, and those slightly further than that looked confused, and slowly moved away as well. Only one man and one woman didn't react, apart from Lance.

Even the hospital personnel left the desk area and scattered further away.

Rael gave Stephanie a wild look and dropped her. He ran off toward the front doors at unbelievable speed. Lance dove at her, but ended up diving too low, expecting her to be near the floor when he got to her. He unceremoniously dove his face into her breasts.

She fell a foot ... and then stopped in the air.

The voices receded to a safer, noisy background level, as though in a busy restaurant. She finally had control over her own thoughts again. Only three floating images remained in her vision.

Lance moved back a foot, keeping his hands under her, but still a foot below her body. Even with the pallid skin tone from the poisoning incident, his face was a brighter shade of red as he blushed. "Whoa, you're floating."

She stared at him. "I don't think I want to play with this here."

He nodded, stood up and very gently grabbed her around the back and legs. He lowered her legs, and they went down until he set her feet on the floor, standing upright. "Stay here a moment. Those workers don't look like they are coming back here. I felt you do something, you wanted people to move away from you."

He leaned over the desk, grabbed a pen and pad of paper, moved to write a note and his fingers snapped the pen in half. Ink drenched his fingers. He scowled, grabbed another, wrote down his name and Stephanie's, and requested to check them out of the hospital immediately, along with the date and time. Then, he walked over to the workers, glancing back to make sure she was all right. She looked confused. He waved at one, and handed her the note. "Please check us out; we can't stay in this room." The hospital worker's eyes flicked back and forth between Lance and Stephanie. She nodded and took the note.

He walked back to Stephanie. *What the heck, what's good for the goose...* He scooped her up carefully and walked toward the entrance. He noticed that most people in the area stared at Stephanie. He'd have considered himself as the target of their eyes, but few made much eye contact with him. Stephanie's head whirled with the concepts of these mass of pictures and voices she heard, and then the idea that she could float or fly as well.

Some people near the entrance walked quickly away from it, glancing back at Stephanie several times.

Lance thought, *well, this is interesting. I'm used to people looking at me and clearing out of the way, but never for little Steph. Hmm, where did Rael run off to? How the heck did he sprint out of the lobby so quickly? I'm going to have to smack him for dropping Steph, though. That was uncalled for.*

Stephanie heard his thoughts clearly, and smiled at the thought of Lance defending her honor.

## Chapter 14 – Out into the World

### Third Person Perspective

Lance hadn't eaten in ten or eleven hours, and his body burned who knows how much energy during the metamorphosis. He said, “Dang, I'm hungry. McCain mentioned food; I think that's our next stop.”

Stephanie looked up at him. “Me too. We probably haven't eaten a full meal in twelve hours or more. Not that I've been that active for most of it.”

“Sure you have, your body gained muscle from the change. Not a lot, and it didn't seem to change your body shape much, but I could see the effect a little on your biceps right after the explosion. Your skin didn't split or anything from such dramatic muscle additions as mine did though.”

“Hmm, I can barely see a change.”

“That's okay, you look better without being a muscled brute. The one serious physical change I can see is your hair, and that looks beautiful.”

“Your mom's a brick, and she's beautiful, Lance.”

“Well, she's in great shape. Huh, now that I think about it, you're probably right. Whatever, you look good a little softer.”

With other people further away, Stephanie could hear his mental voice clearly, he thought exactly what he said. He also had a very clear picture of her in his mind as he looked at her. *Hey, I'm my own lie detector now. That and I have a mirror anytime I'm near someone else if I can get their attention on me. How funny would that look, stare at someone to adjust my lipstick. That'd be a humorous sight.* She giggled at her own joke. Lance smiled in return. He was happy that she'd recovered from whatever put her in such an odd state in the lobby.

Outside the building, they looked around for Rael. Stephanie called out, “Rael!”

Rael stopped. He heard Stephanie call his name in the distance. *Why am I several buildings away from the hospital? I wanted to get away from Stephanie, but oddly enough, I don't feel the urge now.*

He heard her call, “Rael, come here!” He looked around, but he couldn't see her. *Where is she? She shouldn't sound this near without being seen.*

Rael jogged back toward the hospital. After a number of

seconds, he saw Lance standing framed in the light of the entryway to the hospital. He looked like a behemoth holding a wisp of a little girl.

He quickly returned to them. Lance marveled at the speed Rael had just jogged through the parking lot. Rael said, "Sorry about that, I just felt this ... need ... to get away from Stephanie. I don't know why."

Lance replied, "Everyone apparently did. Almost the entire room cleared away from us. It's as if someone dropped a horrible gas bomb. And no, I didn't."

Rael said, "No, it was to get away from **her**. Just her. That's the strangest thing. Did you try to do something, Steph?"

"No. Well, maybe." *Crud. How do I tell them I wanted everyone to get away from me because I could hear and see what they were all thinking, without coming out and saying that?*

"I, uh, was thinking. Crap, how do I explain this?" *Better yet, how do I NOT explain this to them?*

Rael was watching her closely. *That's her face for coming up with something creative. She doesn't want to tell us what she's thinking.*

He sighed. "It's okay if you are afraid to bring something up. I trust you, well, barring the running away from you thing."

Lance studied her face as well. *Rael's right, she doesn't want to talk about it.* "Let's get back to the house and tickle it out of her."

*Rael understands I don't want to talk about it, but Lance is disappointed I don't trust him enough. Damn it, that's not my intent.*

"Listen, being in the crowd felt ... wrong to me. I couldn't think. All I wanted was for everyone to get away from me. I didn't mean for you two, but I couldn't concentrate."

That seemed to satisfy both of the guys.

Rael said, "My car is over here. I put it near another entrance thinking I'd be breaking one or both of you out of there."

Stephanie laughed and asked, "Paranoid much?"

"No, well, maybe. But I'd just seen them load the two of you into separate squad cars while unconscious. This was apparently after you guys leapt half a mile."

He led them to the car, and they arrived quickly. Stephanie thought, *I wonder if Rael is going to mention the change of clothing.*

Lance set Stephanie down, opened the passenger door for her, and climbed in the back seat. Rael's car shifted noticeably at the weight. "Let's swing by an oriental takeout place on the way home. We can eat back at the house."

Rael stared at him a moment, wondering why the car would shift so much at once person getting in.

Rael drove to a nearby restaurant, picked up a variety of meals, and returned to the home that he shared with Lance. He didn't

mention the clothing.

Lanced stopped at the entryway to the house. “Strange, the doorway is smaller. Or I’ve gotten taller.”

Rael looked at him. “You’re right; you used to be able to just walk under a doorway without a problem. Now you’ll clip it. Better be extra careful for a while. If you are armored and super strong, a few accidents might give us a bunch of damaged doorways as you bang your head everywhere.”

Stephanie glanced at the trunk as she left the car, looked at her two friends, and shrugged. She would see how far Rael went with this.

## Chapter 15 – When Mind Meets Matter

### Stephanie's Perspective

We sat down to eat at the boys' small dining table and spread out the variety of food Rael picked up. In the calm environment, I finally spent some time studying the mindviews of my friends.

I was so close to the two of them that each of their mindviews was the size of perhaps a 60" television with me sitting only five feet away or so. In other words, they were quite large. The boys looked at me oddly, when I used my hand to move the mindviews in the air. At least they appeared to be floating in the air to me. The motion looked more like waving, or perhaps like one of the hi-tech movies with computer screens that you use your hand to push and drag the items around on the screen. Except to them, there was no screen, so every time I did it, they gave me a strange look.

For the most part, there was just an image of what they saw and on occasion, thought. It was odd watching the image suddenly shift from the viewpoint of where they looked to something they visualized. Lance suddenly switched to thinking about colorful costumes he considered getting in the day or days ahead.

Even though I was unusually hungry, the mindviews fascinated me more. I realized that I was hearing, smelling, and tasting through them as well. It really shocked me when I somehow made Rael's mindview larger in my visual space and I tasted the food he was eating as though I ate it. Not only that, he enjoyed the taste, and I felt a wave of enjoyment as well.

I mumbled, "Mmm. Wow."

Rael looked at me. Through his eyes, I saw that I had a faraway look to my eyes, and my mouth hung open slightly. *Doh, I'd rather not let this out yet.* I had my fork in my hand, and realized one serious weakness of the mindviews. I couldn't see out of my own eyes!

I stabbed at food on my plate, trying to use Rael's mindview to see. I felt humor coming from him. I could sense it was from his mindview, yet it flowed over me and made me feel the humor as well. I definitely looked silly, trying to get a bite onto the fork.

Then the greatest challenge struck, getting the food into my mouth. I missed my mouth with the fork, dumping some of it onto the hospital gown. My natural reaction was to twist my head down to look, but somehow Rael's mindview was stuck, and I saw through his



eyes as he saw the entire goofy action.

They both had seen what occurred, and they heartily laughed. I felt this double wave of amusement from them both such that I couldn't help but laugh myself. I finally succeeded in pushing Rael's mindview back to its former, and I assumed normal size. I saw on my own again. After picking up the bits with a sheepish grin on my face I said, "Wow, Captain McCain must have hit me really hard, I'm aiming off to where I think my head should be..."

They laughed again, and I felt the double wave of joy flow over me. I grinned, and couldn't stop as I ate with a vengeance, now that I saw on my own again. I found that the food tasted good to me, as well as to both of them. I didn't recall ever enjoying eating so much, apart from some desserts.

We cleaned out everything on the table. I couldn't believe we'd eaten so much food.

I decided to do a test of this odd pass through of feelings. I stood up and walked behind Rael, and succeeded at mentally pulling his mindview large onto my visual space again. He tensed up slightly to see what I was going to do to him. I then proceeded to massage his shoulders. He relaxed under my hands, but I had to see through his eyes, which he then closed. For the first time in hours, my vision was black.

His muscles were thicker and harder than before. I massaged them lightly, working at a feel-good type massage. He enjoyed the massage greatly, and he sighed with pleasure. I gasped as I felt the feeling pass through me. *Wow! When they enjoy something, I do as well.*

I heard Lance's mental voice say, *Holy cow, she must enjoy giving a massage a lot. I wonder if she's got some new sense that makes her hands extremely sensitive, or perhaps her skin overall. I'd give her a massage myself to test that, but I feel like I'm about to crush everything I touch. Darn fork already bent three times in just one meal. I broke her shoulder and arm too. Sigh... I wonder if I'll ever be able to hold someone again without crushing them to death. Enough Lance! It's the price for the power. You can be a hero now, too darn bad if you can't be all chummy with everyone. You can learn to hug without the squeeze at the end, or handshakes without closing your grip. Quit whining. Stupid fork.*

I was amused at Lance's mental argument. I mentally pushed Rael's mindview back to its normal size and position, and found I still felt the enjoyment almost to the same degree. My vision cleared, and while Rael's mindview was generally black, I could now see Lance's mindview, as well as see out of my own eyes again.

I grinned at Lance and winked at him. I felt a sudden wave of happiness that I somehow knew was from his mindview. Wow, so little to make someone happy. He was like my big, happy dog, or something.

Lance smiled, stood up, began taking the trays and cardboard rice containers to the trash, and crushed them in his giant hands. He took great joy in smashing them into the tiniest package possible. I wouldn't have thought the aluminum and plastic could get so small.

Rael opened his eyes at the noise and watched Lance do the crushing. When done, Lance held up the tiny ball and grinned at us.

Rael grinned, "Nice, you'll make a great garbage collector."

Lance walked behind me to wash his hands. I realized how open the gown was in back when he turned around to dry his hands and got a pleasant surprise. *Oh, great, this is a conundrum. If I suddenly move, he'll suspect something strange is up.* I felt him grin, but ever the gentleman, he then walked back around to the other side of the table.

I figured I should call it a night, so I asked, "Hey, Rael ... I need to clean up and crash for the night, mind driving me home? You picked me up at my place, remember?"

His mental images flashed with various schemes to keep me here. "I think it would be smarter for all of us to stay together for a while. You've had some odd things happen tonight, and now you're missing your mouth with the utensils..."

I rolled my eyes and said, "I ... guess I could crash on the couch again. I don't have any clothes here though."

Rael immediately thought of the clothes he had in the trunk of his car. He felt guilty, but wanted to see if he could get me to stay here without them.

He said, "Or you could stay in one of our beds, we have big enough beds. No touching necessary."

Lance inhaled some of the water he'd been drinking. He coughed and said, "Nuh uh. I'm a danger to be around; if she slept with me in the same bed, I could kill her in my sleep. I won't have that on me, no thanks. Sorry Steph, not that I wouldn't like to have you in my bed, it's just not safe. Heck, I'll be lucky if the bed survives the night. I'm willing to sleep on the floor and you can have my bed for the night, though."

*Hmm, actually the couch would be fine for me, but I wonder what these mindviews see when someone is dreaming. That would be an interesting experiment.*

I said, "No, keep your bed, Lance. I'll sleep with Rael. Err, in Rael's bed, if I can borrow a shirt of his. I'd use one of yours, but you're so damn huge..."

Lance flexed at us, though most of the impact was lost due to the hospital gown. Rael and I laughed at him. I said, "That might work better with a t-shirt or no shirt. It looks downright silly in a hospital gown."

He mumbled, "Yeah, yeah. Laugh at poor Lance."

I found myself massaging Rael's shoulders again, and realized that he'd just been hoping I'd go back to doing it. *Did I do that because I heard him think it and did it because I'm just standing here anyway, or did his thinking it cause me to do it?* I couldn't even tell. These mental links were odd. Either way, the enjoyment of giving him the massage through his mindview felt almost as good as getting one, so I wasn't complaining.

He finally stood up and hugged me. He put his nose in my hair and took a deep breath. I couldn't help but take a deep breath as he did, and felt his enjoyment at the hug and the aroma.

He leaned back slightly and looked me in the eye with those catlike eyes. They looked so alien, and yet his mindview was so large that I could feel the caring he felt for me behind them. I felt an overwhelming urge to kiss him ... and found myself doing so.

He ran his hands along my bare back. I don't believe I ever had a better kiss before that point. The sensation of his hands on my back, his lips on mine, and yet the additional sensation from his end of the kiss, and his body against mine almost overwhelmed me. I could have kissed him forever.

Then, I realized that his new enhanced olfactory could smell my breath, and it was the same wonderful aroma of my hair, yet more powerful. The kiss only ended when I cut my lip on one of his fangs, and jerked back out of surprise.

He lightly touched my lips with his finger and said, "I'm so sorry." I watched through his eyes as the cut sealed over and all trace of the damage disappeared within seconds. The pain disappeared with the cut.

His thoughts changed over to the taste of my blood on his tongue. He wondered why he didn't feel the strong desire to bite me as he had Kim, the nurse. Perhaps it was because he was full from eating. Or perhaps something about my aroma kept him from wanting to hurt me. Either way, he was glad he didn't feel the urge.

He said, "If I'd known you wanted to kiss like that, I'd have done it a long time ago."

I blushed and looked down. I didn't know what to say to that. I loved both Rael and Lance in a way. They were such longtime best friends of mine. I enjoyed flirting with them both, but I'd never really considered a serious relationship with either. They were just ... best friends. Yet, so close to Rael, I wondered if they meant more to me than that. I decided to deflect rather than get into a conversation I didn't know how to have.

I winked at him, grinned and walked back to the bathroom. His mindview stayed open for the distance, and I watched through his eyes as he stared at me walk away. He grinned at the open-back view of the

gown.

He caught up to me, fast. I'm not certain how he moved so quickly, in fact. He squeezed me lightly on the shoulder, and pointed out the spare toothbrushes in a drawer.

I asked, "Do you often have guests stay over that you need one-off brushes?"

He laughed, "You were the last one to stay over, and that was for a movie night." I saw from his mindview that he told the truth. For some reason it made me feel better.

He continued, "By the way, you certainly don't need to brush your teeth for good smelling breath. Your pleasant aroma comes from your mouth, too. I haven't figured out why that would be, but it's pretty cool. I'll nab a shirt and hang it on the doorknob for you."

I saw the flash of a visual as he mentally planned to grab a shirt and return with it. I smiled at him and closed the door. The mindview worked through walls, as I watched through his eyes, he went into his room, changed into sweatpants, took out a shirt and came back to hang it on the door. Lance's mindview showed him carefully pulling out comic books to look at costume designs.

I washed up, though smell certainly wasn't a problem. Oddly enough, I hadn't had to use the facilities since the afternoon, and still felt no need. I shrugged, brushed my teeth, and changed into the shirt Rael left for me. It was nice knowing the shirt had a full back to it, and stretched to mid-thigh on me.

I stopped out by Lance in the kitchen while Rael brushed his teeth. "Have a good night, Lance. I think today has been a great day for us."

He replied, "Yeah, we actually made superdom. I'm so stoked! I'm really glad you're doing better, after all the injuries you had today. I'm really, really sorry about crushing your shoulder and arm."

"I'm doing great now. Night." I kissed him on the cheek and walked back to Rael's bedroom.

I saw Rael's viewpoint as he watched the door, waiting for me to come into the room. I felt like I was some type of prey, and he a big cat waiting to pounce.

I shut the bedroom door and walked toward the bed. I could barely see with only the light from the clock, yet Rael's mindview showed the room as bright as when the light was on. *Interesting. He definitely has a far better sense of bearing, smell and sight than I do, possibly even taste from what I saw during the meal.*

I climbed in the far side of the bed from him and lay down. I looked over at him and grinned. I asked, "So ... am I safe in here?"

He said, "I'll protect you."

“I meant from you.”

“Oh. Well, yeah. I promise not to try anything.” He wished I’d slide over and spoon with him, imagining holding me against him. I felt this overwhelming urge to do it, and found that I’d slid over and pressed my back against him before I could clearly think about what I did.

It surprised him greatly that I slid over to him, but felt extremely happy when I did. He slid his arm around my waist and kissed me on the head. My mind went crazy for a moment. *I don’t recall wanting to do that. Did he make me do it? Was it the mind link?*

I was very tense for a moment, finally I decided that I was there, and might as well relax. It would look very odd to crawl over to him, and then immediately crawl away. He thought, *Wow, I wanted her to slide over to me, and she did. Did I do that? I wonder if I have another power of some sort.*

That relieved me. *Let him blame himself for it, and not ask me if I was doing something strange. Oh, like reading your mind, Rael. Yeah, that’d probably go over just great if you knew I was in your head, stealing your thoughts.*

*I can’t believe I just slid over here. Maybe I should move back. This feels so good having her against me. What? Her? Oh, man, I’m getting his thoughts.* Yet ... I found that I enjoyed lying there like that immensely. I’m not certain if it was the comfort of having him hold me, or if it was his enjoyment of doing the holding. *Probably both. This double sensation thing is both wonderful and frightening at the same time.*

The aroma of my own hair was so relaxing through Rael’s mindview. My aroma wasn’t overly special to myself, but his mindview stayed large in my visual space and through it, his senses came very clearly. I drifted off to sleep quickly, I felt so mentally drained.

## Chapter 16 - Heroes Must Help

### Lance's Perspective

I watched Rael chase Stephanie down the corridor. He moved so fast it almost appeared as he just appeared over by her. Speed would be a cool power, but I was happy with the idea of being super strong and armored. I wondered how I compared against the big dogs in town, such as Gatecrasher, Zonk, or Big Man.

I thought about costume designs for a while, and pulled out my collection of comic books to peruse them for more ideas. I held them very carefully, fearful that I would tear them apart.

Stephanie stopped out to wish me good night. I smiled and just sat for a moment feeling good after she kissed my cheek and headed off. Her fragrance lingered for a moment, like a handful of flowers.

Then, I noticed the plastic cup with my water was bent in far more than normal as I gripped it. *I need to watch my grip on everything for a while, I think. I'm not really tired, and I'm sure the meteor shower is still affecting people. People who need help. I can be a hero. I can be a hero **now**. I've got the power to save people now. Forget wearing an official costume, there are problems happening all over right now.* I looked at Stephanie's purse ... the cell phone was in there.

I muttered, "Yeah, baby!" Then, I accidentally crushed the cup. I quickly moved my comics out of the way of the water, and cleaned up the spill.

*Time to act.*

*No idea how long I'll be out, so I'll cheat a bit tonight.* I stepped over to the cabinet and drank a bottle of 5-hour ENERGY. *Maybe someday I can get an advertising gig for something like this, that'd be cool.* I rushed to my room, changed out of the hospital gear and put on a clean white Under Armor form fitting t-shirt with a dark gray pattern on the shoulders down to the elbows. A pair of black jeans and boots completed the getup. The jeans barely fit in the thighs. *Holy cow, I'm bigger, and these were loose before. Ripped hardcore now – I like this. The shirt almost looks like a costume top.* The jeans were slightly short now as well, but wearing boots forgave that look. The boots felt tight as can be as well, but didn't hurt, so I ignored the feeling. *Worst case I'll look super and nerdy.*

I grabbed a belt cell phone case and the phone from Captain McCain out of Stephanie's purse. *He seemed cool enough to us, even if he did stay very businesslike.* I carefully pushed the option for 'on duty' on the

phone. *Man, I need to hold every darn thing like they are eggshells now.* Almost instantly, three incidents appeared. The screen appeared to sort them from highest priority to lowest, and within each level by distance from the phone.

The first of the three showed a Critical severity to it. The other two were Severe. I pushed on the Critical task first.

The text listed:

**Super fight, likely new mutants or bricks. Civilians injured. Building partially collapsed. Need assistance to stop fight and rescue buried people.**

The distance was 4.2 miles away.

*Perfect for me.* I clicked the 'accept' button, and headed out of the house. I figured I would drive my mustang, rather than try this jumping thing. *Knowing my luck, I'd plow into the side of a building and do more damage than the bad guys. It's after midnight, so I probably wouldn't be seen. Of course, flying into a building during the day doesn't sound any less embarrassing.*

The drive was uneventful; I even sped to arrive at the location faster. The only patrol cars I saw were one set of flashing lights off in the distance, until I arrived at the incident location. Traffic seemed light for late Saturday night, probably due to the meteor news.

I quickly parked the car, opened the door ... and ripped off the interior door handle. *Aw, man. Here's where it all starts.* I threw the handle on the seat, and jogged toward the police at the scene. They were watching the corner of a four-story building. Several stories had collapsed in the corner, with the bar at the bottom taking the brunt of the damage, along with the level above it. *Not good, a bar collapsed on a Saturday night after midnight. Speaking of ... crap! I missed my shift tonight. John's going to be pissed at Score!* Score! was the bar I bounced for at night.

The building appeared to have been mostly a four-story office building, with a large chunk of the first level devoted to a bar. The corner where the entrance of the bar was located had caved in from the third floor down to the first, along with massive wall damage all along the outer walls of the bar. All those huge windows had given under the stress the super fight had caused the building. Windows were missing in places on each of the levels; apparently, the fight had included much of the office area.

A small crowd had gathered behind the officers, watching for anything exciting. A loud thumping sound could be heard from one of the upper stories, and a bestial roar followed. Several people commented on it. *Fight sounds like it is still in progress, and these people are enjoying it. That's messed up.* I jogged around the crowd to get to the police.

A shattering sound came from the third floor, and a file cabinet

flew toward the squad car closest to the building. I sprinted out in front of the car, putting my arms up to catch the flying object. *It's kind of like catching a kickoff, but bigger...*

The file cabinet arced toward the squad cars and me. I could tell the angle was off just before the file cabinet impacted me. The file cabinet had been rotating slightly as it flew, and slammed into my face. The thin metal of the cabinet folded as it met the unmoving object my face consisted of. About halfway through the compaction process I got a hold of it, and its movement stopped.

*Yeah, I'm sure that looked wonderful to the crowd. Comedy Guy is here!*

I pulled the dented metal off my face and dropped it to the ground. *Wait, that didn't hurt.* I touched my face a few times to verify the thought. I grinned. *Well, there's yet another reason I didn't play that position in football. Dang, no more football for me.*

I walked over to the nearest officer, pulled out the cell phone and handed it to her. "Would you please mark me as 'on scene' and keep the phone safe until I'm done?"

She looked up at me and said, "Umm, okay."

"Thanks. Is everyone up there considered a criminal?"

"Well, we need to stop the fighting supers. We can't help the people down here until they stop. They've moved up and down levels several times already. Who're you?"

I put my hand on my chin, and thought for a moment, "Hmm, call me ... Spartan." *I'm just not about to run around in a loincloth and sandals.*

"Thanks for helping, Spartan. Good luck up there; be careful of civilians."

"Will do."

I jogged up to the building and jumped toward a broken third story window. *Hope this jumping thing is controllable...*

I flew through the open window, but my jump didn't stop at the floor. My path carried me up through the tiles making up the ceiling. I held up my forearm in front of me, and smashed into the hidden ceiling above that. Metal ties from the ceiling tile hangers tore into my shirt as I crashed lengthwise through more of them, and finally fell out of the ceiling and crashed into cubes below.

I lay there for a few seconds, trying to determine if I'd injured anything, but nothing seemed damaged other than my pride. *Yet again, a bonehead move. I hope there aren't security cameras here.* I climbed out of the mess of furniture and equipment covering me and looked around.

*Yup, that could go on a Superhero Bloopers reel...*

I heard swearing and jogged toward it. The floor was slanted in areas toward the corner of the building that had caved in. There were several large holes in the floor, approximately human sized. Debris was



scattered everywhere, and many cubes in the office were knocked down. Walls had severe damage, and a few doors hung off their hinges.

Furniture moved, and I spotted a head moving. The head had horns attached. A crashing sound erupted, the head and all furniture in the way moved backward about twenty feet before the horned person raised their arm and swiped down. The guy had long claws on the hand. *I hereby dub thee, mutant.*

The combatants swung at each other, and the horned man grabbed his smaller opponent. Suddenly, a man was flying toward me. I swung at him, hoping to take down one of these combatants quickly.

My fist solidly connected with the lower back of the super. I was sure the crowd would hear the boom from my fist meeting the body. The person flew back in the opposite direction. He crashed through several sets of cubes before coming to a stop. I looked at the horned man.

The horned man just looked back at me and growled. *Light's on, nobody's home.* His eyes had a red glow to them, and horns also came out from his shoulders.

I said, "Come on, man. Give up now."

The horned man growled again, and froth ran down from the corner of his mouth.

*Hoo boy. Yep, this dude's gone. Nobody home, methinks. Guy has fangs too, I'd like to avoid another poisoning.*

The horned man slowly walked toward me, clasp and unclasping his claws. I waited for him, and he leapt at me from only eight feet away. I stepped into it and tried to shoulder bash the mutant. One claw sliced into my left shoulder, but his face had an untimely meeting with my shoulder.

The mutant stumbled backward. I grabbed one of the large horns on his head and swung around in a circle, spinning several times at high speed.

I said, "How are ya feeling this one, huh, Horny?" I yanked the mutant's head to an abrupt stop. The mutant was obviously disoriented as he tried to get his footing.

I grabbed his left arm with my left hand and stepped behind the mutant, as I'd do to help control a drunk in a bar. *He's not just going to stop with the way he's all beat up and frothing.*

I used my right arm to wrap around the mutant's neck and put him in a strong sleeper hold, trying to close off his airway in the neck. *Go to sleep, dude, I don't want to hurt you.*

The mutant clawed at my stomach with the arm trapped between us. I growled, "Knock it off or I hurt you." I pulled slightly on the guy's arm as I said it, so he'd get the point.

The mutant didn't listen, and gouged his claws into the heavy muscle in my torso. I growled back at him and yanked the guy's arm up hard. The sound of snapping bone came from the elbow, and then the shoulder in rapid succession. *Ooh, that's going to leave a mark. Sorry about that.* The arm went limp. The mutant grabbed at my sleeper hold arm with his right claw, cutting into my forearm. The claws dug in deeply, and that hurt. I grimaced in pain.

With the left arm non-moving, I released it, reached around and grabbed at the mutant's right arm to prevent him from tearing too much into my sleeper hold arm. He gashed my left arm several times, as I attempted to grab the arm, and used my other hand in an attempt to prevent it. Finally, I acquired a hold on the mutant's hand, locking his fingers with mines. The mutant's claws dug into the back of my hand, and I snapped the man's wrist back because he just pissed me off. There was a cracking noise, and the clawing stopped. He howled loudly in pain.

The mutant struggled for several dozen seconds, his reactions slowing over time. Then a small, yet burly form barreled down the aisle in the room. As he approached, I likened him to a four-foot tall steroid taking body builder.

He slowed down slightly before reaching the mutant and me, and then slugged the mutant in the stomach. The impact shuddered through the mutant into me. The blow had to have exceptional power behind it from that tiny frame. *He's a brick, a small brick. Holy cow.*

The small brick punched several more times against the helpless mutant's stomach before I pulled the mutant back several steps from the small brick. The mutant slumped in my arms. The brick screamed incoherently at the mutant the entire time I held the mutant. *He's really pissed. Something about trying to have a drink, when one of "you freaks" show up and start shit, if I understand his babbling.* The brick stomped on the mutant's foot in a continuing fit of rage. Their feet smashed through the thin carpeting into the wood sub layer of the floor, and the mutant's foot made a crunching sound.

I said, "Hey, he's out cold..."

"Screw you!"

"You need to turn yourself in, the police are outside." I gestured over my shoulder with my free hand.

"I said, screw you. He started this entire thing, trying to eat people downstairs, and then me. I am **not** about to go to jail because I defended myself!"

I was about to say something next when the small super turned and ran the opposite way. I said, "Hey, where the heck are you going?" When he reached the window he leapt ... up. He looked like he jumped

at the next building top. I shook my head. *I could go after him, but the fight's done, and from the sound of it, this is the instigator.*

I walked to the opposite outer wall, where I'd leaped into the building. I looked down at the drop and debated. *If I can jump half a mile, then I ought to be able to land on my feet without killing myself. Only one way to know for sure, I guess. If the mutant was taking a bunch of hits from a brick, even a small one, a fall's not going to do much to him.* A light flashed over in the crowd, but I didn't see what caused it. I jumped down, holding the mutant around the neck. Landing was far easier on a jump down, it seemed. The fall felt more like a jump down from a few feet than two stories up. *Now to dump him off and see to the trapped people...*

I dragged the mutant over to the police officers. More lights flashed. I glanced up and saw some people with cell phones held in the air. *Cell phone cameras, Steph would do that sort of thing.* I stood up straighter and spoke to the officers, "It sounds like this mutant attacked the place and started a fight with a four foot tall brick. The brick ran off, but this one's down, so the fight is stopped. I'm going to see if I can get into the bar. Can I get my phone back please?"

The officer holding it held it in the air, "Here!"

"Thanks much." I pushed the button for 'super paddy wagon' and put the phone back on my waist.

I jogged back to the building and looked for a good spot to pull out debris. I could probably bash in a wall, but wanted to avoid damage to the building's infrastructure any further.

I pulled some rubble aside, and two of the police officers joined me. I said, "If either of you know the best places to take debris from safely, I'm open to suggestions."

The woman officer stated, "Let's call to the people inside, and see if we get any responses. If we do, we can focus on that location."

The other officer agreed, and they moved near the wall and called at it, then waited a few moments to listen for responses. Shortly they found a position where someone yelled for help. *Nice idea, guys.*

I moved there and removed large chunks of brick and concrete blocks. The rough concrete did not bother my hands, and they weren't cut from anything I handled. The concrete felt extremely lightweight to me, as though it were made of painted Styrofoam.

In short order, I cleared an entryway into the establishment. "Officer, mind if I borrow your flashlight? I'll climb in. With how light everything is to me, I don't believe it'll hurt me if something shifts or falls on me."

The woman handed me her large flashlight, and I crawled into the hole. I called out for people, and through the dusty haze found several people caught partially under a table when the walls collapsed.

Two of them crawled out on their own, but the remaining man I carefully picked up to carry out. I was cautious on the way out with him. I hadn't cleared a wide tunnel out of concern for a collapse, and the tight space was not conducive to carrying a person.

I made it out with the man only taking a few extra cuts and scrapes on the damaged wall, and gave him to the officers to care for.

I crawled back into the debris. When I bumped my shoulder against the wall, the building groaned. I glanced up as dust fell into my face and blinded me. I wiped off my eyes when a slew of concrete bricks crashed on top of and around me. The blocks banged off me, though none fell hard enough to be harmful. I dropped to one knee by reflex. It felt like being in some kind of toy pen. Stuff falls on you, but it was so light that none of it hurt, barring the annoying dust in the eyes. Building material continued to rumble as the area shifted and settled until I was buried in concrete, insulation, plastic and wood.

I knew it ought to be a dangerous situation, but when all of the blocks just bounced off from me as though they were lightweight toys; I hadn't felt the need to move.

*Interesting sensation, being buried alive. Even stranger still feeling concrete and brick, and yet not feeling the sharp edges of the corners, or the rough edges. Or the weight!*

*I could probably make some wild tossing motions behind me to get rid of the material fast, but who knows how far I'd fling this stuff – or onto whom.* Since I was still facing in toward the building, I gently pushed the cement blocks away behind me. In short order, I pushed enough blocks clear to get back outside the building. I coughed a few times as I edged back out of the collapse.

The woman officer asked, "Are you all right?"

"What? Yeah ... yeah I'm fine. The dust was worse than anything that fell on me."

She pointed at my forearms. Blood stained them, mixing in with the dust from the concrete.

"No, the guy with claws did that to me." I'd been trying to ignore the stinging pain in my arms. Her reminding me of the cuts didn't help. I grabbed a concrete block, lifting it like an empty carton of milk, and ran the edge along an undamaged area of my left arm. The concrete crumbled along that edge, but my skin was undamaged, if somewhat dustier. I showed my arm to the officer.

"Back inside for me, there has to be more people in there."

I cleared the entry path yet again, and then headed in one more time. Dust floated heavily in the air. Coughing led me to the next group of people. Two people were stuck under a pool table, a leg had collapsed and caught them tightly underneath. I lifted the table off

them and helped them to the exit. It was such a rush lifting a large, heavy pool table with one hand as though it weighed nothing.

Once inside again, I wandered through the dust until I found two people lying on the ground bleeding. Both had nasty gashes on them, and one had what appeared to be a bite mark on his shoulder. They were both severely injured. I weighed the idea of bandaging them here, but decided that the officials outside would have more appropriate equipment. I picked up the girl first. I dislodged a few pieces of wall rubble on my way through the makeshift hole as I hurried to get her outside. Officers immediately took her from my arms and I ran back inside.

As I picked up the man, I wondered at his weight. He was a good-sized guy, at least 6' tall, though he was a bit out of shape. He still had to weigh well over 200 pounds, and yet it felt like I was carrying a balloon animal.

I re-entered again after dropping him off, and the room opened up past that, and I found some people hidden in an office, the rest were secluded in the bathrooms. One woman cried and hugged my torso when I opened the door. I gave her a minute to calm down before leading the people to the impromptu exit, gently speaking calming words to her. No injuries were greater than a few cuts and bruises.

As I guided the group out, I noticed two large holes gaping in the ceiling of the bar. Debris lay about the floor under the holes.

Once they were safely out, I spent more time looking around inside, in case someone was unconscious and unable to call for help. After minutes of walking around the ruined bar, I couldn't find anyone else remaining inside.

As I climbed back out through my rough exit, I coughed again. I'd never considered the mess the debris from a building would make. Several more small flashes went off as I stood outside the gaping wound into the building. I dusted off what I could from my clothes, face, arms and hair when I walked toward the officers. At least the claw marks had stopped bleeding, though the gashes looked nasty.

The officers listened to the stories from numerous people. It appeared that everyone was accounted for, barring the small man that fled. Ambulances had already been on scene and taken away the most severely injured.

I was talking with the woman officer when a man in a suit walked up to us. "You answered the call for H.E.R.O. assistance?" He looked pointedly at me.

I replied, "Yes, sir, that would be me. Going with the super name of Spartan." I realized then that I'd forgotten to push the button for 'resolved' at that point, and quickly took out the phone to push it.

The man interrupted me. "The situation has already been closed, and the ambulance called. Can I get a quick rundown of the situation, officer?" He looked at the woman I'd handed the cell phone to before I'd entered the building.

Officer Coyle quickly ran down what occurred from before I arrived to just then. She made me sound very favorable, even making the file cabinet catch with my face more about protecting the squad car and officers than about the humor of me missing the catch. I appreciated that.

He looked at me and asked if I had anything to add. "Just the fact that the four foot brick was here before the fight, and claimed that the mutant started the fight before fleeing the scene."

He clicked a few times on his phone, and said, "I don't have a Spartan in my system. Are you registered?"

"Not yet. Name's Lance Casey. Captain McCain spoke with my two partners and me at the hospital tonight. He told us to get the paperwork into him Monday, but to feel free to mark ourselves as 'on duty' and help out tonight, what with all the strangeness from the meteors occurring."

"Are they here?"

"No, they had other issues going on tonight. I figured I'd get out here and help out where I could."

"All right. I'm going to forward this case to the Captain, so he can mark it complete once you are in the system. You can't get a reward from the system without that paperwork in."

The man continued, "So this is your first ... situation ... as a super? Or at least as one trying to work with the H.E.R.O. program?"

"Yes."

"So how much of the damage up there happened once you joined the fight?"

*Where was he going with this? Was he trying to stick me with a bunch of the damage?* "A small amount of ceiling damage on the ... third floor. Some furniture landed on during the fight. It was pretty short for me. The small brick and the mutant had been tearing it up for what sounded like some time."

"All right. You can head out now."

"Thanks. What was your name again, sir?"

"Agent Carson. I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again soon, I close a fair number of these cases on the west side of Metrocity."

"Good to meet you, Agent Carson." I held out my hand to the man. Agent Carson hesitated a moment, then shook my hand. I made sure not to close my hand in case the man wasn't a super.

"By the way. Nice work ... Spartan. I look forward to working

with you in the future. You may want to get a real costume, or you'll be going through a lot of shirts and jeans like that."

*Woohoo! Close enough to a 'job well done' line!* I looked down, and sure enough, between my jump into the third story, the clawing, and the concrete falling on me, my shirt and jeans had small tears all over.

Agent Carson walked off, continuing to tap on his tablet as he walked.

I looked at an officer. "Any last things you need help with before I go?"

They looked at each other, back at me and shook their heads.

"Hey, thanks again for holding my phone so it didn't get damaged, Officer..." I held out my hand to her.

The woman officer said, "Officer Coyle. Anne." She looked at my hand, looked at my face, looked back at my hand and slowly took it. Officer Coyle was a pretty 5'8" woman, extremely fit with long dark brown hair in a long braid down her back. She had dark blue eyes, and looked young for an officer.

I gently shook her hand. *What, don't people shake hands or say thanks anymore? I've seen at least two super heroes on the news shaking the Mayor's hand before. It's not as if it's hard just to **not** squeeze someone's hand when you shake.*

"You're welcome ... Spartan, right? Your skin is softer than I thought it would be."

"Umm, thanks?"

I shook the hands of several more officers nearby, and noticed more cell phone camera flashes as I did. It was great, being on the same side as the law, helping people out. I felt awesome.

## Chapter 17 – New Fame

### Lance's Perspective

Multiple people in the crowd “ooh'd” and people pointed toward the sky. I followed their looks and saw a small stream of fire coming down toward the city. It burst in the sky, and created the effect of fireworks as the bits broke up and faded out of sight.

*The meteor shower is still ongoing. I thought it would be done by now. I wonder how quickly people begin to change after one of those dropped over an area. Did my mom have a single one of those come down near her town when she changed, or were there a bunch? I'll have to give her a call soon to talk.* I glanced around at the people; everyone appeared to be looking up. *Now's a good time to get out of here, people are distracted by that meteor.*

I jogged around the exterior of the crowd only to be cut off by a young woman. Her pose reminded me of a linebacker prepared for me to run past in either direction. *Great ... now what?*

I slowed my pace, and held up my arms in front of my shoulders. She sprang at me as I attempted to walk past, and wrapped her arms around my torso. *Whoa, what's up with this?* I stopped and said, “Excuse me, miss?”

She called behind her, “I have him! Come here!”

I tensed, my eyes searched for any signs of danger. Two more young women came forward; they were all likely close to my age of 21. It was obvious that the group had been out drinking or partying.

“I want your picture with me!” she said.

“Oh ... all right.” *Holy com, I've got fans already?*

Her friends raised a camera and a cell phone to take photos, and the woman shifted her pose so she wasn't hugging me around my torso. She kept her hand around my back as they snapped a few pictures each. I put my arm carefully on her left shoulder and smiled. *Great, I'm all dusty and have blood on me, and they think I look good enough for photos.*

One of the friends said, “Wait, I want one too!”

She ran up and put her arm around my waist from the other side. I posed again with them. *This is pretty cool! Spartan, babe magnet, yeah.*

The remaining girl turned to walk away when the friend on my left ran over to her and dragged her back. She weakly protested, “I'm not sure, I can't...” The friend pushed her just in front of me, then



stepped back to take the picture. I set my left hand on her shoulder and posed yet again. I was amused at the antics; this was the sort of thing that Stephanie commonly did to Rael and me.

The first one looked up at me and asked, "How much can you lift?"

"I'm not sure ... a lot. Cement blocks feel like empty milk jugs to me. I know I can jump about half a mile."

"Wow! How do you land, doesn't that hurt?"

"Umm, yeah, it can be a pain sometimes."

"You're a brick, right?"

"I believe so."

"What's your name?"

"Spartan." *Chatty one, I hope she's not driving.*

"Ooh, like in the movie 300?"

"Like that, obviously I don't run around in a loincloth."

"You'd look good in one." I raised an eyebrow at that.

The second friend asked, "If you're a brick, don't you have armor? You have blood on your arms and stomach."

"He had sharp claws. The concrete that fell on me didn't hurt. I've been shot before and not been hurt. Listen, as much as I'd like to stay and chat, the city's a mess tonight. I need to get out there and help others."

"Oh, sorry. Hold on!"

She dug in her purse and brought out a marker. She grabbed my left arm, wiped a little more dust off from it and wrote Debbie and her phone number on my left wrist.

*She just gave me her phone number? Not that unusual to see that type of thing happen at Score!, but it's a first for me being as I'm always bouncing. John would frown on it if any of us bouncers had a bunch of names and phone numbers written on us. Very cool.*

I smiled and she winked at me. I said, "Now I suppose I can't ever wash my arm again." The other girls giggled.

"Good night, ladies. Drive safe if you've been out drinking, please – or better yet, call a cab." I waved and jogged toward my car. *Wow, what a great first night so far. Hmm, I hope my door handle works from the outside...*

Once I was out of sight I took out my personal cell phone and added her name, number and a note under contacts. *Just in case, you never know...*

## Chapter 18 – The Cleansing

### Lance's Perspective

I opened my mustang's door, fortunately, the outer handle worked. The borrowed cell phone vibrated for a moment, and then a voice came from it.

“All points alert,” sounded out in an automated voice. Then Captain McCain's voice came over it. “Emergency at Iron Cross Hospital, level 4, mass attack by mutants, many injuries, need assistance, multiple murder in progress. All available heroes requested.”

A cold chill ran down my spine. *Murder?* I pulled out my keys, sat down quickly, started the engine, and slammed my foot on the pedal. My foot smashed through the floor of the mustang, it jolted forward and then stopped. *Crap. I can't believe this.* I sighed, then turned the ignition off and tried to open the door, but the handle was missing. “Damn it!” I shoved on the door, the hinges snapped off, and the door fell to the ground. I hopped out of the vehicle, set the door by it and looked around. *Great, so now I've trashed my car. The door I could have replaced, but the gas pedal assembly and floor... Come on, Lance, think about that later, there are people to save.*

The hospital was about two miles in the direction away from home. I sprinted to the nearest street facing the way I needed to go and put my best strength into a running jump. My body practically shot into the air. Buildings dwindled under me as I gained altitude. I was easily hundreds of feet high in seconds, and still ascended. My forward momentum accelerated the speed of the jump. I moved fast, easily passing vehicles driving on the street below. *I must be flying over sixty miles per hour doing this.* Even with the speed, it took approximately two minutes of flight time to approach the hospital.

*I should contact Rael and Steph for this, but they are probably either having sex or sleeping by now. Take even five minutes to get ready, another ten minutes to get to the scene and they'll be too late to do anything.*

The wind rushed past my face and blew back my hair as I flew through the air. I could see the buildings of the surrounding region, and picked out the hospital fast approaching below. My momentum would carry me well past the hospital. I lost altitude slowly, but was still far too high to do anything about my flight.

The hospital sped past me on the left side, moving in the wrong direction. I couldn't change direction; my jumping arc kept me

moving forward. I guessed I'd land about half a mile past it. *If I land and roll, this much momentum will make me roll a long distance, probably smashing into something. Here's to hoping the strength to jump distances like this includes the strength to land.*

The ground rushed toward me. My heart pounded as I anticipated crashing and breaking both legs. I descended rapidly toward a small parking lot. As the blacktop approached, I prepared to absorb as much impact on my legs as possible. My feet hit the ground; it felt no different from sprint jumping fifteen feet prior to becoming a super. I easily absorbed the impact in the legs, but the speed carried me forward somewhat and I rolled on the ground once before recovering in a three-point stance. *Okay, when run jumping, land with a leg forward...*

I performed a fast injury check to ensure I took no damage from the fall, and then pumped my fist in the air and yelled, "Yeah!" I sprinted off toward the nearest street leading to the hospital from this direction. *Oh yeah, this jumping thing will work...* Upon reaching it, I lightly jumped while running, again launching into the air. Holding back on the strength put into the jump appeared to be the key to controlling the jump, for I only ascended one hundred feet or so. I crossed over some buildings, and descended toward a street connected to the hospital parking lot. *Jumping certainly is an exhilarating experience! I can't wait to take a day and just jump around.*

As I sprinted toward the building, I noted a large hole in the wall on the fourth floor. I leaped for that room's window, hoping to minimize damage that would need to be repaired. The power of my jump was too great. I crashed through the window on the fifth floor, above the room I'd desired to land in.

Fortunately, the bed was empty in the room. The window burst in and I crashed hard into the bed, flipping it over in the process. I thudded against the door, pushed the bed away from me and stood up. Again, I felt no injuries. I was getting excited about this gig. I grabbed the handle on the door too hard when I opened it and ripped the hinges off the wall. *Darn it all! Bad Lance!*

I stepped out into the hall, looked back and forth to find the nearest stairway, and sprinted to it. Several nurses cowered against the wall as I ran toward them. I hopped half a flight of stairs at a time in my haste to reach the fourth level, but the door was locked. I ripped at the door handle; the entire locking mechanism ripped out of the wall, but the door opened.

Chaos reigned in the hall. I recognized Psycorn from the news, an existing H.E.R.O. He wore his distinctive white and blue gradient costume, with a blue visor over his nose and eyes. He was a well known telepath and telekinetic.

He stood near the nurse's station, a group of hospital personnel on the floor behind him. Two mutants stalked the area in front of him; he held another in the air with his telekinesis.

A jolt of lightning crashed into a mutant to my left. Hellshock, another H.E.R.O. was the originator. He was in costume as well, his dark red and black costume lit up by white lightning bolts here and there, as though it were a canvas from a storm. Two mutants rushed at him as I watched.

I heard the sound of melee from a room off to my right.

I leapt at the closest mutant, the one rushing at Hellshock. The mutant didn't see me; I tackled him hard, and embedded him in the wall on the far side.

He stabbed at my chest with a long spike coming from his fist. Lightning burst through the hallway behind me into the other mutant rushing Hellshock. The mutant with me didn't have enough room to maneuver, and failed to do more than scratch my side. I shoved him the rest of the way through the wall, and the mutant stabbed me again, causing a shallow stab wound. I shoved the mutant's face through the flooring...hard. It's stabbing stopped in favor of pulling its head out of the floor. *Oh, you can take a hit? Let's up the amperage a notch and see if you can take that...* I waited for it to extricate its head, and then smashed it through the floor again near the previous hole. *How do you like them apples?* It slumped to the floor, and I checked to make sure he still breathed.

I grabbed the edge of the hole in the wall and yanked myself back through to the hallway in time to see Hellshock let loose a ball of lightning. *Now there's a cool power.* The ball missed the mutant, instead scoring a large burn mark in the wall of the hallway. *Okay, not so cool.*

To his left I saw a pair of mutants enter a room. I rushed the door behind them. When I reached it, I slammed my palms hard into the door near the handle and the hinge area. The door exploded off its frame into the room. The door took one mutant in the back, flinging him across the bed. The bed itself banged across the room, ruining a large pincer swing the second mutant was in the midst of. Fortunately, it didn't topple the bed over.

A woman lay on the bed unconscious, likely still in a drugged sleep. The second mutant lunged at the woman again. I barely grabbed and pulled the bed back toward me before the pincer swiped at her, and it snapped the security rail on the side of the bed in half. The first mutant swiped his horned elbow back at me, cutting into my chest. The second mutant again lunged at the woman. I barely reached my left arm across in time to prevent the strike, and the mutant grabbed my forearm with the pincer. The pincer protrusions dug into my skin

like small blades. *Why are these cutting me, yet concrete doesn't?*

I grimaced in pain. *Darn it all, knock it off!* I said, "You guys suck, pick on someone who can fight back." I stomped down on the first mutant's calf, driving its knee into the floor. This forced the elbow horn out of my chest. The pincer mutant grabbed my arm with its other pincer, digging the blades on it into my bicep.

The mutant by my feet moved to stand up, and before he moved far, I kicked him hard. He flew across the room, spinning the bed sideways and knocking me over, with the pincer mutant on top of me now. The first mutant smashed through the outer concrete wall of the building and disappeared from sight. The sound of concrete cinder blocks crashing to the blacktop outside could be heard even from this height.

The pincer mutant head butted me, only to be slammed into the wall connecting to the hallway in return. It bit my left shoulder while it continued to squeeze the huge pincers on both places on my left arm. Blood ran from the arm, and then from the shoulder where it bit me. *Darn, fighting this thing's like fighting an animal.*

My left arm still worked, I was able to pick up the mutant with my right hand and rushed the outer wall. I bashed the mutant into it, stunning it badly and causing more concrete blocks to fly out into the parking lot. I punched it hard several times in the head until it hung unconscious, and the wall behind it barely remained. I began to realize that mutants could take quite a beating before being knocked unconscious.

A scream came from the hall, and I rushed back to the doorway. At the end of the hallway, the mutants had taken down Psycom. Two mutants advanced toward the nurses and doctors huddling in the corner. I sprinted two steps and leaped horizontally toward them. *Jumping don't fail me now.* I shouted, "Incoming" as I sped toward them. They stopped to look back in my direction, one of them lunged an arm that resembled a sword at me as I flew toward them. *Good, keep your attention on me...*

The sword entered my abdomen as my arms caught the two mutants. The three of us crashed through the wall, into the stairwell, and continued ahead to smash into the concrete outer wall. *Head, meet concrete, sorry concrete.* A chunk of the wall gave way, collapsing outward from the impact. We fell in a heap at the landing of the stairwell.

I shook my head to clear it. One mutant still moved, slowly. I backhanded its head into the wall, disintegrating more concrete, and knocking the mutant unconscious. I quickly elbow smashed the other mutant into the concrete floor of the stairwell, it didn't move.

Two of the hospital personnel stood at the entry to the stairs

above me as I climbed to my feet. Something impeded me; I looked down to see the sword sticking through my torso on the left side. *Wow, I've been stabbed through.* I winced, grabbed the arm and yanked it back out. Blood sprayed out from the wound, and ran down my side from the wound. It looked bad, but didn't hurt nearly as bad as it looked.

A loud crash sounded from above. I jogged up the stairs, and the people moved aside as I approached. Captain McCain lay in the hallway, a barely human looking mammoth mutant towered over him. It looked more like some kind of devil figure, with four arms, two of which had blades instead of hands. The head was horned; large fangs protruded out of the mouth. Spikes grew out of the elbows, knees and shoulders. *They just get uglier and uglier, bigger too.*

Behind the huge mutant, two others stepped into the nearest room. One was a thin woman; she wore black leathers, chains and spikes, and had violet spiky hair. Another mutant with tentacles went with her. The huge mutant blocked the door behind them.

The woman took something tiny out of her pocket with one hand and flicked it toward me. The object grew into a small wrecking ball three feet in diameter. I grabbed it as it slammed into me, knocking me off balance for a few seconds.

During this time, Captain McCain rolled to his feet and punched the giant a few more times. The mutant's chitinous armor made a crunching noise as the captain's fist went through it. The giant stabbed the hero again with a lower arm sword and slammed him down to the floor with his two upper arms.

I dropped the wrecking ball and rushed at the giant while it stabbed the Captain twice more. It looked at me and roared with a fantastically large mouth. The roar sent a wall of vibration at me that knocked me off my feet, and gouged the walls and ceiling in the area. I felt momentarily stunned, and attempted to stand while it closed on me.

It drove a hand blade onto my left shoulder, slicing into the heavy muscle. I punched it in the chest and drove it several feet back. It closed again and stabbed at me with both blade hands. A lightning bolt struck the mutant from behind, locking up its muscles for a few seconds as all its muscles tightened.

I glanced down the hall. Captain McCain lay on the floor, bleeding. Guards appeared dead or dying all along it. The hospital staff behind me no longer had Psycorn in front of them for protection. It was all up to Hellshock and me to stop this.

I gathered all my force into a mighty punch. *I want to channel that strength like I did when McCain and I shook hands.* Energy burst within me, my eyes glowed yellow and the arm glowed from within. My punch slammed into the mutant's chest, and a loud boom sounded through

the corridor at the sound of the hit. The creature flew back through the wall, again through the outer wall of the hospital, and continued nearly horizontal until it was out of sight. A distant crashing of metal, glass and concrete falling to the parking lot could be heard.

Hellshock stepped into the room and looked out the hole in the outer wall. "It's running off. Their leader disappeared as well. I'm surprised he went that far. Knocking out a wall is one thing, but forcefully enough to throw him so far is awesome."

I dropped to one knee, and placed my right arm on my upper knee while I rested a moment. It was quiet in the hall. I looked at the Captain, who stared back at me. I glanced at my side; blood slowly streamed down from the sword wound. My shoulder continued to bleed slowly as well.

"Nice work, Lance."

"Spartan. Sorry about that, he got away."

"Some of them are hard to take down. I meant nice work on stopping him from mauling us here."

Hellshock called back to us, "He's right. My lightning balls caused him little damage. This place isn't safe for me to really summon up the size of lightning ball that would really hurt him. It'd either damage the hospital or hurt others. He probably could have done a lot more damage to us if he'd stayed longer."

The Captain nodded and said, "Some mutants may have gotten the short end of the stick on looks, but occasionally gain the benefits of both a mutant and a brick. Like that one ... he had armor, strength much like a brick, and yet had the extra arms, swords, and probably the stronger regeneration of a mutant."

Footsteps echoed from down the hallway, and two more superheroes ran toward us. The woman I recognized as Brawny Sonic, a flying blaster who could emit beams of vibration from her hands. She wore an emerald outfit with baggy pants and an unusual, almost chitin-like top. She wore a deep red helm that covered her face from the nose up. The man was Elastiburn. He wore a camo-green loose fitting shirt and pants with metallic armored gauntlets and an old style helm that reminded me of a medieval knight's helm. I vowed to myself to be far more stylish than this guy was. Elastiburn said, "Where are the bad guys?"

Hellshock had returned to the hallway, "All over the place, they were all mutants. They were kidnapping other mutants, and killing new supers they could get to. Some got away."

Elastiburn said, "What, one of you ugly mugs showed your face and they run off? You guys are all a mess; we'll collect them up for holding and get medical support for you."

Elastiburn walked down toward the hospital staff, "They're all down or fled. Get some teams up here to see if anyone can be saved!" Hellshock headed over to the nearest guards that appeared alive to try to help them.

Soon, hospital emergency teams ran everywhere through the level. Several attempted to help me, but I waved them off until I was sure the people stuck in the beds and civilians were helped.

Captain McCain said, "You've got several stab wounds, let them look at you."

"As do you, Captain. You're looking worse for wear than I feel, so don't make me knock you unconscious and have them check you first."

"Stubborn, I like that. Assuming it's in the line of duty, at least. Don't worry about me, my wounds normally stop bleeding shortly after combat, and I begin healing."

Hellshock stopped by, "Are you guys done lying around yet?"

I said, "I figured I'd bleed out a little more, then determine something useful to attend to." He laughed.

He looked at the sword wound from both sides and said, "Damn, that looks nasty. I'd hate to get hit with that without your armor. You **do** have armor, right?"

"Yeah, pistol shots don't hurt me at least. The wounds still hurt though."

Strangely enough, the bleeding from the stab wounds stopped by the time the doctors had attended to all the other injured. The gaping hole in my abdomen, and the slice out of my shoulder were still there, though.

I made them help the Captain first though. He gave me a dirty look.

A physician's assistant came over to me and introduced herself as Ana. She was average height, perhaps 5'5", average build with a little extra weight, very cute lady. She had dark brown hair that went just past her shoulders, and light blue eyes. She was well tanned. She either went to a salon or spent a lot of time outdoors. Ana had a friendly face, good for putting injured people at ease.

Ana was very kind, and led me to a room downstairs to get looked at. She cleaned the large stomach stab wound, and mentioned that if I get something stabbing into me in the future to pull it out. They didn't have tools to do surgery on bricks.

The wound had begun healing, just slowly. She attempted to stitch it closed, but several needles bent when pushed against the skin. Since they didn't bleed anymore, we gave up and hoped the wounds would re-seal themselves. She tried using some tape to close the



wounds, but when I shifted even a little my muscles ripped the tape apart.

Ana said, "Are you trying to be difficult?"

"No, ma'am."

"Either we lock you into a position where you can't move for some time ... at all. Otherwise, we just cover the wounds so nothing gets into them, and see what happens. I don't like that option much though."

"Just cover them. If I end up with scars I'll know next time to do the next step."

As she attempted to close the wound she'd asked, "This is a lot of damage to take, why do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Rush into danger? Is the pay that good?"

"I haven't been paid anything for saving anyone yet. Assuming I do, I have no idea how much I'd be getting. I'm doing it because I can."

"Doesn't it hurt?"

"Quite a bit, actually."

"Do you rob banks?"

"What? Why would you ask that?"

"With your strength and body armor, I'm assuming that you could. If you are going on the theory that just because you **can** do something means that you just **do** it, then why not?"

"That's just wrong. Put it this way, I have the power to do it now, and I would rather get hurt than see other people hurt. Sometimes, I don't even get hurt, so I'm able to just help people without the pain or damage to myself involved." *At least only minor damage on that bar scene. Hopefully I'll have somewhere I don't get injured...*

"That's very good of you. What's your name again?"

"La ... Spartan." I smiled at that. *I need to get used to saying my super name.*

Ana glanced up at me, raising her eyebrows, and then smiled.

I said, "Here's a question for you. How do I fill out the paperwork and such to pay for medical care?"

"You're in the H.E.R.O. program? Are you a new super?"

"I should be officially in Monday. And yeah."

"Well, all of the hospitals work with the H.E.R.O. supers. They deal with all of it, from what I'm aware of. Something like a medical plan for a bunch of agents, like in sports, I guess. Most of you don't need too much in the way of care, as we are seeing here. In fact, most heroes don't bother coming in for care unless it is severe. Anyway, seeing firsthand what you did here tonight, I'd spend my time caring for

you gratis; we'd just need to get the bandages and such."

She continued, "If we can't speed the healing, and can't seal the wounds, would you at least like some pain meds?"

"Sure."

"I'll get you a few for now, and ask Doc. Antais to fill out a prescription for you."

"I appreciate that."

"I don't get to work on supers, normally. I'm amazed that your skin feels so ... normal, yet is so strong."

"It's not all happy times, these changes to the body. I've destroyed my nice car already because I wasn't watching my strength enough."

"Wow, that's depressing. It'll get expensive, too."

"Yeah. Well, I think I'm going to go home and lie down to let this heal."

"Thank you for helping everyone here tonight. Although, when we were checking rooms a lot of people had been kidnapped ... or lost."

"Kidnapped?"

"That's what they were saying, there were a dozen or so mutants kidnapped. They killed some of those that looked like a 'normal' human. I feel sorry for all the guards they murdered too."

"That's not random, something's up. And I agree about the guards." I sighed, because I hated thinking about good people dying while trying to protect others.

"Good luck on finding out. Unfortunately, it won't bring back the dead."

"No, it won't. But I can try to stop them from doing something else dangerous."

"Rest tonight; go after them tomorrow."

I nodded, and then thanked Ana for her help. I mentioned that she ought to get some rest as well, when she could, because she looked tired.

I took some short, safer jumps to get home without incident. The wounds were annoying, but not debilitating. *Wow, I've been stabbed completely through, and I don't feel like I'm out of the game. Booyah!*

When I went to shower before bed, I realized something interesting. I had a residue of dust and blood on me, but I hadn't sweated at all. *Come to think of it, I didn't recall feeling hot since being in the hospital the first time in the evening. Very interesting.*

## Chapter 19 – The Day After

### Third Person Perspective

Stephanie slowly awakened, and felt a hand stroking her butt. Her head shot up with the realization, and then noticed she was draped across Rael's body.

He smiled, “You know, if you wanted to get your paws all over me, all you had to do was ask...” He felt her heart rate double when she woke up.

She blew out the air she'd indrawn and lay her head back down for a moment. Stephanie thought that she would have some respite from his thoughts and images, but the image quickly came into focus, his 'mindview' as she dubbed it. She wasn't sure if the distance, or lack thereof caused it to take up so much room in her visual space. His mental words sounded as clearly, as if he said them. She waited for the perverted onslaught from him, but it didn't come.

She noticed he was already excited, and thought that now would be a good time to get out of bed before he wanted to try something, even though she preferred to lay around in bed for a while most days. She remembered seeing him pull out the sweat pants from a drawer last night in his mindview and thought to get up and grab a pair.

She felt the dual senses again from Rael, his hand and her own backside. She was getting excited, and needed to get up now, or it might not be him getting more serious. Stephanie rolled off him quickly, and said, “I'm getting up.”

“Why the rush?”

“Because I don't trust one of us to not do more, and I don't know which.”

He laughed; a warm, understanding laugh rather than a mocking laugh. “Yeah, I can see that. Not even a good morning kiss?”

She smiled, walked around the bed to his side and gave him a quick kiss on the forehead. “I'm not entirely sure where I want this to go. I don't want to shut out Lance or make him feel like something's changed.”

She walked to his dresser and grabbed a pair of sweat bottoms. Rael was so distracted that he didn't think to wonder how she knew where to get them from.

She slipped them on, rolling them a few times on the waist due to the long length. “I'm going to go steal one of Lance's shirts,

hopefully that will help keep him from feeling distanced.”

Rael lay there with his hands under his neck, creating a distracting sight for her with the covers half down. She grinned at him as she walked out of the room.

She knocked lightly on Lance's door, then opened it and peered in. She heard the whisper of his mental voice, and images that flitted incoherently on her mindview of him.

Then she noticed the white shirt in his hamper with a great deal of blood, dust and cuts on it. *That's not the shirt he wore to the mall, and he had on a hospital gown top when we came home.*

Lance wore only boxers, the covers were all on the floor off to the side of the bed. Stephanie quietly walked around to the side of his bed, and saw the angry red scar on his abdomen, along with another red scar on his left shoulder.

She took one of his shortest t-shirts from his closet and slipped it on. It showed a lot of neck and collarbone, but covered the rest of her body like a tent. She was sure she could fit four of her in the shirt.

The images from him made no sense. Rather than stay near him and watch the equivalent of a nonsensical television show, she left the room. She noted that the rooms were close enough to have Rael's mindview visible in her visual space as well.

The mindview faded once she put some distance between them, but the words lasted throughout most of the house.

She visited the facilities out of habit, yet found no need to relieve herself. She also thought it strange that no body hair had grown longer since yesterday. *Someone mentioned regeneration – that should make the hair grow faster, not slower. Unless it is either in our control somehow, or I no longer have most of my body hair. Strange. Well, at least now I make my own test subject for my genetics coursework into the study of human regeneration of tissue.* She was excited about sneaking into the lab to do tests in the next few weeks.

She studied her hair in the mirror for a while. The metallic gold hair had grown as far down as the bottom of her shoulder blades in the back. It reflected light as though it were metal, but felt like normal hair.

She walked out when Rael came out of the bedroom. He wore just the sweat bottoms. Sure enough, he hoped she'd like seeing him without a shirt. She smiled, but rolled her eyes. Stephanie walked up to him, and ran her hand across his cheek. His face was very slightly rough, like he'd have late in the day.

She'd asked, “Is your beard normally longer than this the next day?”

“Huh?” He ran his hand across his chin for a moment. “Yeah, this is short. Like my five o'clock shadow.”

"Kind of like when we got hit by the bomber?"

"Yeah ... yeah! Wow, that's odd."

"Same thing with me," she said.

He raised an eyebrow. "You shave?"

"Not my face, silly."

"Oh. Nice, that'll save time for us."

She let him have the facilities, and headed to the kitchen for some fruit and coffee. *The nice thing about Sundays, I don't have to get up so early to get to class. Speaking of, do I continue to get my degree? I suppose I might as well, I'm paying for it, and deserting the scholarships doesn't sound fair. Plus I'd make a better role model to finish my degree and be a H.E.R.O. Take my classes in the morning, be a super in the afternoon/evening? That could work.*

*Hmm, I wonder how much information I can 'learn' from someone with the mindview in a short time? This could make for an interesting few days coming up.*

Rael joined her in the kitchen. He said, "My morning routine is different. Not to pry, but is yours?"

She said, "Yeah, I just figured it was the odd eating schedule though." She grabbed her purse for the cell phone the Captain had given them. It was missing.

She said, "Lance went out last night with the phone. He's got a very bloody shirt in his room."

"His shirt got all bloody from the mall."

"That shirt was black; this one is white and gray ... or was before the blood stains, and some kind of dust."

Rael stood in a flash, "Is Lance all right?" Stephanie stared at him a moment. He moved extremely fast.

"He's okay on the surface. He's got some nasty red scar areas."

He sat back down. "Yeah, but if he heals like I seem to, he'll be healed in no time. Something like six bullets worked their own way out of my body only minutes after getting shot."

She said, "I wonder if the phone keeps a record of tasks accepted." She got up and headed toward Lance's room. "I'll be right back."

She quietly entered his room, and found the cell phone quickly. She didn't notice his thoughts change slowly as he woke up when she left.

"Sure enough, he responded to two calls. Only one is marked complete though. A super fight and collapse of a bar, and then an all points for aid to Iron Cross. He had pushed the button for 'accept' but never marked finished. The all points has a voice file on it."

She pushed the button to play the file, and Captain McCain's statement about the mass attack played for them. "Oh my god. Why didn't he call us?" Then she noticed Lance's mindview appear in her

vision and grew in size. He must be coming toward her...

"Because I figured you two would be, uhh, sleeping by then," Lance answered from the entryway. "Then, I destroyed my mustang by accident, and then found how far I could leap, and never had time in all that to get a call off to you. It would have taken too long for you to get ready and drive there."

He'd thrown on sweat pants as well. *What, do these two walk around the house half dressed when I'm **not** here?* She said, "You got hurt."

"Yeah, small scrapes at one call, then it got nasty at the hospital."

"So what happened?"

"A group of all mutants attacked. Good sized group. They kidnapped as many mutants as they could and killed everyone else possible. I saw the biggest, nastiest mutant I could imagine last night. It, well, he, had four arms and daggers for hands on two of them. He had to be 7 feet tall. By the way, I let them know my code name is Spartan."

Stephanie said, "That's not good. There's got to be something up – you just don't get a random group of what, a dozen mutants to all attack a hospital together and just happen to kidnap others?"

Rael said, "Possibly even more intriguing is the thought that there's such a large group of mutants out there. Almost nothing shows of them on the news, ever. What the hell's up with that?"

Stephanie said, "Makes you wonder if the government is doing something with the news agencies to keep things quiet. Either that or the mutant group is really laying low well. Perhaps those that look 'more' human are doing the shopping and such for the others."

Lance said, "Yeah, but how would they pay for the food, shelter, clothing, etc.? Unless ... are people going missing at times?"

Rael said, "Give me a break. What are they, vampires? Lurk around in the dark and mug or kill people?" Stephanie could see that Rael identified with them in his mind.

Lance said, "It does sound farfetched."

Stephanie said, "You guys are mental cases. They could be doing remote work over the web for people. Programmers, bloggers, manuscript editors, SEO, teaching, and editing, etc."

Lance said, "Okay, so we can't work under the assumption that they are doing something outright illegal for work ... except for the fact that they just murdered a bunch of people and kidnapped others."

Stephanie said, "Yeah ... true. Did any of them survive? I might be able to pull some information out of them as to where they stay, or what they plan to do."

Lance said, "How? Rael would be more effective on threatening someone."

Rael said, “No. You didn't see the effect she had on people in the hospital corridor. The mutant was lying there cowering in fear of her. So were pretty much everyone else.”

Lance looked at Stephanie. She certainly didn't **look** scary. She actually looked kind of cute in the massive shirt. *Hey, that's my shirt!* “Hey, isn't that my shirt?”

She just grinned at him, winked, and then stuck her tongue out at him.

Lance smiled, “So ... what if I wanted my shirt back, like right now?”

His mindview told her that he only joked, so she decided to tease him. “I guess I'll have to take it off right now then and give it back.” She gave him a pouting look.

“What? No, uh, I didn't mean... I was just joking.”

She laughed.

Rael said, “So, would you give the sweatpants back if **I** asked?” He grinned, and his eyes said he debated on it.

She laughed at him next. “Sure I would. However, this shirt is so big it stretches to my knees, so it wouldn't help you any.”

*Damn her, and Lance for his monster shirts!*

Rael said, “Wait a second, that reminds me now – I have clothes for you guys in my trunk.”

Lance asked, “In your trunk?”

Stephanie narrowed her eyes for a moment. *Now he brings it up. Not as clever as you think you are, Rael, not when I'm watching 'Rael TV' as we sit here. What would Kell say at school, something like 'All your thoughts are belong to us' type line? Oh great, if I hear what all my study buddies are thinking all the time, I'll end up picking up more geek speak than I ever wanted.* She sighed.

“So ... did you plan on bringing them in?” She smiled at him.

“Sure, be right back.” He grabbed his keys and walked out to the car. The neighbor lady across the street stared at him from her lawn. He waved at her and smiled. She waved back. He retrieved the two sets of clothes from the trunk and brought them back inside.

He plopped the clothing on the table for the two of them. Stephanie separated out her clothes, raising an eyebrow at the missing brassiere. His mindview showed her that he was quite pleased with himself. He didn't even bother to hide the immature grin on his face.

She took the clothes into the bathroom and changed. While actually less comfy, it felt good to wear her own clothing.

She reentered the dining room when the phone rang. Lance said, “Rael, you may want to make a habit of answering the phone. If I do something too quickly I seem to break it lately.”

Rael grabbed the phone, "Rael here."

He handed the phone to Lance, "Some woman claims to know you..."

Lance looked surprised. *Oh my, did one of those girls look up my phone number? How'd they get my name?* He took the phone and said, "Hello?"

"Hi, Lance, it's Mom."

He pointed at Rael, put his fist into the other palm and ground it a little. "Hi, Mom. So what's up?"

"Your face is in the paper and you are asking **me** what's up, kiddo?"

"Uh, it is? There weren't any news photographers there..."

"Thanks a lot for leaving your poor, old mom out in the cold on itsy bitsy changes like you've obviously had."

Rael heard her clearly even from the other side of the table, and laughed at the joke. He said, "Yeah, like she's poor or old."

Lance ran to the door to get the Sunday paper while she continued. Rael noted how heavy his footsteps were on the floor, and Stephanie picked up on it from Rael's thoughts. Lance's mother said, "So, I'm up on the meteor shower. Not much debris fell over here; apparently, Metrocity got hit hard. The paper is filled with articles on things related to it."

"I don't see me in it."

"Page 2. The meteor shower itself covered page one. First, are you all right? Second, I want to know what changed?"

He glanced over the article while he spoke. "I'm fine, as are Rael and Stephanie. Both changed as well. I seem to be similar to you. Extremely strong, have body armor. I found out I can jump several miles last night. I heal severe injuries over six hours or less. Hmm. I think that's it so far. Hey, they're pretty kind to Psycom, Hellshock, Captain McCain and me in the article." He sat back down and spread the paper out on the table.

Stephanie put her arm around his neck and half laid over him to read it as well. She said into the phone, "Hi, Mom." She'd been calling Ms. Casey, 'mom' for as long as she could remember. Her own mother hadn't been in her life at all, to her knowledge, and since her father traveled so much, he'd sent her over to stay with Ms. Casey quite often.

"Well hello, dear. You're there early?" *Busted!*

Stephanie said, "Umm, we, ah, had a late movie night last night, so I crashed here."

"Dear, how did Lance have time to change last night, get involved in the attack on the hospital, and the issue on the bar, plus do an interview with a blogger and still fit in a movie?"



Stephanie coughed. "Okay, okay. There were some ... issues with my new powers at the hospital. Rael threatened me if I tried to go home alone last night."

"That sounds more reasonable. Lance, hand her the phone please."

He said, "Would you accept no or something?"

"No, give her the phone." He handed Stephanie the phone and put his face in his hands. "Doh. Don't say anything incriminating, please!"

Stephanie said, "Yes, ma'am?"

"Are any of you injured?"

"No, we really are all fine. Although Lance has two big, nasty scars on his shoulder and abdomen." Lance gave her a pleading look.

"So, is he hiding anything?"

Stephanie looked at Lance, focusing on his mindview. It zoomed up in her mind's eye to cover her normal vision. He'd been thinking about the scenes last night, so she had a reasonable picture of some of the events from his point of view. *Oh, this memory reading is too cool...*

Rael listened to both sides of the conversation; he found that Ms. Casey's voice sounded clear to him even without being right next to the phone. *Hmm, this ought to be useful to sneak a little information out of people when they aren't aware of it...*

Stephanie's head jerked toward him at overhearing that thought and laughed.

"Is that laugh meant to show that he **is** hiding something?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was laughing at Rael's expression. Wow, no, Lance isn't covering anything up. He just hasn't mentioned how much he can lift or how much damage he can take. Last night he broke both my shoulder and my left humerus bones."

Lance looked sick, "You're being cruel now..."

"Did he? You said you were all right, though? Did he hit you?"

"He did. I'm fine now, apparently, I heal very fast. They were healed within hours for sure. But no, he didn't hit me. Both times were due to him just being a big, clumsy, but helpful brute."

Rael doubled over laughing at that comment. Lance burned red in embarrassment.

"Have you discovered what you can do yet?"

"I can ... cause fear in people. I can hover in the air, though I haven't had a chance to play with that yet. I can force them to run away from me, although that might be the fear thing. And I heal fast. That's, ah, about it so far. Oh, and my hair on my head all fell out and re-grew solid gold. None of the rest of my hair is growing though – is

that normal?”

“My hair didn't change, but Kiel, that's Rael's father, his hair did that. I've only seen a few pictures of it before the change though, not in person. The other hair growth or stoppage seems to be pretty common with us. I've found that when I really want my hair to grow to change styles it will, but only then. When I get a haircut and like it, it stays that length. The rest of my body hasn't grown hair in a long time. I don't sweat either, which is pretty handy on the construction sites I work on. Have you since last night?”

Stephanie said, “Wow, that's going to be great with the hair! Hey, have either of you noticed if you sweat since last night's change?”

Rael debated for a moment and said, “Not that I recall. I should have been sweaty after the fight when you first woke up, but don't recall it. I was beat up bad enough to be wet from the blood though.”

Lance said, “You're right. If I had sweat, the concrete dust from my bar encounter would have stuck to me badly, but it didn't.”

Stephanie spoke into the phone, “Nope, none of us recall sweating so far. Why is that?”

Ms. Casey stated, “Something about our metabolism takes excess heat and converts it to the energy we need or use for our special powers. We also tend not to get cold, so that's a plus too.”

“Oh, I thought your body armor kept you warm, so I never asked why you didn't wear a winter coat when you went to work.”

“It would do that too, I suppose. Blasts of heat or fire can damage my clothing, but it takes a lot to actually burn me. If you all changed, I want a new picture of you all sent to me, or at least a high detail picture emailed so I can print it out. Would you put my son back on?”

“Sure thing. Good speaking with you again, Mom.” She smiled sweetly at Lance as she handed the phone back to him. She gave him a big smooch on the cheek and went back to hanging over his shoulder to read the paper.

“Whatever she claims I did, I didn't do Mom. I'm innocent.”

“So are you planning to join the H.E.R.O. program? Did you enjoy your first two forays into superheroing?”

“Yup, on Monday we've been told to go in and get setup. We met Captain McCain, the regional head of the H.E.R.O. program already, and it went well. I even saved his butt from a big mutant ready to carve him apart at the hospital late last night. And yeah, I did enjoy them. I got hurt both times, but even the bad stab wounds weren't so bad I couldn't handle them.”

“Why did you give an interview to a blogger on your first night out?”

"A ... what? No, I didn't give an interview."

"Sure you did, a blogger from Metro University says she spoke with you and discussed your powers with her. She even has some pictures of you with her and her girlfriends. Apparently the newspaper also got a story from her about it, and printed it on page D5."

He flipped to the page. Stephanie marveled at the muscle moving under his skin as he did it. *Interesting, I could at least move his torso when I leaned up against him before, now he's like a statue until he moves, barring the soft skin.* She ran her hands over his arms and torso while she read.

Stephanie said, "You took **pictures** with some girls?"

"Wow, well ... at least Debbie was good enough to be nice to me. A really good light in the article too. Very cool. I wonder if that's why she gave me her name and number?"

Ms. Casey said, "You took pictures with the blogger and her friends, and then got her phone number?"

"Well, she did ask a lot of questions, but I thought they were just interested in me. I don't recall her saying she was a blogger though. Great, so did she give me her number just because she wants me to be a 'source' for her? Man, I hate being used."

Ms. Casey asked, "So what, you finish breaking up a fight, rescue people from a building collapse, then go hang out with the crowd?"

"It wasn't like that! She practically tackled me when I tried to go around the crowd and just wanted pictures with me. Then she seemed so excited about meeting a super that she started asking me questions."

Rael said, "So take her out for dinner or something and embarrass her."

Lance replied, "Not cool. I'm not about to do that to someone."

Stephanie chimed in, "Besides that, if he did that, she'd just blog about it and hurt his reputation. It wouldn't even be libel."

Ms. Casey said, "Do what to someone?"

"Sorry, Mom, two conversations going on at once. Oh, Rael wants me to get revenge on her."

"You know better than to do that."

"I know you just heard my response to him. Besides, maybe she could be a good news outlet for me, or us. Like a PR person."

"Good. I'll look up the costume maker I know and send you an email. If you go out in normal clothes you'll spend a ton of money on clothing, and I know how much you love shopping."

"Thanks, mom. Sorry I didn't call earlier, there hasn't exactly been much time to breathe since we changed last night. I **did** plan to call you today."

"I believe you, dear. Be careful out there, all right? That and always remember that protecting people takes top priority. You've done

a good start in the paper at least. Love you.”

“You too, Mom. Bye.” He hung up the phone.

“Thanks a lot, Steph. You enjoying your gropage?”

She smiled, “Very much, thanks. I just noticed that I used to shift your torso when I leaned on you. Now you don't even move until you shift position or something. Your muscles are ... huge.” She didn't mention that she also felt waves of enjoyment as she ran her hands over his torso as though it was being done to her. It was an interesting sensation coming through his mindview.

“I like the change. I wonder if I'll have to work out to maintain my build now. Wait, how **can** I work out? The gym doesn't have weights for a few tons or something.”

He used his cell phone to text his mom about if she had to work out to maintain her build. She was powerfully built as well, at least ever since the change before he was born. As with most other female bricks, though, her body had not become extremely wide and thick, simply heavily muscled.

## Chapter 20 - Friends

### Third Person Perspective

The doorbell rang. Rael hopped up and jogged to the door. Lance watched him and said to Stephanie, "He's faster than he used to be. A lot faster."

Rael opened the door to find Tina Raddatz standing there. She was one of the other serious workout partners at the gym that happened to have a similar schedule, so Rael, Stephanie and Lance had gotten to know her well the last few years.

She was a petite 5'4" woman, 22 years old, with dark brown eyes and shoulder length curly black hair. She was very toned from all the workouts, though not overly muscled. She was always very bouncy and full of energy. She did mortgages for a living, and went out clubbing with them at night on occasion. They were all good friends with her.

She was momentarily distracted by his lack of clothing. When she finally looked up at his face, her eyes showed her surprise. Her mouth hung open while she stared at his eyes.

Rael slowly grinned, "Morning, Tina."

Her gaze was bound by his unusual eyes as she said, "Uh, hiya, Rael. You guys didn't work out this morning. Then I noticed Lance in the paper, and just had to stop by and see him..."

"Do the eyes bother you?"

"No, actually they remind me of Leemon, my pet crested gecko. Odd though. I take it that Lance isn't the only one that's changed?"

He mocked at pouting. "Lance? You came to see Lance? I'm hurt. But no, I'm pretty obvious."

She laughed, "You weren't in the paper. Do you feel all right?"

"I feel great. Want in?"

"Sure, thanks." She smiled at him.

Stephanie undraped herself from Lance when Tina came in and said, "Hey Tina, whatcha doing here?"

Tina stopped for a moment with a look of confusion. "Do you guys all live here?"

Stephanie said, "No, I don't." Already Tina's mental voice had begun 'talking' near Stephanie, and when she got close, her mindview joined that of the others. Three mindviews took up nearly half of her visual space.

Tina stared at Stephanie a moment, "Your hair looks great. Did

you get it colored yesterday?”

Stephanie walked over and hugged Tina. “No, my hair changed when I did.”

“I like it. Eyes changed too then, that's a pretty exotic color. And what's your perfume? I love it.”

Stephanie could see it was true in her thoughts. *I like my new lie detector.* She smiled. “I'm not wearing any perfume. Actually, I don't have any of my own stuff here, so I don't even have deodorant on.” *Oh, my god, I hope I smell good. I need to start keeping amenities here or something.* Her skin tingled in a wave down her body. *That's odd.*

Tina looked befuddled for a moment, and then her face cleared. “Yeah, you smell **really** good.” She stepped in close to Stephanie again and inhaled. “You're lying ... you've got some kind of perfume on. God, it smells awesome.”

She abruptly hugged Stephanie again, driving her face down into Stephanie's neck, then up by her ear and through her hair. “I just want to inhale you.” She pulled back slightly to look Stephanie in the eye.

Stephanie blinked at Tina's odd behavior and asked, “Are you all right?”

“Even your breath smells great.” She kissed Stephanie, who stood there in shock for a moment.

Stephanie didn't respond to the kiss until the dual feedback began to affect her again, as it did with Rael last night. She felt Tina's soft lips and tone body, and Tina's hands starting to run across her back and side. Tina was getting very excited by the kiss, the smell and the touching. Every touch had double the effect on Stephanie. The kiss was unbelievably stimulating.

Lance had seen Stephanie kiss girls in the dance clubs before. He thought she did it to tease the guys. But this was different. She didn't just kiss Tina, she ... made out with her.

Rael quietly said, “Holy crap. Wow.”

Lance said, “Yeah, I've never seen her do that to another girl.”

“No, can't you **smell** her? I'm drooling, and not with hunger.”

Lance said, “Yeah, yeah I can. She's got great perfume on.”

“Dude, she's not **wearing** any perfume. She was hanging over you before; did she smell like that?”

“Of course, she smelled great before. Hold on a second.”

Lance stood up and walked over to the girls. As he closed the distance, he could smell just how wonderful her aroma was. It was unreal. *Something's up. She didn't smell like **this** before. Wow.*

He hated to break up such an exotic scene, but he thought it best to stop them before they got too far. He touched each of their shoulders.

“Hey, are you two all right?”

Tina stopped the kiss long enough to see who was touching her. She dropped her hand away from Stephanie's chest out of embarrassment and stepped back. Stephanie moved to close the distance, but Lance gently held her back.

Lance said, “Hey, are you all right?”

Stephanie stood in a stupor for a minute. She was caught up in both her own and Tina's emotions; it was hard not to continue with Tina. Lance led them to the table and gently pushed them down onto chairs.

Rael said, “I didn't realize you liked girls so much.”

Stephanie said, “No, I...” She flushed bright red. *I can't exactly bring up this double sensation thing.* “She kissed me.”

Rael replied, “Oh, well, I guess that explains everything. Soooo, Tina. I didn't realize that **you** liked girls so much.”

Tina blushed. “I normally don't do that sort of thing. I'm not even sure why I did.”

Lance said, “Well, assuming you two don't want to borrow the couch or something for a while, how are you today, Tina?”

Tina looked all too happy to switch to another topic. Her face was still bright red. She coughed and said, “Ah, I see you have the paper. You guys weren't in to work out this morning, and when jogging I noticed Lance's picture in the paper. I thought I'd come over to see what's up. So ... what's it like?” She watched Lance as she spoke.

Lance asked, “Is this staying in this room? I would never have talked with that Debbie from the blog if I'd known it'd get spread around.”

Tina looked deep in thought for a moment and said, “Okay.” Stephanie saw that she intended to keep the promise, but was depressed about not being able to gossip about it.

Lance said, “Which part?”

“What's it like being super? You're sitting around half nekkid, I can see the difference from yesterday's workout. You look hot, by the way.” She smiled at him.

Lance smiled. *She's obviously been paying close enough attention to notice, interesting.* “No, I'm not hot, cold either, more like it's just pleasant in the room. It's a mix of exhilarating and painful; painful from the change, and from being clawed and stabbed repeatedly in one night. Exhilarating to be able to lift those 30 lb. concrete blocks for buildings as if they weigh nothing, and jump for miles ... literally. Painful in that I've already destroyed my mustang.” He looked sad at that.

“Wow, that part sucks. Your car is destroyed? I'm sorry to hear

that. So, you like, have more muscle now. How much are you up to?"

"I have no idea. How can I really test it? The gym could handle perhaps one thousand pounds on the best bar, but it has to be much more than that."

"Have you tried to lift a car?"

"I can drive my foot directly through the floor of one. My fingers can bend the metal on the roof of an SUV. Trying to pick one up would do severe damage, I'd think. Though I could get mine and mess around with it, considering the damage."

"Hmm. Okay, they called you a brick, what's that mean?"

"It means I'm a large, strong and armored super."

"Armored?"

"Yeah, bullets don't hurt me, or at least that one didn't. Not sure about most things, though the claws on those mutant guys cut me, not sure why. Part of the building collapsed on me and it didn't hurt. The dust was annoying though."

"Can I touch your skin?"

Rael said, "You can touch mine." He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

"You're armored too?"

"I don't appear to be."

"You've got more muscle too. For that matter, you do too, Stephanie, I could feel how solid you are when we, uh, hugged."

Tina headed around the table to Lance and touched his shoulder. "Wow, your skin is soft. I thought it'd be, like, hard. The muscles underneath feel extremely hard though." She proceeded to run her hands over his arms and torso. "They don't move even when I press on them. My god, your muscles feel like they're made of metal. What's this scar from?" She touched his left shoulder where the blade had sliced into him.

"Mutant had a big blade for one of his hands, he chopped down into me. It healed a lot since, what, 2 or 3 AM?"

Tina sat back down and looked at Stephanie. "So can you do anything cool too?"

"I can apparently cause fear in people. And float in the air. I'm hoping I can fly, I was thinking we'd go out and test ourselves a little today."

"Wow, that'd be awesome if you could really fly!"

"Oh, and the fast healing. Not sure how to test that. I'm not into masochism."

Rael piped up, "Not that you **know** of yet." He grinned.

Stephanie rolled her eyes.

Tina asked, "So, like, what can you do, Rael?"



"I'm stronger, but don't know by how much. I can see well in the dark. Sharper hearing and smell. Heal fast, and I'm not sure I **need** to test mine. I was shot I think six times last night within a few minutes time, plus punched, stabbed and clawed. Everything healed up in a few minutes, perhaps ten tops. Oh, and my fingers can turn into claws. The claws can dig through concrete without a problem."

Lance said, "If yours can turn back, I wonder why the others with claws and blades don't do it?"

Rael said, "Mine only went away when I really, really wanted to be able to, umm, carry Steph without hurting her." *Well, that and touch her while I carried her.*

Stephanie smiled as she watched his mental flashback of the memory.

He continued, "Oh, and Kim mentioned that many of the 'mutants' kind of go crazy when they change. They get this bloodlust and actually attack or eat people. That type of craziness may push them far enough over the edge to not be able to control it."

Stephanie saw in his mindview just how close he'd gotten to biting Kim as he replayed the scene in his mind. He was worried that he might bite someone unintentionally one day too. *Oh, my, is that why he keeps nuzzling my neck, he wants to bite me?* She focused for a minute on sorting through his memory of last night. It relieved her that he didn't appear to have the urge to bite her.

Lance asked what Stephanie had been thinking, "So ... you haven't had this urge?"

Rael looked at him. "Actually, I have. I nearly bit Kim when I was testing, ah, yeah, well, I nearly bit her."

Tina asked, "It's not like a vampire thing is it? You bite someone and they change into a mutant too?"

"I doubt it. I'm guessing that most mutants don't exactly bite people and let them live."

Tina said, "Of course, I guess I'd rather Stephanie bite me if it did work that way. Flying would be like, awesome."

Stephanie said, "And the mind control thing the master vampires have over their slave vampires would rock. You wouldn't be able to stop next time." She wickedly grinned at Tina.

Her joke triggered a hailstorm of thoughts from the three. She laughed as she heard all three of their thoughts debate on if Stephanie was into girls, would she have done it, etc. Rael wondered if he could push her into it with his power.

Lance said, "Well, regardless of Steph's vampiric leanings, I'd like to test out some of what I can do today."

Stephanie replied, "I agree. I want to see if I can fly, or just

float.”

“And I'd like to see if I can pop my claws and put them away on demand.”

Tina joined in, “And I'd like to watch. Can I come with you guys?”

Lance said, “Sure. First I need to get some eggs in me.”

Lance's phone beeped with new emails. He gently pushed the buttons, and found that he'd received the contact information for the costume maker, Dr. Turnquist, from his mother. She also mentioned that she hadn't needed to work out in 20 years. Her body maintained its muscle mass on its own, though moving objects weighing a few tons was common for her at work.

He said, “Good news guys, mom says that she hasn't had to work out to maintain her muscle mass or form.”

Stephanie said, “Wow, for how built she is, that's impressive.”

Tina said, “I'm jealous. Umm, assuming mom is well muscled, or has a great form?”

Stephanie said, “His mom's a brick, like Lance, but not so thick ... in body or head. She loves superheroes, but never fit into that mold herself. But, she can hang on the edge of a twenty-story building, and lift 3 ton massive steel girders by herself with ease. Think of a six foot tall body building amazon.”

Tina asked, “How big is your dad?”

Lance shrugged, “No idea. He got freaked out by mom's power before I was born and split.”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to bring up a sore spot.”

“It's not. My mom's always been great. She's got to be pretty excited right now. She's been hoping I'd go super my entire life. I couldn't have asked for better preparation. Or friends for that matter.”

Rael said, “Suck up.”

Stephanie said, “Okay, now to decide where to test this stuff. I don't think they'd appreciate us jumping off buildings downtown, for example.”

Rael said, “A rock quarry would be nice to see how big of rocks we can lift.”

Stephanie said, “Not very accurate though. However, a junk yard might be more useful for real items that we might encounter out in the city. Cars and such.”

Rael said, “Yeah, you and I can find out roughly how much we can lift too then. And Lance can throw a car up in the air so it lands on himself to see if he can take it.”

Lance said, “Don't need to. Police car ran into me at probably 20 to 30 miles per hour or more and it only knocked me back.”

"Fine, you can do it to test **catching** one then. You never know when a car will be lobbed at you."

Stephanie said, "You know, thinking about your mom made me realize, she still looks very young. We might age slower too."

Tina said, "Bite me now, please!"

Stephanie rolled her eyes, "Give me a break."

Tina said, "No, seriously. If this can spread, I want in. Come on, come on!"

Lance said, "You really think scientists haven't already determined if this could spread? That would have been huge news."

Stephanie said, "He's right, or at least one drug company would have tested a super to find some cure for cancer or heal tissue and made mongo bucks off it."

Tina said, "But what if it did? Lance, I'll do anything you want."

Lance looked surprised. "What?"

"Anything. Don't make me beg."

Rael jumped in, "I'd bite you, but how would you react if you turned into a mutant? Many of those seem to be pretty fugly. Tell you what, do anything **I** want, and I'll make Stephanie bite you."

Stephanie sighed. "Transferral of powers hasn't worked in the studies done so far. I'm in the genetics program, remember? I looked that up a long time ago. But, I haven't looked recently, and I don't recall the trials being by bite. So I'll look again. That might tell us some results. I can ask a few of my professors about it as well. Hell, some of my study buddies might have dug into it recently. Some of them are really into comic books and such, I'll bet that they've dug into it in the hopes they could be changed too."

Tina pouted. "If some reasonable checking doesn't show people turning into zombies, you'll try?"

Stephanie said, "Fine, if nothing bad turns up I'll bite you a few times."

Rael grinned wickedly, "She still has to sleep with me though."

Both of the women gave him a dirty look. Stephanie's mindview of Rael said he'd do it, too. Tina would as well if she thought it might work.

Rael said, "If Stephanie would check the phone book for places to train at, I'll cook. Are you hungry, Tina?"

"Sure, I'd have something healthy."

"Like we cook hardly anything but around here, look at us. Wait, think about what we looked like **before** changing."

## Chapter 21 – Vehicle Graveyard

### Third Person Perspective

Stephanie called junkyards while Rael cooked, and shortly found one that had vehicles junked so badly they wouldn't mind if they were damaged further. She had to explain what they wanted to do before the proprietor, Ray, would allow them to come. The only requirements were that the guy got to take pictures with them, and that they put any vehicles out of the way when done so his yard didn't get cluttered where he had to clean up after them.

She punched up the address on her phone's GPS and had a route planned in moments. Before they left, Stephanie asked Rael to bring a few strong hunting knives with him to test their armor and healing.

The guys dressed up in some workout gear, and they piled into Rael's car. Thirty minutes later, they stood outside Ray's Salvage. Ray was a wiry man with wrinkled, dirty clothing and the look of someone used to manual labor. They all shook hands with him, though he had a difficult time looking Stephanie in the eye with the shirt Rael had picked out for her yesterday.

He pointed out the section with the vehicles already stripped of valuable parts and reiterated the cleanup requirement. He also made them promise to accept all responsibility for injuries they took onto themselves. They agreed.

After they walked to the area, Lance quickly lifted a car on its side slightly, and then picked it up by the frame. He said, "It's light. Stand back a ways, I'm going to throw it up above me and try to catch it."

He turned the vehicle on its side and threw it in the air. It flew up about fifty feet, and dropped back down. He shifted to where it fell in an attempt to catch it. His right hand grabbed the frame, but the left missed, and the vehicle slammed him in the head. He grabbed the frame with his left before the vehicle bounced off him. Lance felt his head for a moment before laughing. He said, "That didn't hurt! Yeah, baby!"

Rael called over to him, "Do it again, I didn't get a picture of that! Damn it, that reminds me that my phone broke in that blast in the mall."

Lance complied, this time the car went up thirty feet before

falling again. He successfully caught it with both hands on the frame and kept it in the air. "Yeah!"

He jumped and flew into the air, still holding the car. His jump took him up over one hundred feet. The others watched as he climbed the distance equivalent to 10 stories and dropped back down toward them. They ran away on the chance that he didn't jump up straight. Lance felt the wind rushing through his hair as he fell. It exhilarated him, knowing that a fall wouldn't hurt.

Lance kept the car steady above him when he landed, although he buried his feet a foot in the gravel. He pulled his foot out and stepped away from the hole.

He tossed the car twenty feet off to the side onto another ruined vehicle. He yelled, "YEAH! I'm loving this!"

He ran back over to the car, picked it up again, and threw it straight in the air. While it ascended, he leaped up at it. He banged into it, but failed to grab the car. He continued to rise in the air while it plummeted to the ground below. It smashed with an explosive sound of metal rending. He fell back shortly after, landing on a knee and hand.

He was so excited, as he poised to jump again; his eyes glowed yellow and a yellow glow came from his skin from the head down to his feet. He tensed, then jumped and flew almost straight up out of sight.

Rael said, "Holy shit. I think he's going up a few miles."

Lance watched the ground recede from him for a dozen seconds, and as he continued to increase in altitude, he looked up and enjoyed the rush. There were few clouds in the air. He looked around and saw the vast expanse of Metrocity stretching in all directions. He reached his apex two miles or more in the air, he thought. It felt like flying to him.

He attempted to use his hands and feet to guide his fall back toward the graveyard. Lance felt nearly invincible. He was able to leap miles in a single jump. He had the strength of a comic book hero. Cars landing on him didn't hurt him. He successfully guided himself to it, but smashed down on top of several piled vehicles. They crumpled to the side from the impact and he rolled off to the side.

The others ran over to him, but he stood up laughing. "I love this!"

Stephanie said, "Well, I'd like to be a little reserved my first time. I don't have tank armor for skin. Would you take my foot and throw me **gently** in the air? Something like twenty feet up or so?"

"Sure." He clasped his hands together, she stepped into them with one foot, and he lightly tossed her up, as he would have done in a pool before they gained powers. She arced into the air about twenty-

five feet, and then dropped back down a short distance away. They all saw that she slowed down significantly before floating to the ground. Stephanie was not aware of doing anything to cause the slowdown. She jogged back over to Lance.

"Again please." He threw her again. He put more strength into it this time, and she shot up about fifty feet. As she fell, she had a mild panic attack seeing the wide-open space from five stories up. She stopped mid-air. Her heart beat wildly for a minute as she looked around. Her arms momentarily swung about in search of something to grab onto.

She hovered in the air, and felt an odd energy around her. She noticed that for the first time since the hospital last night, that all of the voices were gone. She was alone in her own head. It felt quiet; closing her eyes for a moment gave her pleasant darkness rather than a continuous video stream from someone nearby.

She put out her leg as though to step forward and her body glided in that direction. When she pulled her leg back to stop from taking the phantom step, stopped her forward motion. She tried to move down, but her body didn't move. She tried to take a step down and glided down toward the ground.

She lifted her knee up and she shot upward in a curving arc. Stephanie didn't know how to control her direction and twisted around, further worsening the arc. She screamed as she spun in a large backwards circle in the air, and then slammed into the ground a hundred feet away. She moved at one hundred miles per hour or faster on impact. Rael, Lance and Tina ran over to her, but she lay unmoving. Rael checked for a pulse, her heartbeat was strong. Stephanie was unconscious but alive.

Tina said, "Do we call for an ambulance?"

Rael said, "Let's give her a few minutes. She's healed multiple broken bones quickly already." Rael carefully checked her over for broken bones; the only obvious injury was a broken arm. He knew she'd heal that based on last night. The arm visibly bruised and returned to normal within about a minute.

After several minutes, Stephanie stirred and woke. "Ow," she mumbled.

Lance nodded, "Yeah ... ow. What did you fly into the ground for?"

She rubbed her head. "Duh, I didn't mean to. I didn't know jabbing my leg up would kick up my speed like that." She sat up, and shifted to rubbing the back of her neck. "You know how they say it's the sudden stop at the end of a fall that hurts? I'm with that guy."

Tina said, "You, ah, might want to avoid that next time. You

going to wait until tomorrow to continue?"

Stephanie squeezed along her limbs and ribs, searching for pain spots.

Rael asked, "Are you looking for wounds, or groping? Cause I could help..."

She gave him an evil eye and said, "Checking for broken bones. None broke, that's cool."

"Uh, hate to burst your bubble, but I checked you after you crashed. Your left humerus was broken, near the lower part of the bicep. It healed while you were unconscious."

"Really? I guess that's good. And heck no. I'm not giving up." She climbed to her feet and stretched her neck a few times. Then she stepped up as though onto a stair, and floated up. "It's actually pretty easy to do, I'm surprised. I think it's physical in nature, not mental."

She played like this for several minutes, moving up, down and around until she got the hang of how her body caused movement in the air. She pushed off as though to jump, and shot up in the air at a high speed, which seemed to increase as she stayed in that position. Moving her arms, she found that she could alter direction by changing their position slightly. It didn't seem to matter if they were near her sides; arms spread wide, or out in front of her.

The temperature dropped, and the air became slightly harder to breathe as she continued miles up, so she shifted direction to fly back down. While she felt the cold, it didn't seem to hurt or actually bother her skin. Her hair blew gently back behind her as she flew. Stephanie jabbed her knee up and her speed shot up again. The ground flew by unbelievably fast; she was now outside of Metrocity. She flew over a highway, and vehicles barely moved on the ground far below.

She flew around for a number of minutes while getting the hang of this fast flight. *Screw taking it slow, this is the best thing in the world!*

Stephanie couldn't believe how **right** this felt. She twisted, and did a slow roll in the air. She likened it to walking. Once she started, her body just moved and did its thing. She soon realized that the hand movements were unnecessary; aiming with her shoulders also changed her forward direction.

Something moved off to her right, and she saw a small jet flying in the same direction. She angled over to close the distance to it until she was a few dozen feet away. The pilot stared at her. She smiled and waved at him. His mouth moved, and she heard his mental voice as he spoke.

He thought, "Oh my god, a super! Hey, Christi, tell Mr. Desat about this!" Stephanie grinned, thinking that she'd probably have done the same thing in his place. She pushed her foot down a bit to try to

slow down, but used too much force, and the plane shot ahead. She jabbed her left knee up and began catching up to the plane. She focused on her speed, wanting to catch up now, and she shot forward, quickly overtaking the plane and flying past it.

She mumbled, "Darn it all!" She made a large curve to the left and looped around behind the plane again. She played with slowing and speeding up until she was able to pull up alongside the passenger windows. Several faces were in the windows. She smiled and waved at them.

She closed inside the wingspan, and heard them thinking and talking.

Mr. Desat said, "I want you to find out who this woman is. I've never seen her picture."

Christi, his assistant answered, "Yes, sir. She's very pretty, isn't she?"

He answered, "Indeed. Find out if she's a hero, criminal, or a hidden super as well."

Stephanie grinned at their conversation. She angled her shoulders back and looped up into the air away from the jet. On her way back to the junkyard, she practiced speeding up and slowing down at low altitudes so she'd better be able to follow alongside moving vehicles. She practiced against some vehicles on a highway for a few minutes until everyone began matching speeds to watch the flying super near the highway.

Rael watched her fly off and said, "She's going to love that ability."

Lance nodded and replied, "Yeah. Jumping kicks butt, but freeform flight ... wow. It'll come in handy for getting to crime scenes quickly."

Tina sighed and wished she could fly.

Rael said, "Okay, Lance. Let's play combat. I'm going to try to chuck a car at you; you catch it as if it had people in it."

Lance grinned. "Good test." He walked forty feet or so away and waited.

Rael walked over to a car and grabbed the frame. Picking up the car was fairly easy. It was like a large, unwieldy medicine ball. He braced and threw it at Lance, but the vehicle only flew about twenty feet. Rael sighed, "Well, at least I can pick up a car."

Lance said, "Um, you know it's missing the engine and other parts? Plus, no weight from people."

"Jerk, shut up." He walked over to the car and picked it up again, then moved to about twenty feet from Lance. He lobbed the car



again, this time reaching Lance. Lance easily caught the underbody frame in his huge hands. His body barely shifted from the catch.

“Should I throw it back at you?”

“Hell no. Lightly toss it, but I have a feeling that if you can toss a car up a hundred feet, a real sideways throw wouldn’t be hard.”

“Fine, ya big sissy.” Lance gently tossed the car to Rael. He marveled at the thought that this vehicle, probably a thousand pounds or more, felt more like a giant Styrofoam object than heavy metal. It even bent in like squishy Styrofoam if he squeezed much.

The vehicle flew toward Rael. He watched it come at him slowly, easily shifted his position and grabbed a pair of strong points on the underbody. The force of stopping the car wasn’t easy, but he did it. He grunted as he absorbed the main force of the car.

Tina clapped from off to the side and cheered. She said, “If you want to act like the car has an engine and people, grab some more metal and squish them on top of that car, Lance. I see you bending metal with your fingers.”

Lance said, “That’s a good point.” He walked over to another vehicle and began ripping it apart. The sound of the metal tearing wasn’t enjoyable, but none of the metal parts withstood being torn apart.

Rael said, “I told you that you’d make a good garbage dude.”

Lance stepped over to another vehicle and double hand smashed down on the rooftop. It collapsed in as though made of aluminum foil. Even the reinforced frame bent easily to his strength. He said, “Guys, I don’t know how much I can really lift, but this stuff feels really, really light and flimsy to me.” He ripped off a piece of undercarriage and crushed it in his hands.

Rael attempted to mimic him. He easily bent in a rooftop, though the crash resistant frame only bent, it didn’t crush completely inward. He tried pulling the frame apart, but it took a mighty effort to rip the bar in half. He growled and bared his fangs at the car, and his fingers grew out into claws as he pulled on it. He swiped at another part of the bar with his claws and easily ripped through the metal.

In a surprised voice, he said, “Whoa, that’s easy.”

He raked across the roof of the vehicle, easily tearing through the metal under each fingertip. He did this a few more times, and then flipped the car on its side. Then he attacked the stronger underbody metals. His claws tore through them as well.

Lance said, “Well, you’ve got your name now. Big Kitty. Or maybe Fluffy. You just need a steady supply of cars to use as scratching posts.”

Tina snickered, and even Rael smiled at that. He said, “Hmm. I

am a little like a big kitty now. Like hell if I'm using a dumb name like that though."

Tina said, "Yeah, but you could have this cute pink kitten face on your shirt."

Rael said, "Pink? Where did pink come into this?"

"I like pink."

"Okay, Tina so doesn't get to pick out my costume. Pink? Sheesh. Lance, I want to test some damage output on each other, you okay with that?"

"Sure, I've already been stabbed completely through with a mutant blade."

Rael stepped over to him and said, "I'll try punching you first. Where do you want it?"

"Gut." Lance patted his stomach.

Rael pulled his arm back and slammed Lance in the stomach. Lance shifted a little, then shook his head and smiled. "You've got nothin', my friend. Try again in the chest."

Rael jabbed him several times in the chest. The punches made loud thudding noises. Lance shrugged, "It really doesn't hurt, man."

Rael nodded and said, "Your body is unbelievably solid. Hold on." He walked over to a car door and punched it in. The door dented severely inward. "Huh. I've got some decent force behind the punch. You must have some great armor."

"Dude, a moving car ran into me last night and it didn't hurt."

"All right, let me try clawing a forearm."

Lance held out his arm. "Careful on the first try, I'd hate to lose an arm if you're overzealous."

Rael nodded. He ran a single claw down Lance's forearm, putting some pressure on it. The claw tore into the arm, drawing blood immediately.

Lance grimaced. "Yeah, that smarts. It doesn't surprise me though, this mutant at the bar scene had claws, he ripped into my arms and gut too."

Rael said, "My claws don't look like bone, I wonder if whatever gives you your armor, gives the same strength to this material?"

Tina said, "Give me one of those knives, Rael. Let me try to cut into one of your claws. I promise not to cut it off."

"Okay." He handed her one of the hunting knives. She unsheathed it and took hold of his right ring finger. "Ready?"

"Yeah."

She ran the blade across it, but barely even left a mark. A moment later, the mark smoothed over. "Huh, that's interesting. You see the mark disappear?"

“No, cut again.”

She cut harder this time, putting much of her strength into the motion. She scored the claw slightly, but it was still unremarkable. The groove smoothed over within seconds. She said, “That’s pretty cool. Mind if I cut your arm?”

“Go for it.”

She ran the blade over his forearm, barely cutting him. Blood didn’t even well up before the thin slice sealed over. She looked up at his eyes. “Okay, deeper this time.” She put some strength into a serious cut on his forearm. It cut in, but far less than she expected it to. Blood appeared just in time for the cut to heal. “Wow. Should I try stabbing you?”

Rael nodded.

She shifted her grip on the knife and stabbed downward at his forearm. The knife went in an unremarkable amount and she immediately pulled it back out. Again, the wound sealed over in seconds. Rael said, “That barely even hurt.”

Lance said, “Try that cut on my arm, Tina.” He held out his arm.

She stabbed at his arm, and felt the impact as the blade hit the skin. It stopped there, not even penetrating the skin. She ran her free hand over his arm and looked up at his eyes. “Wow, that’s cool. Did it hurt?”

“No, it felt sharp, but didn’t feel like I got stabbed.”

Rael said, “Okay, let me try the knife, see if my strength makes much difference.”

Tina handed him the blade, and he jabbed at Lance’s arm. The blade barely made a mark on his skin. “Wow, you’d think steel would do better.”

Lance said, “I dunno, it couldn’t do too much more than a gunshot, I’d think. You want me to test punching you, in case you have to fight a brick?”

Rael said, “Sure. Glad I heal fast.” He worked the kinks out of his neck and braced for a punch before handing the knife to Tina. Lance jabbed at Rael’s chest. He didn’t use his full power, but also didn’t hold a lot back. The impact made a loud thud and Rael flew back twenty feet or so. He hit the ground and rolled to his feet. He made a face and put his hand on his chest. “Ow. That hurt far worse than a gunshot.” He pulled his shirt off as he walked back over. They watched as the wound turned into a bruise over the next 15 seconds and cleared up. Rael took a deep breath.

Rael said, “Okay, do it again, hard this time.”

Lance nodded. He pulled back and roundhouse punched Rael in

the chest. Rael braced for the punch, but didn't expect the unbelievable force behind the punch. He flew back fifty feet or so and slammed into a vehicle. He fell to the ground and focused on breathing a moment. The others jogged over to him as he stood up.

Tina yelled, "Like, oh my god, are you okay?" She grabbed his shoulders.

Rael coughed and nodded. "Holy shit. That's a hell of a punch you've got, Lance. If we spar, I'm not going to just stand there and take it."

Lance said, "Good. A criminal brick might do the same thing I just did; you can learn to avoid it."

Stephanie took her time landing, slowing down hundreds of feet in the air for fear of smashing into the ground again. She stretched her neck from side to side, but felt no leftover effects from her prior crash.

Tina spotted Stephanie floating down toward them, and pointed her out to Lance and Rael. When Stephanie landed, she ran over and hugged her. "So? How was it? How fast did you go? Was it like, awesome?"

Stephanie laughed and returned the hug. "It was awesome! I can pass a private jet, I know that much. I didn't actually get a distance and time myself though."

Tina said, "You can use mile markers on a highway to test it. Just start your watch's stopwatch at one and fly for a while."

"Wow, that's a great idea. So what have you guys been up to?"

Rael said, "Ripping apart cars and beating on each other. You know, we both know we can lift you if you're out, you should see if you can lift us. It might be useful knowing if you can carry someone when flying."

Stephanie stepped in front of Rael, put her hands on the sides of his chest and lifted. She easily picked him up off the ground.

"Oh, my god. I can lift you up!"

Rael said, "It doesn't surprise me too much. I can lift and hold those beater cars over my head. I can't flip them around like Lance can, but I did throw a few about twenty feet."

She set him down. She stepped in front of Lance, and attempted the same with him. She was easily able to lift Lance as well, though neither of them felt light to her. Rael felt more like the weight of a large child prior to her change, but Lance pushed her limits.

She said, "I'm not sure how flying is going to work though, I used my hands to help guide me around."

Rael said, "Do you think that's set, or it might be a crutch? Come on, try carrying me while flying." He thought about holding

Stephanie, running his hands over her back. Her head snapped up to look at him. His eyes were closed though.

She wondered what he planned to try on her. "All right, I'll try. Try not to lock down my legs. I stepped up or down to control moving up and down slowly. Let me try to get into the air a little, then pick you up."

Stephanie closed her eyes and thought only about the flying. She stepped on an imaginary stair and pushed down. She felt energy around her, and sensed that she moved up.

She opened her eyes; she was about three feet above the ground. She grinned and looked down at the three of them.

Rael's hands were back to normal. Stephanie caught his thoughts that thinking about holding her helped return them to normal. It made her smile that he used holding her as his reasoning. Then she noticed through the mindviews of the others that she was looking at Rael rather dreamily. She shook her head and blushed. She practiced stepping up and down a few times to get a feel for controlling slow up and down movement. After she felt she could do it, she made a walking motion toward Rael and floated to him, approximately a foot off the ground.

Rael said, "How about I concentrate on holding on around your neck for the most part so you can focus on the flying?"

"Sounds good to me."

He faced her, and then slid his right arm around her neck, left around her torso. She 'heard' him think that he debated on kissing her. She looked into his catlike eyes, so close to her own. He grinned, gave her a quick kiss, and then put his chin on her shoulder. When he fully lifted his weight onto her, she felt it on her shoulders only lightly, and it didn't seem to move her in the air.

Rael was thrilled about the prospect of flying, but just as much to be able to hold Stephanie this close and smell her new fragrance.

She put her arms around his torso, smiled, stepped up and pushed off. They slowly flew up. Her heart rate increased as she planned her next move, due to residual fear of crashing again. She jabbed up the knee that wasn't directly in front of Rael and they shot into the air.

She discovered that she could change direction, by moving her upper body in the direction she wanted to go. It worked well even while holding onto another person. Stephanie sighed in relief.

Rael greatly enjoyed the flight. He easily held on around her neck, his arm and hand were locked in place with a grasp of iron.

The rush of flying again made Stephanie giddy and filled with excitement. Rael's mood heightened even more. She wasn't sure if

she'd used that other new power, but Rael yelled out "Woohoo!"

His mindview was huge, she saw as much through his eyes as her own. She felt her excitement mount from the additional emotion flowing through Rael's mindview. Adrenaline poured through her system, and they sped up even more. Rael yelled out in excitement again as the ground streaked past well below. The wind rushed against them loudly, there was a momentary boom, and noise went away.

Within another minute, they crossed the outer edge of Metrocity. She shot around the outer edge of the massive city in a large circle. Her skin tingled with excitement, and Rael tried yelling in joy. She couldn't hear him, but she heard his thoughts. She wasn't certain, but she had the feeling that they continued to speed up as they raced around the city's outskirts. In approximately ten minutes, they circled around the outskirts.

Rael got a major rush off the flight. He thought that she might have been accelerating even more as they flew, and tried yelling, "Yeah, baby girl! Faster!" Stephanie felt her heart racing as it had after the shot of adrenaline, and swung around the city again. This time it took only about five minutes to circle the city.

When they approached the rough area of the city where the junk yard lay, she put a foot forward to slow down. They felt and heard a boom sound around them, and rapidly slowed down. Within seconds, they went from supersonic to a hundred miles per hour. She realized that she didn't feel jolted from the sudden slowdown.

Rael said, "Wow! What a rush! You must have something that lets us breathe at such speeds; otherwise it'd be a pain in the ass."

"Yeah, I'm liking this flight thing! I'm not sure if you've noticed, but I didn't feel like you were being torn off me by wind shear, nor felt like I really had to do much to lift you to keep you with me."

She spotted the junkyard and flew them down toward it slowly.

Rael leaned his head back so he was nearly nose-to-nose with her. She felt that he was getting excited not just from the flying any more. He gently kissed her as they flew. It was an interesting sensation to her. His hair blew past her head, tickling her neck. Some body areas were cool where the air rushed against her, yet her torso so hot where he pressed against her. The kiss lasted for some time.

Rael's back slammed against a rusted bus in the junkyard. Stephanie was mostly spared from the impact but for her left knee and arm, and Rael's fang cutting her lip.

They dropped to the ground the last few feet. Rael shook his head a few times before he could speak. Stephanie gently rubbed her knee. They heard footsteps running closer as Lance and Tina came around the end of the bus.

Tina said, "Are you guys all right?"

Stephanie blushed as she said, "I will be; it feels like I just kneed a wall ... hard."

Rael coughed and mumbled, "Give me a minute."

Tina watched them both. Within a dozen seconds, Stephanie stopped rubbing her knee and forearm, and it now looked like she merely had blood on her lip rather than a cut.

Rael stood up and stretched. "I'd do it again." He grinned. Stephanie grinned back at him.

Tina said, "So ... I didn't realize you two were an item. That was quite a kiss..."

Rael just grinned at Tina and winked.

Stephanie looked at Rael and said, "I ... I'm not sure what we are." Rael's mindview showed that he'd hoped she would declare herself to him right then and there. *Sorry Rael, I just don't know if I want to take that big of a step...*

Tina said, "Wow, you two are over thinking things, the way you look at each other."

They both stared at her. She continued, "Like, you can't see the forest for the trees, anyone? Okay, ignore I said that. How did the flight go?"

Stephanie laughed, "Okay, okay. The flight was **awesome**. Better than awesome. I'm pretty sure Rael and I just broke the sound barrier on the way back. I **love this!**"

Rael said, "Hey, I've got an idea. You mentioned that it didn't seem hard to hold me, or me to hold you while you flew. Let's imagine that I'm a person stuck on a roof that is collapsing, and you grab my forearm while I grab yours, then you fly up."

Stephanie said, "So I'd be holding you only by your forearm?"

"Both of us holding each others, but yeah. If we can do that, you could possibly do a flyby to grab one of us, or someone else. Could be useful in dangerous situations."

"Okay, I'll try it out."

Rael stretched again, moving his arms and shoulders a lot. "I don't feel injured anymore."

"Me either."

Stephanie stepped into the air and pushed down. She floated up into the air. She grinned. "This feels almost natural. I wonder what would happen if I got knocked out though. No, don't even think about it."

Too late, he thought that Lance could just duplicate what Captain McCain did last night to her. He thought it would be a good test too; who knew what would happen in a fight.

Stephanie sighed and rolled her eyes. *Great, he'll get Lance to do it, too. Yay, I can look forward to being thunked on the head soon.*

She stepped up again, to add a few more feet under her body, and then reached down for Rael's arm. They locked forearms, and then she pushed hard off an 'air step' to speed up. He should have been pulling hard down on her shoulder, even with his iron grip, yet her shoulder wasn't being stressed.

She said, "It's working fine – and it doesn't feel like I'm lifting you with my arm."

He said, "I agree. We're only a few dozen feet up, you hold me, I'm letting go to see what it would be like with a normal person without my strength."

"Sounds good." Rael released his grip on her forearm. She barely noticed a difference. She lifted him up and it felt strange, as though normal physics didn't apply to her and her ... passenger? She brought him up in front of her and put her left arm around his waist, then let go with the right arm on his forearm.

Again, there was no difference. He asked, "How tightly are you holding me to you?"

"Not at all. More like if I wanted to just pull you close to me while standing, but this shouldn't be enough to actually hold you up."

"I like it. Well, that and the flying stuff." He thought dirty thoughts again.

She descended quickly before something could occur that might become a problem.

After landing, Stephanie said, "Well, I'd call that a success." She 'heard' Tina think that she'd like to try flying.

Stephanie smiled at Tina, "Want to fly with me, Tina?"

Rael squeezed Stephanie's backside as she turned toward Tina. He was definitely thinking some creative thoughts.

Stephanie put her arms around Tina's waist, and Tina put hers around Stephanie's neck. Tina smiled, "I feel like we're about to slow dance."

Stephanie said, "Oh, I think you'll find this far more exciting." She step pushed and floated up. A few more times and she headed upward at several dozen miles per hour. Tina clung closely to Stephanie, remarking a few times on seeing something below them. Stephanie found she could shift Tina slightly so they were cheek to cheek facing the same direction, using her right arm as the primary holding arm around Tina's waist. Tina clung tighter to her as they increased their altitude. She kept her nose buried in Stephanie's gold hair.

Stephanie said, "Are you ready?"



“For what?”

“This.” Stephanie kneed her left leg up hard and they shot forward. She arced them so they flew horizontally over the city, now at perhaps one hundred miles an hour. Tina screeched at the acceleration, and then clenched her arms as tight as possible around Stephanie. She gulped and said, “Wow, Stephanie, this is like, way cool. But so scary! Aren’t you afraid not to have anything under you?”

“Hmm, surprisingly, not too bad. After my initial shock of seeing the ground below me, I’m starting to feel at ease. I kind of feel like I’m walking. I step forward, my body moves forward. If we’re at speed and I lean, we turn that way. It just kind of feels right.”

Stephanie noticed a few people down in the city pointing up toward them as they flew around. She waved down at them.

She flew them around several larger buildings and more interesting sites, such as the amusement park, prior to heading back to the junkyard.

Tina said, “Oh my – look at that.” She pointed.

## Chapter 22 – Tempers Flare

### Stephanie's Perspective

I looked in the direction Tina pointed. A semi blocked an intersection, with a group of cars piled up in front of it, some badly crunched.

I altered my direction to fly there, holding Tina tighter as we sped toward the ground and traffic. All traffic had halted in the area, causing a large vehicle jam. No police cars were in sight.

I flipped my legs to slow down; it worked like a charm again. *This flying thing is actually really easy. I hope I don't somehow sleep fly ... that could be embarrassing.*

We landed, and I asked, “Tina, will you call this in to the police? Mention that a super is on scene and will try to help out, I'm **not** in the H.E.R.O. program yet, but I've spoken with Captain McCain to get active tomorrow.”

Tina said, “Will do. Those guys look like they are going to beat the truck driver up.” She pointed in the direction of the semi.

Sure enough, two men advanced on the man nearest the semi. One held a baseball bat, the other a golf club. I already heard all the mental voices and the nearest peoples' mindviews as I ran through the people standing around their vehicles. I couldn't tell if everyone really was talking and yelling out loud or if I just 'heard' it that way.

I sprinted over to the men about to fight, and yelled “Hey!” as I got close. They were in the midst of shouting, and didn't hear me over themselves and others making noise and honking horns.

*Damn it. Listen to me.* I screamed, “HEY! Back off now!”

I ... felt ... my shout rip through the minds of every person nearby. Nearly all mental voices went quiet for a moment as my words tore through their minds.

The men all stopped and stared at me. For that matter, everyone in the area stopped and stared at me, I think. I had about five mindviews of myself. It was distracting losing so much of my vision to them all.

I said, “Everyone needs to calm down. Just calm down now.” My skin tingled. *Yeah, that'll help too, everyone calm down.* Loudly, I asked, “Is anyone hurt?”

Between the mindviews and a deluge of mental voices from those nearby, it got a little hard to think. Strangely enough, everyone

seemed quite calm, at least those nearby. *My power's working. Oh, this could be a great job!*

The man with the golf club in his hand said, "My daughter is hurt badly. This jerk rammed us in the intersection. She's unconscious and bleeding. I don't think she had her seat belt on in the back seat."

I walked with him over to the car; he couldn't get the rear door open. The young teen bled from her head where she was slumped over. I asked for his golf club, he meekly handed it to me. I broke the window near the top with it. *If I can lift Lance, I hope I can pull this off.*

I grabbed the top of the doorframe from the window area, put my left foot up on the driver's door and pulled hard. The top of the window frame bent outward. Some remaining glass shards cut into my hands, slicing them open. I changed my handhold, put my other foot up by the rear window and pushed off hard with my legs.

I was not sure if my flight kicked in from that, or it was just strength, but the door ripped off its hinges, and I flew backward with the door in my hands. My back slammed against another vehicle and I collapsed to the ground. *Om. That hurts.*

I pushed the car door off me and crawled to my feet. The man tried to wake his daughter up. The area was strangely quiet, even with all the mindviews and mental voices. Most had images of me in their head.

I yelled to him, "No! Don't slap her! You might make it worse!" *What kind of dolt hits someone who is injured like that? Wait, someone in a panic, I guess.*

My back hurt, but I jogged over to his vehicle.

He said, "I can't tell if she's alive."

I told him, "Stand back a little ways." *Mindviews seem to be most powerful when I'm close...* I leaned in so my head barely touched the girl. There was ... something there. No active visual or mental speaking, but something. I checked for a pulse and breathing, both were fine.

"Heart is beating, she's breathing, and I'm sensing something psychically; she's not dead." I leaned back out and focused for a moment on each mindview and mental voice in the area. A few were thinking of a minor injury or vehicle damage, but no one else seemed to have a severe injury. A headache had already begun from all the mental noise of so many people, even with most of them at least 20 feet from the vehicles in the accident.

I heard a siren in the distance. *Several minutes for a police car to get here. They'll wait for an ambulance, five or ten more minutes to get here with the traffic jam. Then another five or ten to get to the hospital. That's too long.*

I called out, "Where's the nearest hospital?" I immediately got the image of Metrocity General Hospital's location from several

people. Several of them pointed to the north and called out the hospital name.

I looked at the man, "She looks too young to have a license, do you have an insurance card or something in your wallet I can bring with me? I'll fly her to Metrocity General if you want."

He said, "Will she be all right?" He looked worried.

"I don't know, I'm not a doctor. I'm thinking an ambulance will take ten to twenty minutes to get here and back to the hospital with her. I can have her there in perhaps two."

He rummaged through his wallet, found a card and handed it to me. "Yes, please get her to the hospital."

I looked at the card, "Todd Woorsten. What's your daughter's name?"

"Gina."

I nodded to him. I closed my eyes and thought to myself, *everyone be calm. Be calm. Stay calm for the police.* I felt the tingling all over my skin again. The area became the calmest large accident scene I'd ever seen. Peoples' mental voices tended to be quieter when they were calm, too. That was nice.

I put the card in my back pocket and picked up Gina as carefully as possible. I knew from my first aid training how dangerous a head wound could be if moved, yet I was worried about the time it would take to have her looked at.

I looked at the man again, "I'll be right back, after I leave her with a doctor. I expect you all to be calm when I get back, okay?"

He nodded, eyes not leaving his daughter.

I cautiously used my 'air step' to float up, did it several more times and moved fast toward the hospital in moments. I kept the flight smooth, avoiding any jerky turns or motions. It was very pleasantly quiet once in the air, though I caught a few mental voices here and there, probably from nearby buildings as we flew past. Hearing that many voices wasn't pleasant for me, even with the crowd separate from the area I'd been standing in. It took perhaps two or three minutes to get to the hospital. Once I'd reached enough height to see over buildings I angled directly toward it.

I flew around the hospital until I saw the emergency exit, and then descended toward it. People outside stopped and stared at my passenger and me.

*I'm so glad my landing is soft. If I were like some movie superheroes that smash down to the ground, I'd never try this with the girl having a head injury.*

Someone was quick on the uptake. By the time I landed, an emergency room doctor, a nurse, and a gurney were at the entrance waiting for me. I very carefully put the girl on the gurney, and handed

the card to the nurse.

I said, "She was **just** in a car accident with a semi. That's her father's information. Her name is Gina. She didn't have her seat belt on and was in the back seat."

The doctor nodded, "Who are you?"

I blinked as I stared at his face. *Quick! Think! Mind powers, flight, gold hair.* "Psystar, with a y." *I hope that's original.*

"We'll take care of her."

Someone behind me said, "Ouch. That looks like it hurts."

Their mindview showed me they were looking at my back. I must have cut it on the car I landed on. My shirt was cut and bloody.

The nurse was keen; she stepped around me to see what the man had pointed at. She pulled the wet shirt away and looked. "You don't have a wound here, but there's fresh blood."

I said, "It must have happened when I pulled off the car door. I heal really fast I guess."

"You want to be checked over?"

I stretched a bit from side to side, testing my torso for pain. I had none.

"No, thank you, though. I want to get back to the scene to see if everything is all right there."

A middle-aged man ran over to us. He looked directly at me, so I assumed he wanted my attention. When he was perhaps five feet away, he swung his cell phone up and appeared to take a picture of me. *Great picture, I wasn't even smiling.* I smiled at him.

They wheeled the girl into the emergency room; I turned and hard pushed on my 'air step.' I forgot to angle myself carefully, and as I shot into the air, I quickly curved backward and narrowly avoided the hospital's upper floor. My heart raced as I corrected my course, and then sped back to the crash scene. *Flying's much easier when I don't have to worry about an injured person. Guess I need to pay **some** attention though.*

Everyone was still very calm when I got back, this time in under a minute. I landed right by the car that had held the girl this time. I came in slightly too fast and landed hard, though at least I kept my footing and remained upright.

The police were on scene questioning everyone at this point. The two men with weapons no longer held them. More people had gotten out of their cars and come closer to see the damage or listen to those involved in the accident. The area was even more crowded now with the addition of those people and many curious pedestrians.

One of the officers stepped over to me, "Everyone here is saying that you diffused the situation here and flew away with a young woman?" He looked me up and down, and was a bit confused by the

lack of costume on a super.

"Yes, officer. I'm Psystar, with a y. I saw the accident when I was flying around and flew down to see if help was needed."

Before he had a chance to ask the questions he was thinking of, I said, "The men were very angry at the semi driver due to both being hit and angry about the one's daughter from being injured. I flew her to Metrocity General's emergency room; they are looking at her now. I pulled the car door off to get to her; it was bent and stuck from the crash. I didn't **see** the crash though, so I'm not sure who ran the light."

"Well, miss ... Psystar. You know just what to answer. A few people are saying that everyone was riled up and angry until you showed up, is that true?"

"Yes, it is. I, ah, calmed everyone down, I think. Don't ask how, I don't know how I do it." With the addition of the officers and others who had crept closer, my vision became overwhelmed with mindviews, and thoughts made background noise very loud. I put my hand on my head and said, "Is there anything else, officer?" I could barely even see the officer out of my own eyes my vision was so crowded with mindviews.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and opened my eyes. I did not recall closing them. The officer stood right in front of me now. I mentally had to push mindviews out of the way; my vision was filled with them. They had a nasty habit of shifting around as people moved.

He said, "Miss, I asked if you are all right?"

I said, "You did? Too ... busy here. It makes it hard to think with so many people so close. I need to get out of here."

After a short time, the thoughts quieted and numerous mindviews disappeared. I felt hands on my shoulders. "Miss, miss. Are you okay now?"

*So many images of the police, crashed vehicles, the crowd and myself. I opened my eyes. Damn it, when did I close them again? It's easier to think now.* I glanced around; it looked like one of the officers had asked the people to back up that had encroached on the main accident group.

"I'm sorry officer. Yes, yes I'm better now. Why do you ask?"  
*Ah, I see in his mindview that I was swaying with my hand on my head.*

He said, "You mumbled your answer, hand on head, swaying. Do you have a fear of crowds?"

"No! I like movie theaters, water parks, amusement parks, etc. The people being close just makes it hard to concentrate or think."

"We really need you to wait for the H.E.R.O. agent. Do you have the ability to move certain vehicles to help us get some traffic moving?"

"No, but I can go get a few supers who could in a few minutes."

"That'd be great, if you promise you'll be right back."

"I will." I looked around for Tina; she was at the front edge of a group of people. *Oh great.* I walked over to her and said in her ear, "I'm getting the boys and coming right back." *Wow, so many people in such a tight spot. I must have had two dozen mindviews active at once.* Several people standing by Tina reached out and touched my arms.

I stumbled backwards to free myself of the blast of images and voices in my head. I pushed hard on my 'air step,' and launched fast into the air. The voices disappeared immediately with the distance, though I could now see I was headed for a building at high speed. I jerked my upper body away and my path swerved clear of it, missing the windows by a few feet at best.

I kicked up my knee and the speed shot up. *Wow, I might develop a fear of crowds if it stays like that.* I quickly flew to the junkyard and found Lance and Rael smashing junker cars apart. More accurately, Lance smashed and Rael cut them apart.

When I was a few dozen feet up, I yelled down to them, "Boys, I have an accident scene that needs your help moving cars, and possibly a semi."

Lance looked up, "Yeah! Hero time!" He pointed at Rael and said, "Figure out a name, or it's Big Kitty!"

I held my arms down to them and Rael just grabbed one. Lance looked skeptically at me. I said, "Just try it." He grabbed my other hand with his mammoth sized hand.

I kicked up to fly fast into the air. The weight of both of them felt ... odd. Not entirely burdensome, but I could feel that they weren't light to me. Other than that odd feeling, it didn't seem to affect me much. I started to acclimate to leading with my upper body rather than my hands, and my legs were free to move for slowing down or speeding up.

It took minutes to get back, even with flying what might have been dangerous speeds inside the city. Neither of the boys felt like they would fly out of my hands, though. I again landed us by the crashed car.

Some people in the crowd actually clapped, when I landed with them. The crowding of voices in my head started up again. It didn't help now having the boys right by me as well.

One voice spoke louder and was more irate than the rest. I tried to focus on that one. A man had gotten very angry at the long delay from being stuck. He had become downright furious. I figured out the general direction the voice was coming from and walked in that direction while focusing on the voice.

I approached a buildup of people in that direction, and I was

assaulted by thoughts and mindviews as I closed my distance to them. I held up my hand to try to ward off the mindviews, but it didn't work. I couldn't see, my vision was so crowded with mindviews, apart from trying to make sense of over a dozen images floating in front of me. It was hard to hear real voices, because of the many mental voices speaking. They all blended together.

I dimly recognized that some people slapped my hand, perhaps thinking I was high fiving them. Others touched or groped me, I wasn't even sure. The voices picked up in volume as I closed on them, but the angry man grew even louder. He felt like he was ready to blow with anger. I had a difficult time stumbling through the crowd; it was as if my brain was being scrambled.

A few people followed me, but most didn't, and many of the voices quieted down. It wasn't a clear case of a mindview hovering over a person's real image in my vision, so linking the thinker to their actual position was a bit of a pain. Generally, they seemed to stay on the side where the person was located, so I had to stop and turn a number of times to lock down his position.

I closed the distance enough for his mindview to become clear to me. He held a gun in his hands and was about ready to use it. The rest of those following me stopped, when it wasn't clear to them where I walked.

The man sat shaking in his seat. His face was red with rage. I felt the power of the emotion, as I arrived at his vehicle.

I gently knocked on the hood by his door. His window was down, so I said, "Sir, are you..." That was all I got out.

It startled him; he hadn't noticed me walking up. He screamed incoherently and shot me in the stomach. My body jerked back slightly with the bullet's impact. The shot rang out through the area, silencing almost all the physical noise.

His anger must have affected me, with his mindview so significant in my vision and I focused on it.

I screamed out, "**Enough! Calm down!**" I believe I said it out loud, anyway. I know that my scream ripped through every voice in my head, quiet or noisy. I'd bet that it was like me yelling at someone at my own table in a restaurant for every single person, regardless of whether their voice sounded more like a murmur from the other side of the room to me at the time.

He pulled the trigger again. Out of surprise that time, I think. That one hit slightly higher up in my abdomen. My body jerked again. *I've been shot ... twice.*

I'm not certain what happened next. Rage clouded my mind, I was hurt. I bashed at his mindview, and felt a surge of energy lash out



at him. It stunned him; the gun hand fell back onto his lap. I was so pissed off. My skin tingled, as I reached in and grabbed the revolver from him. The barrel wasn't even warm to the touch. My other hand held my stomach.

I stumbled backward a few feet. I looked at my right hand; it was red with blood. *Oh my god, I've been shot. You shot me, you asshole!*

The mental voices that had been nice and quiet for a moment suddenly began to grow in noise and anger. *Oh, no. I just made everyone mad.* I focused on calm thinking, everyone stay calm. Spread calm. *Damn, my abs hurt.* Vehicle horns honked in the area, people shouted at each other. It was harder to get the tingle this time, perhaps because of the pain and the lingering anger from the angry man. It took me numerous attempts to focus on calm before I felt the tingling.

The anger in those around me dissipated.

I opened my eyes. Rael stood next to me. He turned me to face him, pulled up my shirt and began looking at the bullet wounds. I continued to think of spreading calm, and my skin kept up the tingling.

He said, "You're doing something, I can smell it."

I nodded. The bullet wounds hurt. A police officer made it through the crowd to us. I held out the gun, holding the barrel in my hand. It was obvious who had been shot, only two shots were fired and I had two bullet wounds in my abdomen. He took out a cloth and carefully held the pistol by the body of the weapon.

"What happened?"

*Oh, shit. If I can't read people's minds, how would I know? Hmm.* "I could feel that he was getting angrier by the moment. I came over here to try to calm him down. He shot me when I started to talk to him. I don't believe he meant to harm me, but he shouldn't have a gun if he's bipolar or can get road rage bad enough to hold that while in traffic."

Rael said, "I'll bet that the bullets will pop out on their own. All of those in me did."

I said, "Assuming neither of us is armored, and we both heal at similar speeds, and the bullets went into roughly the same density of flesh. It hurts though."

The officer said, "Miss, you should lay down, we need to get pressure on those wounds. I'll call in for an ambulance."

I waved my hand. "Hold off officer. I'm not bleeding profusely, and the bleeding has slowed already. I've healed from crushed bones fast before, this may be the same."

"Well, I guess with you being a super, I'll wait a few minutes. Normally, it'd be required. I still have to arrest him though." He proceeded to get the formerly angry man out of his car and cuffed him. I noticed then that the guy was awake again. At least now, he wasn't

angry, my calming aura worked on him as well.

I ran my clean hand through Rael's hair, "Rael, go help ... Spartan move vehicles. You kneeling here won't speed my healing, nor get this scene cleared sooner." He didn't want to leave my side when I was injured, but decided to obey to help clear the traffic scene faster.

"Okay, yell for me if you need me."

He walked back to Lance's location, and I felt movement at my stomach. The bullet worked itself out as I watched. I said, "Officer, do you need the bullets? The first one came out."

He looked over at me, and the last of the wound sealed over as we watched. The skin became just an angry, red, bruise area. Within another minute, the second bullet pushed its way out of the wound into my hand, and that wound also sealed over. I set the bullets on the cloth he'd used to pick up the gun.

The officer asked, "Does it hurt?"

I thought about it a moment, "No, not any more. More of a bad soreness now. Pretty cool, huh?" The wounds still looked like angry red welts, but those faded rapidly.

"Yeah, that's got to be handy."

"By the way, officer. I don't know in a gun shooting if the person has to press charges, but I won't press them against this man. He now knows he could shoot someone, and if that goes on his record, then perhaps it will prevent him from owning a weapon. But I startled him when I showed up."

"Yes, but what if that would have been another person who saw him getting angry? Or an officer?"

"So we do just what's needed to keep him from having a gun in the future. If you need to contact me further on it, I'll be registered with the H.E.R.O. program tomorrow under the name Psystar, with a y."

"Sounds good."

A new voice said, "Are you the supers handling the situation here?"

I turned to see a man in a suit. "Hello."

"Hello. I'm Agent Carson of the H.E.R.O. program. Not good enough to just deal with a traffic problem, you have to involve a shooting at the scene?"

"I came over to him to try to prevent him from raging out, I was too late. At least he shot me instead of someone who doesn't heal fast."

"Very true. Thank you for that. I've already spoken with the officer that handled the traffic scene. Is there anything special you have to add?"

“Not really. The first officers asked me the key points to verify, and I did with them. Listen, I need to move away from all the people here. We can either walk further away, or I can fly you up to a building top or something.”

“We can walk down the street if you need to.” We walked away from the crash intersection; he took my elbow and pulled me into a small cafe. He intended to sit right by the glass windows, but I pointed to the much less busy back section.

“Please, it's the proximity to people that is hard.”

“So, why is being around people hard for you?”

“I can sense them. It's not bad when there's a small group, but a crowd that starts closing in is rough.”

“Fair enough.” His mindview told me he knew I was lying. He didn't trust me.

I sighed. “Fine. I don't want to start off badly with you, Agent Carson. I can talk to other people mind to mind. I'm hearing, ah, static with so many people around.”

“I'm not new at this Miss. I'm well aware of psionics and telepaths. Why don't you come right out and say you are hearing what people are saying?”

A surprised look crossed my face. “Oh. Well, to be honest, I thought it would freak most people out if they knew that.”

“I'll have a message sent to Psycom, to see if he's willing to have a talk with you about it. Are you okay with getting a call back from someone in H.E.R.O. or from Psycom directly?”

“That'd be fine.”

“Well, I'm not finding a Psystar in the H.E.R.O. system, so I'm gathering that you are one of Spartan's two new partners?”

“Yep.”

“Well, with you not in the system, I'll fill out the paperwork and turn it in to Captain McCain. He'll have final approval on it.”

“Sounds fine to me, sorry about not being in already. The Captain asked us to wait until Monday to come in to fill in the paperwork.” *Wait, he's thinking there's a nice reward for helping with the scene and saving the girl, if she lives. Nice!*

“Not a problem, I think we'll have a number of new superheroes joining our ranks this weekend. You three just jumped out and started doing things right away, which isn't common. Unfortunately, others are likely to become criminals.”

“Yeah, I flew for the first time already this morning.”

He looked me over closely, and only through him did I realize that I kept touching the former bullet wounds excessively. “Well, if you have nothing else to add, I'll be off. I've already spoken to your

teammates.”

“Thanks for talking to me in here, Agent Carson.”

“Not a problem. As you mentioned, at least someone who could take being shot was hit, rather than someone it could permanently paralyze, or kill.”

*Interesting, he meant to make a point that supers can help save others, and that I should take people with weapons seriously. He should have just said that.*

“Yeah. I'll be out in a minute; I need to get an energy bar or something. I'm really hungry.”

“You turned yesterday?”

“Yep.”

“You may not have discovered this yet then. Many supers eat more than normal. It doesn't seem to matter what you eat, but you need to eat more often. A super's body converts it into some odd energy type it uses for all these abilities. I'm not sure what happens if you don't eat enough though. I don't recall having that conversation with any supers. If you find out, let me know, would you?”

“Okay, though I guess I'd rather prevent it.” I got up and headed to the counter. The woman behind the counter stared at my bloody tummy. I looked down; realized my shirt was still pulled up, and my abdomen blood covered.

“Oops, sorry about that.” I grabbed a few napkins and started wiping myself off, it wouldn't all come off cleanly. Sigh. “I'll be right back.” I headed to the restroom to clean up. *No chance of saving this shirt.* Blood on both sides, plus the tears and bloodstains meant the shirt was ruined. Minutes later, I returned to the counter and ordered four energy bars.

The police had removed the crowd from the street, and the boys almost had a path clear for vehicles to begin traveling through. I munched down my bar and headed out. I focused on spreading calm. Once the tingling began, I walked through the cars down the street.

Hearing the mental voices calm down as I walked through the parked cars helped to keep me in the zone.

One of the officers preparing to start traffic moving saw me as I walked down the center of the street and jogged over to me. “Excuse me, ma'am, but you'll have to clear the street.”

“Give me a minute, officer. I'm spreading calm. It'll help prevent everyone from trying to rush the opening as you guys start traffic moving. Just watch peoples' faces as I get near them.”

He accepted the explanation, and followed me as I walked. Once I swept through the four streets and the intersection, no horns were blowing, and the boys had cleared out the area enough to begin.

While the officer started traffic flowing, I stopped over by

Lance, Rael and Tina. I gave each of them an energy bar.

Tina saw my shirt and said, "Like, oh my god! You've been shot!"

I smiled, "Past tense, I healed it."

Lance said, "Perhaps training in a junkyard isn't what we need. You seem to be learning things about your powers right here on the scene."

I replied, "Yep, but this wasn't a combat with supers."

"You still got shot."

"True, but it was still better than having someone chasing me around with a gun or knife looking to kill me."

Unfortunately, now that we stood on the corner and vehicles weren't being moved here, the crowd moved in en masse. Images and voices again deluged my mind.

I mumbled, "Guys, I need to get away from the crowd." I think that was what I said, anyway. It was very hard to think under the mental noise and mass of mindviews filling and overlapping in my vision.

After an indeterminate time to me, the voices cleared, leaving my friends' voices and mindviews. I blinked a few times and looked around. We were in an alley between two stores.

"How did we get here?"

Rael said, "You don't remember?" I could see in his mind that the boys had each taken an arm of mine and led me along, while I practically stumbled along like a zombie.

"Ah, yeah, of course I remember. You two held my hands." I smiled up at them.

Tina said, "She was stumbling around whenever she got near the crowd before as well."

*Damn it. I don't like where this line of talk is headed. Great, what's a good cover story for stumbling around? I was drinking?*

Tina continued, "Why were you holding your head when talking with that first officer, Steph? He suddenly had the other officer move people back away from the accident vehicles ... and you. As soon as people backed off, you were fine."

*Oh, great, I can see my own panicked expression in their mindviews. Rael moved behind me and slipped one arm around my stomach, the other around my collarbone. He's holding me down.*

*My mind ran a hundred miles an hour. I can't tell them about the mind reading; it'll make them all mad at me. Oh, no, I look paranoid in their mindviews too.*

"Not here, I don't want to talk about it in public; you're going to hate me though..." *Besides that, I might have heart failure.*

Rael just hugged me tighter to him, and Lance kissed me on the forehead. Rael heard and felt my heart rate increase.

Lance said, "No we won't. Now, we've got four of us to get home, and you can carry two. I'll jump home."

Tina said, "Hello? Like, we drove in Rael's car, remember? It might be a good idea to fly there and drive home. Then perhaps we all go get some lunch?"

Lance said, "Good idea, I'll meet you guys at the house so you can change out of the bloody clothes."

Rael slid around beside me, but never stopped touching me. His mindview showed he could sense my fear, and wasn't about to let me run off without them. I held Tina around the waist, Rael's forearm and stepped up into the air a few times to gain speed.

I didn't fly us particularly fast; instead, I kept us in sight of Lance for a while, so we could see what he looked like jumping around like some kind of human frog. Once he was far enough away toward the house, I accelerated toward the junkyard. I had no idea how to tell them that I was stealing their thoughts.

I stayed quiet on the flight to the junkyard. Rael and Tina were as well, but I could see what they were thinking, and they kept looking at each other and wondering what would be so bad. Rael wondered if I'd figured out that he'd used his new power on me, and if I were mad at him. *Talk about paranoid!*

We landed softly at the junkyard. The boys had already cleaned up their mess, so we hopped in the car. Tina jumped in the back seat.

I was pretty depressed by the time we got back to Rael's place.

## Chapter 23 - Confession

### Stephanie's Viewpoint

We arrived back at the house without incident. As we pulled into the driveway, I debated getting out and flying home right away. I stared out the passenger window as Rael stopped the car. I caught his thoughts, more than the movement, as I watched his intent to get to my door fast.

I thought to actually do it ... *step out and fly home immediately*. My mind was numb from fear, and I moved slowly when the car stopped. I'd never seen anyone move so quickly. I barely grabbed the door handle to open the door by the time Rael hopped out of the car, swung his door closed, slid over the hood of the car, and opened my door.

I looked up into his eyes. He took my hands in his and smiled gently at me. He wanted to portray himself as being as kindly as possible. Worry wracked my brain. I couldn't smile, and pursed my lips as I looked down.

We walked into the house. Rael pretty much led me to his room; he grabbed a shirt, and walked me to the bathroom. He closed the door behind us and gently ripped my shirt off me. I was already in a shocked mindset; that certainly didn't help clear my head.

He stayed behind me, wet a small towel and proceeded to wash off my back. Then he slid the towel around my front and washed off my bloody stomach. The blood on the shirt had re-stained my body.

*If I don't tell them, they won't trust me, and will know I'm keeping things from them. But if I tell them I hear everything they think, they won't want to hang around with me for fear I'll intrude on everything they think of. Rael especially, with all those dirty thoughts in his head, he won't want to be around me. Lance will think I'm invading everyone's privacy. What about when others find out? Oh, my. I'm going to have to move just to be around people that don't know me ... until they find out. I'll be on the run constantly, having to find new friends in every town, until something happens and they realize that I'm intruding on them too.*

He mumbled, "This is too hard." He spun me around to face him. "Damn, the shot wounds bled to your pants." He proceeded to unbutton and pull down my pants. He finished washing off my stomach and upper thighs, dropped the washcloth on my pants and used a fresh towel to dry me off. Rael wasn't thinking much during this entire time. He simply paid attention to what he was doing, with an occasional glance at various areas of my body.

Rael slowly stood up and pulled me close to him, then hugged me tightly. He said, "I don't care what you've done, or think you've done. It won't bother me."

I hugged him back and said, "I hope so." For the first time since being back in the crowd near the crash, I realized I had shunted his mindview around constantly – it had confused me. Rael's hug brought back a stable mindview and I received the dual feedback I seemed to receive from anyone touching me. The hug was unbelievably comforting.

I practically melted into his arms; he probably held me up more than I did. I didn't know how long we stood there like that, I didn't believe I'd ever felt so comforted in my life. *I guess there are other benefits to tying into other people's senses than just sharing massages with them or their enjoyment of food.*

He finally stepped back, took the extra shirt, pulled my arms up and slid the shirt over them. I could see where he was really looking though. *My naughty minded Rael. Hopefully mine, after what I had to tell them all. I could just head out and fly away ... literally. No one needs to know I'm a thought-thief.*

Rael grabbed the bloody clothes and towel; then pulled me along with him to their laundry room while he threw them in a load with cold water. *Oh, now I see in his mind why he changed my clothes. He doesn't want the couch ruined with blood stains. Why didn't I notice that before?*

He then pulled me to the living room. I looked at the front door. *I could still run for it, could still fly away. The door's only a dozen feet away ... so close. My friends don't have to hate me...* Rael held my hand and my side though. I'd have to fight him, and I liked his touch too much. I sighed. These were my friends; I had to be honest with them.

Rael sat me down in the center of the couch, and then knelt down in front of me, resting his hands on my knees. Lance sat on my right and Tina sat on my left. Their mindviews became quite sizable with them sitting so close to me.

Lance said, "This is tearing you up. Until you spill it, it's going to continue causing you problems..." He took my right hand in his.

*Do I or don't I? I don't want to leave my friends.* I sighed again, and made the decision. I said, "All right, here goes... When people think near me, I hear it as if they said it. When they visualize something, I see that too."

Rael said, "That's it? That's what you are so freaked out about?"

I sighed again, "There's no privacy, Rael. It's **always** on. I keep visualizing it as a restaurant, where the people sitting at my table I can hear fine. Those farther away dim down into murmurs, although for me they are staying clear enough to understand throughout the entire



restaurant. Now throw on top of that a TV for each person nearest me, they float in my vision.”

I took my hand from Lance and made large boxes in the air where I saw their mindviews now. Sitting so tightly around me, each of them filled perhaps a sixth of my total visual space. It was almost easier watching what they saw than see out of my own eyes.

“Those are where I see your mindviews now. If I focus, I can pull one up to cover my entire vision. I can feel what you feel, too, through them.”

Rael said, “Feel as in emotions, or senses, like touch?”

“Both.”

Tina said, “Wait, you said it never turns off?”

“Never.”

“What happens when more people are in a room?”

“Then I hear more and more voices talking, and more and more mindviews show up in my vision. It becomes like a busy restaurant where everyone starts talking at once, and the volume becomes loud enough to make it hard to understand other people at your table.”

Tina said, “So ... when you were right by the crowd, you were hearing dozens of voices, and seeing many TVs?”

“Yep. It gets hard to think, see and hear. Well, actually I continue hearing just fine. It’s just that I also hear everyone thinking everything, and since most people think a lot more than they say, it’s really noisy.”

Rael said, “Ah. That explains why you were stumbling when we took you through the crowd near the corner.”

I said, “Yeah, but don’t you guys understand? I’m listening in on **everything** you guys are thinking. I can’t stop.” I raised my arms and flopped them back onto my lap to emphasize the point.

I put my hands over Rael’s, where they rested on my knees to prevent him from acting on the thoughts running through his head. He’d debated on tickling me.

Rael raised an eyebrow and grinned at me. “Is that an attempt to keep me from doing it?”

Lance had problems figuring out what we meant. He was a person who worked well off drawings, but not as well off purely conceptual ideas. He watched Rael closely in the hopes of picking up clues from his friend.

Tina attempted to visualize a crowd full of voices, and being in front of a television store with a dozen screens up in front of her at once.

I said, “Tina, you’ve got the right idea by thinking of the front of a TV store. Now make the screens move around based on where

the people are, and become larger as they get close to you.”

Rael’s eyes narrowed as he thought about last night. He’d wanted me to go back to massaging his shoulders, and I had. He’d thought about me sliding over to him in bed, and I’d done that too. I’d even looked surprised and tensed up afterward. He had thought he had a power over me, but now he realized that I had reacted to his thoughts either unconsciously, or not under my own control.

He suddenly shifted into a cross-legged sitting position. He squeezed my legs gently and let his hands fall back to his thighs. My eyes widened in fear. *He’s going to try something to me, he’s not thinking ahead of his actions.*

I began to say, “What are ... you...” He interrupted my line of thought with a clear visual of me sliding down off the couch onto his lap. He even tried a mental loud, echoing mental statement of “Come to me.” I discovered that just as mental ‘shouts’ sounded louder, someone focusing extremely hard on a visual forced their mindview to enlarge on my visual field.

His mindview reduced in size somewhat, and I laughed as I said, “What was ... oh crap.” I found that I sat on his lap. I barely remembered actually moving while he’d been thinking that. He slid his arms around my waist and hugged me, then chuckled evilly.

Rael said, “Sweet, I think I like this.”

Lance said, “What do you mean.”

Rael bonked me lightly on the head with his forehead. He said, “Give her some really good visuals of things you’d like to do to her, or have her do. She reacts, I dunno, like she’s hypnotized. That’s what happened last night, isn’t it?”

I flushed dark red. Tina looked confused.

Lance said, “But, I wasn’t thinking...”

Rael slapped himself on the forehead, “No, I was though, in great detail. Steph, are you telling me you can’t resist doing what others picture you doing?”

I said, “Pfah, of course I can. I think. I ... I dunno. If I pull a mindview up close it has more impact on me, and physical proximity makes the visuals larger as well. Like last night, and right now. Like today with the angry guy with the gun. When he shot me it made me so mad I shouted at the area.”

Tina said, “Yeah, I heard that, very clearly too. You ... you shouted directly into our minds!” Her face went serious as she thought.

I glanced toward her, and said to the boys, “She’s beginning to see my fear of telling you. I hear you thinking it, Tina; you might as well just say it.”

Tina said, “Okay. Stephanie can read our minds at will. More

than at will, all the time, at least when near her. You can see what we think, and even feel what we feel. There's nothing private. If I thought about grabbing Lance's butt, she'd know I was thinking it."

Rael shrugged, "I'm not seeing the problem."

Tina said, "Don't you see? Even if I don't **do** anything, she still knows I thought it. What if I thought about robbing a bank? I'm not about to do it, but she knows I thought about it. What about people's private sex thoughts? Account numbers? PINs? Secrets they know about other people? Their own secrets?"

Lance said, "Wow, you can see all that?"

I said, "I hear everything you are thinking or see right now, as you think it. If you think of your bank account number, then yeah, I'll either hear it or see it, depending on if you tend to recite the numbers to yourself, or visualize them. It seems to be different for different people."

All three of them mentally recited a series of numbers. Tina actually put a visual to each number, such as the image of a credit card, and her bank.

I continued, "Apparently even mentioning account numbers starts people on a cycle of reciting their various numbers in their heads. You guys just flashed me a bunch of them. I'm almost glad I'm not eidetic."

Tina's voice was picking up volume as she started to 'freak out' mentally about so many secrets and hidden things we all keep from others.

I said, "The more excited you are in your thinking, or perhaps the more forceful the thinking, the louder it makes it in my head. You're mentally shouting at me right now, Tina."

Tina said, "Yeah, that's part of the problem though! It's **my** head, **my** thoughts you are in!"

I nodded and sighed. "I know. It's just ... there. This is part of why I was so afraid to bring it up."

Lance said, "This is hard to imagine for me. So ... you are seeing a picture of what I'm seeing?"

"Yes."

"But what if my eyes are closed?"

"Then I see what you are visualizing, if anything. Otherwise, your mindview, or mental TV, is black. That seems pretty rare though. People are always putting a picture to what they are thinking."

"So ... what if my eyes are open and I'm visualizing something?"

"If you think quickly of your mustang, I'll see the image of the mustang overlay what your eyes see. If you focus hard on the mustang,

and really picture it in great detail, then I only see the mustang.” I sighed. “In Rael’s case just now, all I saw was his image of me sliding down onto his lap; I didn’t even realize I’d done it.”

The glee Rael felt flowed through his mindview at me, making me feel somewhat better about the lack of control over myself. I gave him an evil eye and punched him in the shoulder regardless.

Lance said, “I guess I can understand Tina then. I mean, we all watch other people when they aren’t looking at us, now none of that is private.”

“I know, I’ve been finding out just how many people stare at my different body parts as the day goes on. Strangely enough, it’s not the same for everyone though, so at least there is some variety. But I am getting a lot of visuals of myself. Glad I’m a little narcissistic.” I smiled weakly.

I continued, “I already knew you guys watched me a lot, and it never bothered me before, so I really don’t mind knowing that you do it so much.”

Lance said, “Yeah, that’s kind of the problem. It’s not your option to mind it. I think I **understand** Tina much better now. Simply because other people think something won’t give you the right to react to it as if they did it.”

Rael said, “I’d prefer if she reacted to my thoughts.”

Lance snapped at Rael, “Stop thinking dirty thoughts for a moment. Or maybe not. What if some guy was thinking really dirty thoughts about Steph near her? Getting on his case about it isn’t fair. It wouldn’t be right. Now if he is leering at her in public, sure that’s a physical action. But if he were daydreaming...”

Rael said, “Or if a guy were thinking thoughts about someone other than his girlfriend or wife. Hmm. So she can’t react to them, and if she doesn’t say anything to other people, then where’s the harm? Well, other than her knowing that he’s a leech.”

Lance said, “Steph, you’ll need to be very, very careful about gossip. You might accidentally give away something that rightfully should stay secret.”

“I’m well aware of that.”

Rael said, “As far as I’m concerned, this isn’t a big deal, so long as Steph isn’t telling everyone about everyone else’s secrets. I’ve known her for a long time, I don’t believe she’d steal from someone for a second, so hearing account numbers and such seems like a petty concern to me. She already knows I’m a leech, so I doubt I’ve been a surprise lately. So unless you are in secret, Lance, this whole thing just doesn’t matter to me.”

Lance gave Rael a recriminating look. “I don’t believe I am. My

mom would kill me if she thought I acted that way, or even thought it."

Tina said, "I think now I understand some of the little smiles and glances you've been giving to different people now. You are hearing something funny or interesting."

I nodded, "It's hard for me not to react a little, sometimes. To me it sounds like I'm hearing your mental voice out loud. Actually, it's hard to tell the difference at times. Now, people who think ahead, but talk slowly can actually be kind of irritating. It's like I'm hearing an echo. But hopefully you've noticed that I don't say anything about it, or at least try not to."

Tina said, "So, just for the heck of it. If I were to think of something like, say, jumping Lance's bones, what would you do?"

"Nothing, except perhaps to ask you to make the visuals better." I grinned.

Tina blushed.

Rael said, "You **do** realize that if you are going to be reading my mind, I fully intend to be mean to you?"

I smiled, "You did before you knew."

"Oh, no. Most of that was minor league stuff. You get to know my dirty secrets; I'm going to get my enjoyment back out of you."

I frowned. "I hope you won't in public, please."

Tina said, "Okay, my turn. Sorry in advance if it's a problem, Steph."

I said, "Problem? Oh come ... on." *How did this become about doing stuff to me?*

Tina understood what Rael meant when he made me slide onto his lap. She imagined me looking back at Rael and kissing him passionately. *Oh no, come on, Tina ... get off this idea of coupling us up!*

I felt this irrational desire to do it. I resisted, but she kept up with the visual, she even began a quiet verbal chant of "Kiss him, kiss him." She was determined to make me do it, and I lost focus. I kissed Rael. He didn't complain. I felt unusually happy, gleeful and confused as we kissed. Then, the double sensation from Rael's mindview kicked in, and I didn't want to stop the kiss.

I heard Tina thinking for Rael to stroke my hair back, and it shook me out of the near trance from the kiss. *Thanks a lot, Tina. I didn't want to ... well ... hadn't planned to... Oh, man, I love kissing now.* I found myself staring into Rael's catlike eyes. I didn't realize that cat eyes weren't always slit, but sometimes had a round iris. I blushed as it struck me that we'd done that with Lance and Tina as an audience.

Tina clapped and bounced on the couch where she sat. "Nice! It works!"

I rolled my eyes. "Great. I'm opening myself up to you guys,

and you make me your puppet. I wasn't even sure last night if what you thought made me do something. Obviously other people can make me do things now." I sighed and put on my glum face.

Rael said, "So ... you didn't want to massage my shoulders last night? Or cuddle with me? Or sit on my lap?"

Lance said, "She enjoyed giving that massage, you should have seen her face. Why is that? Wait, you said you feel what others feel. So ... you felt what when you massaged him?"

I said, "Rael, I, ah, yeah, I'm fine with all those. You didn't make me start giving you the massage; just restart it. And no, I um, kind of liked the kiss, so I'm not even mad at Tina. However, Tina, you bonehead, just because you can make me kiss him doesn't mean that you can make him stroke my hair back!"

She stopped clapping and stared at me. "Oh. Well, he was holding you, how am I supposed to know I can't have him do something." Rael laughed.

He grinned and said, "I like where you were going with it, though."

Tina said, "I can't believe that actually works. That is like, **so** cool!" I slapped my forehead. *Great, she's going to cause me all sorts of problems.*

Lance said, "Hey, I had a question in there! And what works?"

Tina looked at him. "Lance, you are so sweet sometimes. I made her kiss Rael. Right, right? That was my thinking that did it?"

I kept my hand on my head and blushed. *Did they need to teach each other how to do it?* I nodded.

Lance said, "No way. Really?"

I buried my face in Rael's shoulder. Lance and Tina stared at me, Lance in wonderment, Tina with glee. Rael put his hand on my head and grinned, then winked at Lance.

I mumbled, "I saw that."

Huddling against Rael must have kicked off his protective nature. I felt it in waves as he put his arms around me and hugged.

Lance said, "Okay, my question is still out there though. What did you feel when you massaged him?"

I lifted my head to look at him, though I already had a clear view of him through the others. "I seem to feel emotions flow through the mindviews, as well as other senses. I can hear and see what you do, and taste, smell, touch, etc. if I pay attention. Giving Rael a shoulder massage was almost like giving myself one, both from the feeling on the shoulders to the enjoyment of it. Those didn't seem as strong, so I don't know if I have to concentrate on getting them, or just be close, or what."

“Whoa.”

Tina said, “Like, oh my god. So when you kiss Rael, you feel it, and you feel him feeling it?”

I nodded.

“And you said you feel enjoyment too, so do you feel yours plus his, or just his at that point?”

“Both.”

Her eyes got big and she imagined some rather naughty scenes in her mind. I was so glad that she pictured herself doing them rather than me – and with Lance, nonetheless, or I had a bad feeling that Rael and I would be doing them right now. I coughed gently. She glanced at me, and then flushed bright red as she realized I saw what she was thinking.

Rael said, “Come on, girls. Now is confession time, no secrets!”

Tina eyes were large as she shook her head slightly and looked at me. Mentally she thought, *No, no no no, please don't tell. Oh man, she's going to tell on me.*

I smiled at her, “No, this is my confession time. Tina can have her own some other time. By the way, you don't have to think to me in the third person, you know. If you think a sentence as though you would say it out loud to me, I hear it the same, probably louder than a whisper would be, too.”

Rael said, “Bah. You guys are no fun. Though, I could try to force you to talk about it...”

I looked at him, “That's not cool.”

Lance nodded, “I agree. We just got done telling Steph that she shouldn't share the secrets of others. Do we need to have the same talk with you?”

Rael replied, “All right, fine. No promises as far as working it out of Tina some other way though. I'm devious like that, you know.” I didn't find it surprising that he immediately thought of tickling her.

Lance coughed. “Well, umm, didn't we have lunch plans?” He wasn't as clueless as he let on. He thought that Tina's thoughts might have had something to do with him.

Tina laughed nervously, “Yeah. Yeah, lunch plans.”

I said, “Do you guys forgive me?”

Rael replied, “How could I not forgive you? I told you this wouldn't be that big of a deal.”

I said, “Seriously though.”

Rael debated the pros and cons in his mind. From me knowing everything he thinks and sees, to being able to mess with my head, so to speak. He said, “I'm not bothered. Again, don't expect me not to be mean to you on occasion though. Two way street, babe.”

Lance said, "I'm okay, I guess. I can't say as I really hide much that I know of, so I'm not overly worried. Just be aware that some things from people may be unconscious or private, and not to react to them. You need to be the world's best darn gossip keeper ... or preventer."

Tina said, "I'm not the most comfortable with it, but if I feel like you are abusing my knowledge, I won't be happy about it. At least I feel good about being your hypnotist whenever I'm nearby. I'm kind of with Rael though. If you're going to be stealing my secrets all the time, I won't promise not to use my new powers of hypnotism."

I thought about that for a moment. *I guess I'd rather have them do some little mean things to me than to hate me for listening in on their thoughts. I can handle that tradeoff.*

I said, "Fair enough. Would you guys keep this stuff our secret, though? I'd rather not have everyone and their brother knowing I hear what they think. It'll make people paranoid of being around me."

Rael said, "I'm sure we can come to some kind of protection arrangement that gets paid on a regular basis to keep our silence." He grinned.

I said, "You know, mentioning hypnosis ... maybe I should change from my genetics degree to one in psychiatry..."

Tina snorted and laughed, "Nice. Now ... think about your mother..."



## Chapter 24 – Girl's Time

### Third Person Perspective

Stephanie stared at Tina for a moment. Something was different about her. Then, she realized that Tina had changed her shirt. “Tina, did you change your shirt?”

Tina said, “Yeah, the blood on your shirt got on mine. I grabbed my extra from my gym bag while you changed. So, how about I drive ... wait, how about you fly the two of us to your place so you can get some proper clothes, then we fly back here and all drive to eat together?”

Rael said, “You’re dressed already. Why fly with Steph?”

Stephanie heard Tina’s very clear and loud thoughts ‘to have girl talk time,’ and to fly with Stephanie again. Stephanie said, “So we can talk about you, duh.”

Rael nodded slowly, “Ahhh.” He looked back and forth between Tina and Stephanie, grinned and thought some perverted thoughts. Stephanie rolled her eyes.

She said, “You need to give me room to stand up, Rael.”

He said, “Bummer. I’m saving my spot though.”

“What spot?”

“Right here.” He patted her side; then helped her up.

She went to her purse, grabbed her keys and wrapped the key ring around her finger. Tina joined her by the door. “See you guys in a few.”

Once outside, Tina said, “You’re flying without pants?”

Stephanie said, “Might as well, pants are in the wash, they’re all wet right now at the least. Not like I plan to hover over an area for a long time. Besides, what difference is this than wearing a bikini? More than half my body is covered with Rael’s shirt. I’m more covered, and in looser clothing than we wear to the gym.”

“Okay. Thanks for taking me with you, by the way. Flying was so cool the first time.”

Stephanie smiled at Tina, hugged her and drew her tight; then step pushed into the air. “I’m loving this myself.” She kicked up the speed to fly to her small house rapidly.

As they landed, Tina asked, “You own this?”

“No, renting it for college. Dad’s paying some of the rent; my scholarships are paying for the rest.”

"Strangely enough, I don't think I've ever come here. We've always met at Lance and Rael's house. The place is nice. I don't think I ever asked you what your degree was in before either. You mentioned genetics?"

Stephanie opened the door and gathered clothing into a duffel bag while they spoke. "Yeah, I'm actually planning to focus on DNA as it relates to supers. Now I have three lab rats. Well, two rats and a mouse."

Tina asked, "I'm a mouse?"

"No, I'm the mouse. The boys are much bigger than I am, thus the rat ... oh, never mind. If you wanted to donate your blood for testing, it might help to compare though! But yeah, I'm in my junior year."

Tina headed to the restroom, "Be right back." Steph picked out clothing and stuffed the duffel bag while she waited.

Tina returned and said, "So you have about two months of school left this year?"

"Yeah, rest of April, May, and a little June."

"So what do you do in genetics classes?"

"Learn about biology, dig into details of DNA."

"Huh. So if the hero thing doesn't work out, you'll be a lab rat?"

"Probably. Though the mind reading might change that now, even without the hero thing. I can help people collaborate better than ever, I'd think. If they are misunderstanding something, I'd know and could help them figure it out."

"Wow, that's a cool idea."

"Yeah. Heroing is the first priority though, as a job. Lance's mom, and Rael and my dad are all supers; they've wanted us to change for many years. Rael's dad used to be part of the H.E.R.O. program."

"Nothing like some parental pressure."

"I used to mind, but now I don't. Think about it, we just flew here, how cool is that?"

"Why are you putting clothes into a duffel bag, Steph?"

"So I can stay overnight at the boys' place."

"You live here though, right?"

"Yeah. But like the guys mentioned, we don't know what will happen with our powers, it'll be safer staying together for a while."

"Uh, huh, and that's why you're staying there."

"Rael, umm, threatened do something or other to me if I didn't stay there, with us having new powers. He worries about me..."

"Yeah, like that's the real reason, Steph."

Stephanie thought about it a moment and blushed. "Maybe not the only reason."

"I think you like being 'controlled' by Rael." She used her fingers to quote the air.

Stephanie blushed and said, "What? No, I uh, well. Oh, hell, I guess I'd just be lying if I denied that, after what you just saw."

"I think Rael really likes you."

"Yeah. I guess I've been a little blind to it, somehow. Seeing into other people's heads certainly lays bare the truth, doesn't it?"

Stephanie caught Tina's thoughts about Lance and Stephanie and looked up quickly, "No, Lance and I **haven't** done anything at all. You like him, don't you? Whoa, you like us both?"

"Hey! No fair intruding on my mind!"

"Come on, Tina, it's not like I can help it."

"Well, I guess that's **one** way to just kick someone out of the closet." She grumbled.

"You like Lance, so you aren't exactly **in** the closet."

"True. He is a hunk."

"Hell yeah. Not to make you jealous, but I **did** enjoy draping myself over him while he read the articles in the paper. It was nice ... very nice. I wonder if they walk around just in the sweat bottoms all the time."

"That would be nice."

They grinned at each other, and Stephanie changed into her own clothing.

Stephanie said, "You know, they **are** suckers for going with me to shop for clothing. You just have to entice them with a lot of flirting and try on clothing that they'll like."

"A lot of your clothing looks like stuff they'd like, Steph. Besides, I don't have your bust. Speaking of bust, I can see the changes from your metamorphosis. You gained some muscle, you're tighter on the thighs, abs, butt, and you're perkier."

"You've got a great butt though, and a tummy to die for."

Stephanie packed a few of her own amenities in the duffel bag as well.

Tina asked, "Didn't you say earlier that you hadn't put on deodorant?"

"Oh, my. Sorry about that."

"No, that's the point. You not only don't smell bad, you smell good. Don't put any on; just bring some along in case you need it. I'll bet you don't."

"Is that why you really put your face in my hair on the flight here?"

"Yeah. I can't explain it, you just smell so damn awesome."

“Do it again here, Tina. Let me pay close attention to your mindview.”

“Okay.” Tina stepped forward and breathed in Stephanie’s hair. It smelled sweet and fresh, yet somewhat exotic. It was ... alluring. Stephanie turned her head away and stepped back just as Tina tried to kiss her.

Stephanie cleared her throat. *Kissing’s so good now that if I let her start, I don’t think I could stop.* “Wow, and I haven’t washed my hair since last night. Perhaps the fact that I no longer sweat has something to do with it.”

Tina cleared her throat and said, “Who knows? I’m sure now, it’s not your shampoo, or perfume, or deodorant, assuming you are telling me the truth about all that.”

“Well, bonus then.” Stephanie grinned.

She grabbed the duffel bag and keys and locked up the house. Holding Tina tightly again, she flew up and back to the boys’ house.

## Chapter 25 – Flowers so Sweet

### Shrinker's Viewpoint

We squatted on top of an office building near the edge of the river district of Metrocity. The buildings here were relatively short, generally three stories in height. It provided a good vantage point of the businesses and streets in the area.

I watched a van with flower logos on the sides pull into the parking space at the rear of the flower shop. The driver hopped out and quickly entered through the back entrance.

I glanced at my minions. Fellow mutants following my lead, they would soon earn a rare spot in my army. These were mutants I'd collected the slow way – by tracking them down in the seedier parts of town. The clubs in the darker streets that didn't care what their clientele looked like.

Kralgon knelt by my side, cautiously peering over the rooftop. He was my lieutenant. A monster by human terms, he was huge at 7' tall, had four arms, and vicious fangs protruding from his mouth. His eyes were dead black most of the time. The lower two arms ended in blades, practical swords from the elbow on. He had the best traits of a brick and a mutant. The strength, armor, and ability to withstand massive damage of a brick, yet retained a mutant's weaponry. His shaggy, unkempt hair had a streak of purple in it. Most of us did that. Conforming to societal norms was for the humans.

Two other mutants stood behind and to my left. Vox appeared very human looking. Sadly so, in my mind - I much preferred the horned look so many of us had. One day, we wouldn't need to hide amongst the humans; we would rule them via fear. Today was not yet that day, though, and I brought him along to handle the front entrance. We needed the humans alive. Vox's only real mutant traits were long, dark fingernails and the small spikes on all joints, barring the jaw, and his fangs. He still didn't fit in perfectly. We all wore black leather, boots and had tattoos. But ... other humans wouldn't run away from him, at least.

Tim was the other pet I'd brought along. Tim ... such an odd name. He was one of very few of us who hadn't taken a new name upon becoming mutants. It was almost as if he clung to his past. Perhaps he did, though he looked so non-human I couldn't imagine any "normal" human reacting well to him. His arms had become tentacles,

and his skin was now purplish, with bumps all over. He was already activating his power, the ability to stretch those tentacles to unusual lengths. I smiled at his eagerness. His eyes glowed a dark purple from inside. I loved that effect.

I ran my long tongue over my fangs as I thought about this endeavor. I was so close to tripling my number of mutant followers, and with them, enough power to overwhelm any heroes foolish enough to try and stop me. We even captured a female mutant from the hospital last night. I hadn't seen another prior to this. *She had better not cause me issues with ruling the group or I'll happily shrink her head until her body dies, and feed on her.*

I ran my finger claws down my palm, scoring them and causing lines of blood to appear due to the unusual sharpness. The cuts almost instantly healed over.

The day was brighter than I'd like. My slit eyes worked better in the shadows of alleys at night. I wished the weather were stormy or otherwise menacing for the beginning of my war.

I looked at Vox. "Go to the front of the flower shop, prevent anyone from entering. Kralgon, you get in the center of the humans and cow them into silence. Tim, you'll round them up and bring them to me one at a time for reduction. We'll use their own van to transport them. Vox will drive them back home. I'll handle the phone line before entering. Oh, and make sure no one uses a cell phone, got it?"

They all nodded their understanding.

Vox jumped down the three stories, landed smoothly and walked around the building toward the front. I gave him a moment and motioned the others forward. The rest of us all leapt down, me smoothly, Kralgon with a heavy crunch as the concrete cracked under his much heavier weight. We moved quickly toward the rear entrance.

I stopped and tried the door of the van. It was unlocked. Opening it showed the keys were not inside. I debated hotwiring it, but knew that the human with the keys had just entered, and they were easily obtainable.

The others entered the door as I stopped by the electrical wiring entering the building. I grabbed the pipe with my right hand, and in a hard jerk of my arm wrenched the electrical and telephone wiring out from the back of the building. Sparks momentarily flew as it separated. Human buildings were so easy to rip apart...

I heard a very brief scream from inside before hearing Kralgon's guttural warnings of violence, and then silence.

I slid the duffel bag off my shoulder as I entered. It pleased me for a few moments to see all the humans on their knees. Tim wrapped the arms of a man up with his tentacles, picked him up and brought

him over to me. He wore a light jacket with the name of the shop embroidered on the front.

I slid my hand in his pocket and pulled out the keys. They were labeled “Fay’s Van.” I nodded sarcastically to him and grinned. Then I grabbed the man by the neck, activated my power and shrunk him down to six inches tall. I quickly slid him into the duffel bag.

One man decided to be a hero. He punched Vox squarely in the jaw as Vox stared at me. Vox’s head moved slightly to the right from the punch, but otherwise he gave no indication of injury. The man clutched his hand, an expression of pain on his face. He looked amazed that Vox wasn’t fazed by the punch. Vox raised an eyebrow at him.

Vox said, “Really? You thought that would hurt me? Pistols hardly hurt me, and I heal that in a minute, human.”

Kralgon said with a guttural tone, “Want **me** to punch you, Vox?” He laughed at his own crude joke.

Vox glanced at Kralgon. “No thanks, big guy. You’ve got a few dozen tons of force behind your punch.”

“Aww. You heal pretty quick like.”

I said, “Back to it, boys. We aren’t here to wait for a fight with some heroes.”

Kralgon looked at me and grinned. “You got it, lady boss.”

We moved through the rest of the room quickly, shrinking the shoppers and the employees, putting them all in the duffel bag. A few cried, but they all stayed quiet, likely out of shock and fear.

Before we left, I flipped the front door’s sign to ‘Closed,’ grinned again, and walked with my mutants out the back door, laughing all the while. I hopped in the passenger seat while my minions climbed in back, ripping out some of the racking for flower transportation with their strength and claws. I threw the duffel bag of humans on the floor next to me and tossed the keys to Vox. He grinned as he started up the van and we headed back home...

## Chapter 26 - Tights

### Stephanie's Perspective

Rael found a pair of sunglasses to wear that wouldn't look horrible indoors, to hide his eyes in public.

We ate a pleasant lunch at Mama Lucci's. Her little diner made tasty, healthy food, so it had become one of our favorites over time. I couldn't help but wonder if it mattered any more, though. Still, it was a menu friendly choice for Tina.

While we waited for our meal, I looked up the number for the regional H.E.R.O. office, called and asked if Captain McCain was working today. He wasn't available.

I said, "The mutants that were captured are probably being held by the local police, they have the jail facilities. I think, anyway. They sure as heck won't let us in without a H.E.R.O. card."

Lance said, "We've got the temp cards."

I said, "We need costumes too, Lance has gone through three nice shirts and pants. I've ruined several shirts now."

Rael said, "What do we do, charge the costumes and hope we make enough to cover it?"

I said, "They must take time to make, maybe we pay on pickup?"

Rael said, "Hmm, speaking of costumes, we need to ask if they prevent scent from going through them. If so, then you need a skimpy costume, Steph."

"What?"

"You were calming people down at the accident scene by a scent. I have a very sensitive nose now. Probably makes me more susceptible too, damn it. Anyway, if a suit blocks the scent, depending on what part of you that releases the scent, you may need to have the costume scanty in that area."

"I think it's my skin. I feel a tingling all over when it happens."

Lance said, "Did I miss something here? What are you talking about, Rael?"

"Dude, sometimes you're thick. She did it at the house and at the accident scene. We got caught up in all of those, and it might be too subtle for you to notice, but she's putting out something, perhaps a pheromone that affects other people. That and she **always** smells great. Beyond great. That's not normal."

Lance said, "Hmm, you might be right."



Rael smacked himself on the forehead.

Tina chimed in, "I only saw you walk around the streets at the accident scene and people were calming down. Is that what you were doing?"

I said, "Yeah. When I get really emotional, or want to help others, it seems to happen. My skin tingles all over, kind of in waves."

Tina said, "And you claimed you didn't know why you smelled so good!"

"No, I just didn't put my smell and the power I've been using together."

Rael said, "Yup, definitely a tiny, itsy bitsy costume. Maybe just a bikini." His mental image of a bikini was ... barely there, to say the least.

I rolled my eyes, "And high heels, I suppose?"

"Yeah, that would do nicely."

I sighed, "Fortunately, you don't get to decide my costume. I don't mind being revealing, but come on."

Lance dialed the number for the costume maker his mother had forwarded from Rael's father. I listened in his mind while he called.

He pushed a few buttons; then someone picked up. He spoke with them briefly. She asked if the calling number was his cell number, and would text the location to go to, after she'd received confirmation of him working with the H.E.R.O. program. She said it should be fast ... if true.

Lance said, "If we have to wait a while, let's swing over by Score! I'd like to talk to John. He'll be pissed about missing last night."

I agreed, until we knew if H.E.R.O. would pay enough to live off from, Lance and Rael needed their jobs, and I needed to keep tutoring to keep one of my larger scholarships.

We climbed in the car and Rael drove us to the bar. I looked at the H.E.R.O. phone and put us 'on duty.' *We might as well see if anyone needs help...*

We pulled into the bar's parking lot, and Lance walked into the employee entrance. He grabbed a rock from the bushes outside the building before heading in.

After a few minutes, he came back out. He brushed dust off his palms by the bushes.

He got back in the car and said, "He's okay with it, although he'd rather be able to announce that I'm a super. By the way, I got the text with the location."

He gave it to Rael, who proceeded to drive us there.

Rael said, "What's up with the dust?"

Lance replied, "I crushed a rock for John. I figured it'd be hard to disbelieve that."

In about fifteen minutes, we arrived at a nondescript office building.

We walked up to the glass door, but it was locked. We heard a buzzing sound while we looked for a button to push, and the door clicked open. We walked in, and a receptionist said, "Third floor, office 302."

I caught her mindview, and discovered that she was a super. She wondered if she was as strong as Lance. She assessed us as we walked by. *Wow, I wonder how much a super security guard runs?*

Rael pushed the button, and we entered the elevator. We found room 302, and as Rael reached for the door, it buzzed open. We walked into a nice waiting room, with very sturdy oversized chairs.

A tall, curly, blonde haired woman walked into the room. Her eyes were gray, and she was slim of build. She looked relaxed, though her clothing was stylish.

She introduced herself. "I'm Dr. Turnquist."

We introduced Lance as Spartan, me as Psystar, and Rael as Black Tiger.

Rael said, "We got your name as a costume maker..."

The Doctor said, "Just getting started with the H.E.R.O. program?"

I said, "Yes, we changed last night, although each of us has a parent who is a super."

She said, "Welcome to the ranks of supers, then. I was told you've already been active?"

I replied, "Yes. I'm not sure what they'll consider things we've done at this point. I'd guess at the very least Spartan's work on the bar and hospital last night, and our work today on the crash scene. They might consider other work done at the hospital if they are generous."

She asked, "And I take it you've had clothing issues so far?"

Lance chuckled, "That's a mild way to say it. Rips, tears, and blood stains are conspiring to destroy our clothing."

"That they do. So you knew enough not to buy a professional wrestling style costume at least."

"Yeah, that stuff would rip up fast too."

"So your group is looking for four costumes? Clothing only, no accouterments?"

"Three costumes. Tina's here for support."

"Do you need a means of communicating with each other, unless you are three individuals, not a group?"

"We're a team. We have cell phones, what are you thinking of?"

"Something more like satellite radio communication via earpieces or such. That type of thing costs quite a bit more though."

Lance said, "I don't even know how much we'll be paid from H.E.R.O. We need to be able to afford something."

The Dr. said, "There are numerous factors H.E.R.O. uses to pay superheroes. The potential damage to civilians, lives likely saved, damage caused to the area, supervillains captured, damage likely prevented, etc."

"So ... we still have no clue."

"The pay is quite good – it very much depends on your activity level and types of problems handled. I'm guessing that none of you are wealthy, would you like me to put this on a relatively short payment plan? Each suit runs a base five thousand dollars, but self seal tears in themselves. Special additional items can add to it, but I'll let you know if you want any, to give other options. Chunks ripped out need to be repaired by me though. The type of material you want isn't overly relevant; I can make something that feels like silk as easily as metal. Protective gear costs much more though."

Stephanie asked, "What drives the cost? The material type? The amount covering the body?"

The Doctor said, "No, it's more the difficulty in making the garment of clothing. A complex design with a lot of intricacy takes me longer than a plainer garment. Colors are easy, and a suit can have multiple colors. Again, my use of special tools and my powers commonly allows me to make the costume while you are here."

Rael asked, "Will scent, or a pheromone pass through the clothing?"

She said, "Will it protect you from a gas? No."

I said, "Great, so I don't need a skimpy costume just because I release pheromones, assuming that's what they are."

The Doctor replied, "Wait. That might be a little different. It wouldn't entirely stop it, but it might severely restrict your range. The density of the material is higher than normal, which restricts gas flow, but doesn't make it airtight. Do you breathe out the gas?"

"No, my skin tingles all over; I'm guessing I emit it from all over my skin."

"Ah, then I'm sorry to say you'll want a more revealing uniform."

Rael mentally cheered. I gave him an evil eye.

Dr. Turnquist led us into another room with a tall floor to ceiling apparatus. It looked like some of the more exotic cable based workout machines, with poles running up on each side and in the back.

"I'll assume that none of you are self conscious. If so, you may

not want to be in the hero business. Embarrassing things occur all the time...”

We all replied that we were fine with whatever.

“Spartan, would you please strip down to your underwear and step onto the foot shapes on the floor in my scanning machine?”

Lance did as directed. She moved his arms and general position slightly. “Hold still now.”

She typed a little on a computer and bright laser lights started at the floor to touch Lance. Devices moved from his feet to above his head, moving the lasers up his body. She performed the scan a second time and mumbled “Good, good.”

Rael went next, with similar results. Tina watched the boys closely, she was glad she’d come along.

I asked, “Should I keep a bra on?”

The Dr. replied, “That’s fine, unless it is overly thick or padded, unless you intend to always wear a padded bra.”

“I don’t wear a padded bra.”

“It should be fine then.”

I stripped down and stood in the machine.

Lance asked, “So what did that do?”

Dr. Turnquist replied, “It scans your exact body shape. Most superheroes choose skintight costumes, so it helps a lot.”

Tina asked, “Why **do** superheroes tend to wear skintight costumes?”

The Doctor looked at her, “Why do supermodels wear form fitting clothing that often highlights or shows off their body? I’ve spoken with a lot of heroes over the years. Almost all of our bodies are changed either at or soon after the big change that makes us a super. By changed, I mean they become extremely efficient, burn off most fat and gain muscle. So most heroes have great bodies, they like to flaunt them.”

Tina said, “So ... they are all vain?”

Dr. Turnquist laughed, “Possibly, but there is another reason, baggy clothing could catch on something or be grabbed. Something skintight can’t be gripped easily by an opponent, nor caught in a car door, nor drag you down while swimming, etc. There are a lot of combat and action type reasons not to wear baggy clothes, or capes, or a jacket over a suit.”

Rael said, “Now that makes sense. I had planned on having a leather jacket or something like that with mine, but you just convinced me not to. I have no desire to have it grabbed and allow someone to restrain me.”

“Interesting that you mention jackets, few supers get overly cold.

A jacket isn't needed for cold weather, so the only reason to wear one becomes vanity or utility to hold or hide items."

Lance said, "Capes too? Damn, so many comic book heroes look great in capes."

Dr. Turnquist said, "I'll make a costume with whatever you want. However, a cape is pretty easy to grab, and comic books don't show the bloopers."

"Bloopers?"

"What would happen if you dove out of a car, and part of your cape was still in it when it drove off? You'd bounce along behind it, rip off the cape, or in your case, if you are a brick that is, you could damage the car. Have you ever run through a factory with a cape on as it billows behind you? What happens when it catches in some gears or other turning parts?"

Lance nodded, "Okay, okay. Thank you for sharing that with us, I wouldn't have thought of the cape getting caught."

Dr. Turnquist held up her hands. "I don't want to dissuade you from choosing whatever costume design you want here. It's your costume. Just know the dangers before wearing something."

He asked, "How about goggles? Is there any reason not to wear those, or glasses or shades?"

She asked, "Glasses could be torn off pretty easily, but I have some designs that are tight to the head, and the eyepieces could be more goggle-like so someone wouldn't get a hold of the rim. Is your eyesight bad?"

"No, but I can jump really fast, and it also would be nice to have something blocking my eyes from dust and such. I've already been in a cave-in as of last night; there was a ton of dust floating around. Is there a problem with utility belts?"

"Not at all, I have a variety of styles, and I can change the material type to match what you want it to feel like."

"Something strong enough that I don't accidentally rip it. I'm damaging a lot of things so far when I'm in a hurry."

Rael said, "So how could we hide our costume under clothing?"

Dr. Turnquist replied, "You have three options here. One, you could avoid wearing the costume unless you go out 'superheroing' so to speak. Two, you could wear part of your costume, that which will fit under a shirt. You might have to alter the clothing you wear for that option. Three, an expensive option is to use one of two devices created by a colleague of mine. One changes the properties of cloth set to the right frequency so it becomes invisible and back. You can still feel the cloth, though. The other is a device that makes the cloth invisible, and phases it. In a nutshell, the costume pretty much isn't

there until you hit the code on the device.”

Lance said, “Whoa. That could be embarrassing if someone else pushed the button on the device during a fight or rescue.”

“No, it's a code. Like a security code. He changed it from a button to a code due to exactly that problem in the early models.”

Lance asked, “Do we even want to ask how much something like that costs?”

“Fifty thousand dollars per. Pretty reasonable, I think.”

Rael made a choking sound, “Ouch. To you maybe! Is there something built in so we don't get paparazzi focusing on our groin?”

She smiled, “Yes, all of the men's costumes have that. No need to have the media, or certain members of the public raising an outcry about such things.”

She continued, “So, shall we begin designing? Who first? Oh, go ahead and get dressed now.”

Lance said, “I'll go first, I know what I want.”

Dr. Turnquist turned on a large display on the wall, and the 3D scan of Lance appeared on one side. She proceeded to go through a list of designs for the top. He chose a tight fitting yellow top with a red V shape starting between his pectorals and widening to about 5 inches on each side of his neck, then going back down in the V in the back to a similar point.

His legs were also tight fitting and yellow, with a red stripe starting at the beltline to mid-thigh, then crossing to the inside. In effect, it created a yellow V if he stood with his legs tight together, with the bottom of the V being at his knees on the inside.

He went with black gloves, slightly tacky to make grabbing someone or something easier, much like a set of gloves for American football players, with a red V beginning at the outer forearm, spreading around the arm just before the elbow.

He changed the sleeves so that a similar red pattern went up the forearm, and crossed from the inner elbow to the top of the triceps in an upside down V. He chose a tactical style red belt, with a series of pouches on each side. The buckle was black to match the chest top, outer elbow and knee areas.

Last, he chose tight goggle style glasses, with the glass-tinted red.

Dr. Turnquist said, “This will be an easy costume to do. You want the material to feel like a rubbery material, sheer like the form fitting Body Armor shirt you have on now, or anything else?”

Lance said, “If you can really make it feel like this shirt, I'd love that. I'm used to wearing them.”

Rael said, “Yeah, I think you personally support that company.”

“I like them, and I'm not ashamed of my body.”

Rael continued, "Yeah, you better not be with them. We need to get Steph some of them." He looked pointedly at me and grinned. I stuck my tongue out at him.

The Doctor said, "One last thing, do you want the boots and gloves a color of black and shininess so you can wear them with other clothing and not look unusual?"

"Yes, please. Were it not for that, I'd have gone with red gloves and yellow boots."

She smiled at him. "All right, who's next?"

Rael said, "I'll go."

Rael's idea of a costume was much simpler. He chose a black, tight-fitting t-shirt style top with a tiger paw logo in gray on the chest. Fingerless black gloves for the hands, and black tight-fitting pants covered the legs. He picked out a different style of black tactical belt with a small pouch on the right, left, and back, and a round gray buckle. For boots he chose a style that looked more like black leather buckled boots that almost reached the knee. Apart from the material, his costume design looked more like something he could have bought himself.

I said, "You don't think all that black looks too ... villainish?"

Rael said, "No. I'll let La ... Spartan be all colorful and shiny. I'd rather not be seen by every villain in the area."

Tina said, "Looking at the design on the screen, are those pants tight enough to wear under jeans?"

The Dr. replied, "Yes, they are. You're seeing the need for superheroes needing to change anywhere, aren't you?"

"Right. Ste ... Psystar, you'll want something that is low enough on top so you can wear it with other shirts. Otherwise you'll really limit your clothes."

I said, "I agree. I want people to see me and think 'heroine' at first glance. Hmm, I want something sexy, and it needs to have enough open for the pheromone thing to work."

I chose a white top that covered from the waist to the top of each breast. It went around the chest under my arms and ended at my lower back. The center had three wide oval cutouts showing my belly button on the bottom one, and barely open on the bottom of the breasts on the top cutout.

Dr. Turnquist said, "You won't be able to wear a bra with this."

I said, "Will it have support built in?"

"Yes. You shouldn't have much of a problem with that after the change anyway, but it will help prevent some bouncing during some activities."

"That's all that's needed then."

The shoulders and arms were left bare apart from white gloves that covered half of the forearms. A gold belt that matched the color of my hair came next. I chose form fitting white shorts, similar to short biker shorts. I considered various miniskirts, but the shorts looked better on the screen... Also, I couldn't hide a miniskirt under jeans or pants. The shorts were low cut so I'd be able to wear them under a variety of pants or skirts, though the top went down to them and appeared to seal with them when pressed together.

I picked white boots that came halfway up my calf, and had a low heel to allow some fighting. I didn't think I'd need them for running, as it would be faster to just fly.

Dr. Turnquist said, "That's it?"

"Yep."

"You do realize that your face isn't covered? You won't have a secret identity."

Lance said, "I'd rather be a public figure, I think."

"Friends and family might be endangered. Also, you'll have the colored glasses that will help a little. People won't be able to see your eye color, eye shape, or eyebrows."

I chose a partial facemask, colored white that I could attach quickly, and would stick to the skin until peeled off. Rael added a similar black mask that covered enough to make identification difficult, but was easy to add or remove.

Dr. Turnquist said, "All right then. Let me check and see if I have the belts, boots, and Spartan's glasses in stock. If I do, we can trial fit them and I can alter the size, color and material to fit you snug."

Rael said, "You just happen to have things in our sizes on hand? How will you change the colors?"

The Doctor chuckled, "I have powers as well, and tools that make changes to the materials at the molecular level. It's one reason why heroes come to me to make costumes, I can make them fast and sized perfectly. Some heroes don't keep multiple costumes on hand, or not more than two copies."

She continued, "Before we move on, I need to verify that you are all fine with the five thousand dollars per suit. I can charge one thousand per month to your H.E.R.O. account once it activates if you want to be conservative. If you find you are bringing in much more, let me know and I can change that."

Lance said, "Wow, that would be awesome."

I said, "If you think we'll really bring in that much money from H.E.R.O. I'm okay with it." The doctor's mindview showed that would be an unusually low amount if we were active at all, they may already have more than that waiting to be authorized for payment.



Rael said, "I'm good with it as well."

She said, "Great. Would anyone like water, soda, tea, etc. while you wait? It will likely take about ten to thirty minutes per suit, give or a take a few."

Everyone asked for water. The doctor then asked us to give her a few minutes to check for supplies, and she'd be back out.

After she left the room, I said, "Wow! She actually resizes things with her powers, and then changes the material so it can repair itself. That's really neat."

Rael said, "Here I figured we'd wait a week or two."

Lance said, "Ouch. That would be a lot of ruined clothes in that time."

In about ten minutes, the Doctor came back in with a cart of clothing, boots and belts.

She had Lance strip down to his underwear again, and put on a plain gray costume. It was oversized even for him. She held one item at a time, her hand glowed, and the item shrunk to a snug fit on him. After all the items were on him and fitting snugly, she took a pen shaped tool and made marks where his costume should change colors.

She had him strip down yet again, took the costume pieces over to a machine that stretched the fabric straight, and drew lines connecting the dots she had marked. Then another tool changed the color of the entire region touching that mark to the yellow, red, and black of his final costume.

Finally, she ran her hands over each piece, her hands glowed again, and she held the costume to him. In less than half an hour, his costume was complete.

She said, "Done. Try it on."

He complied.

She said, "Do you like where the colors change now that you see it? We can move the V shapes up or down, darken or lighten the yellow or red, etc."

Lance said, "This looks great. I'm amazed that you can do it so fast."

She replied, "Keeping a lot of material in stock, having unreal high tech tools, and powers to make items fit and change the material composition work wonders together. But thank you, nonetheless."

He said, "No, thank you."

She went through a similar process with Rael, except with his, she added marks to cut off the material to make short sleeves.

The Doctor's process with my costume was more extreme than Rael's. She first drew free form on the costume to note where it would be cut. Then she verified with me that it was where I wanted the cut,

and used the cutting tool while the costume was on me.

“There, done.”

I asked, “If the costumes self repair how do you get enough business to stay busy?”

The Doctor smiled, “I’m one of very few costume designers in the country that can make a self repairing costume; others only sell normal cloth types. That makes my clientele nationwide and more. I have the costume information secured in the system, so I can make more with a phone call.”

Tina said, “How do they self repair? Isn’t that spandex?”

Dr. Turnquist grinned, “It was, past tense. One of my abilities allows me to change molecular structure. The cloth now almost has a form of DNA to it. It remembers the cloth near it, and the edges of the tears reconnect and reform when a tear occurs. So it reseals itself from the outside of the tear to the center. If a portion is torn out, it can’t reform it, which is why you need to bring it in for me to repair it if that occurs. I know you are wondering how thirty minutes of time is worth five thousand dollars. It’s due to that unique property, plus the normally immediate service, plus the rarity of what I can do. I would honestly be surprised if more than five providers worldwide can make costumes like I can.”

Lance said, “I think you rock.”

The Doctor smiled. She had the three of us fill out forms allowing her to charge our H.E.R.O. accounts, including the amount, and we were done.

Dr. Turnquist had one last thing to mention to me, “The men have their small pouches for their H.E.R.O. card, keys, money, and cell phones. Here are the spots on your belt to slide in a few keys, the H.E.R.O. card, and money can slide into this spot. The cell phone will have to clip onto it. Here’s a secure clip for you, no fee for it.”

I said, “Thank you.”

“Oh, and watch this bonus property of the material.” She stepped behind me and pulled the bottom of the shirt up just below my chest, then smoothed it out around my abdomen. It clung to itself. “There. You’ll be able to wear normal shirts that line up at the top of pants and still show a little skin without the suit showing. You can even stick the face mask to it.”

## Chapter 27 – Mental Contact

### Stephanie's Viewpoint

We put those items in our belts before leaving. We stayed in costume when we left, since we planned to stay active the rest of the day. Rael wanted to try to get into the hospital, to see some of the mutants currently being held. He thought we'd have a pretty good chance if we were in costume, and showed the temporary H.E.R.O. card.

Lance agreed, as did I.

I said, "How about you guys find out where they are being held and head there. I want to check on the teenager from the accident site to see if I can hear her thoughts. Perhaps I can even use my pheromones to help wake her up if something happened to her head, like a concussion or coma." *For now, I'll skip mentioning that I plan to try to dig into her mind to bring her out...*

Lance said, "That's a great idea. Some positive PR will be a good thing."

I replied, "I don't care about the PR, I just want to see if I can help the girl. For a few minutes of my time it's worth checking on."

"Point taken. We'll check out the mutant angle and text you the location."

"Thanks guys, meet up with you in a few. I'd bring you, Tina, but it's probably smarter not to mix costume and not. Perhaps we'll have to get you a costume soon that isn't made for heroing, but would allow you to accompany us without others asking questions."

Tina smiled, "Like wow, thanks for thinking of me! I should get back to my plans for the day now, though; it's already almost five P.M."

I said, "Okay, I'll fly you back to your car now."

I slid my arm around her waist and drew her close; she hugged me in turn. She leaned in to smell my hair. *Damn, they must like my fragrance if they keep digging into me with their noses.* The thought made me smile.

I air stepped up once, then jabbed my other knee into the air, and we shot into the air. It took us a few minutes of fast flying to reach the house and land.

Tina said, "Thanks again for including me today. Let me know if you have time for me to hang out again, or go for a flight! And please check into the bite thing!"

I smiled, "Will do. I have to go to school in the morning, and study group in the afternoon; it might be a few days before I can find out much."

She kissed me on the cheek. "Thanks. I like your costume. It's almost an offshoot of a workout outfit."

I studied myself through her mindview. "You're right. I'll have to try on a bunch of clothes to work out what I can wear over this without showing anything."

"The way you've got the two pieces, it should be pretty flexible. Good luck on it, Steph. See you soonish."

"You too, Tina." I made sure she was able to start her car, and then took to the air again.

I raised my speed to high levels to zoom to Metrocity General Hospital.

*Yes! I'm in a superhero costume, actually flying around the city!* The city was an amazing sight from the air. I saw traffic flowing, easily spotted the flashing lights of a police car that had pulled someone over, and the skyscrapers of the city. For the most part, Metrocity was beautiful from the sky. Sometime soon, I determined that I would have to check out some of the cooler buildings in town, such as the Tri-Towers skyscraper, the new football stadium, and the Olaread Theater.

A professional looking photographer snapped photos of me as I slowed and floated to the ground by the entrance. He stepped closer as I walked to the entrance. "Excuse me, Miss?"

I said, "Yes?"

"I'm Darian McDermit. I'm a freelance photographer. Can I ask your name, and if it's not private, why you're here?"

"My name is Psystar. I'm here to see a young lady I brought in early from a traffic accident." I 'heard' him think to ask more questions if I stayed here. I wasn't in a rush; it would take the boys some time to find out where the mutants would be held, much less drive there. I waited for Darian to ask something next, thankfully he wasn't someone who pre-thought everything, causing that almost annoying echo to me.

He smiled when I didn't rush away from him. He wasn't used to that. "So you are just here to check on how she's doing?"

"Not just, if she's not conscious I'll try a few things in my disposal to try to help her."

"May I ask what those are?"

"No, sorry."

"Is that your natural hair color?"

*What an odd question ... wait, he means it. He's interested as a photographer.* "Yes it is."

"I've never seen you before, are you a new H.E.R.O. member?"

"That's correct."

"Would you mind a few close-up shots?"

"I don't mind. It's not like I won't have some pictures taken of me over time anyway."

He took some photos from about five feet away and rapidly moved in an arc around me snapping more. I smiled for the pictures.

After he finished, I said, "You must have a good camera to take pictures so rapidly." Then it struck me, I'd unconsciously shifted my position to match how he wanted me to stand. *Hub, well, photographers would probably like me as a model. So long as they think about how I should move, I'd just do it.*

He said, "I have to, this is my full time job. My pictures are my livelihood."

He pulled out a card and handed it to me. "If you are interested in a photo shoot, some outdoor scene or in front of a special building or site, or if you know you'll be meeting someone special and want some pictures, just give me a call."

I just realized from his mindview that he wasn't 'just' a photographer. He was also paparazzi at times. That was why he was waiting by the hospital. *For some reason I thought they'd be like hounds, following you around annoying you and getting in the way of your car and such.*

I said, "Thanks for the card, Darian." I shook his hand, which surprised him a lot, then headed into the hospital.

My steps slowed as I approached the lobby desk. I'd forgotten the last time I was near the lobby desk at Iron Cross Hospital. Mercy Hospital's lobby had a different layout, but I nervously looked around at the number of people there. It wasn't overly crowded at the main front entrance rather than the emergency entrance.

*There isn't a line, thank goodness.* I asked the receptionist, "Hi, I'm here to see Gina Woorsten. I brought her in earlier today. Her father is Todd Woorsten."

She punched the name into her computer. "She's in room 414. You can take the elevator right there to reach it."

"Thanks." I headed toward the elevator. An older man walked up beside me, and surreptitiously looked at me from the side.

The elevator door opened, a man about my age looked about to depart until he saw me, and then backed up to stand in the back of the elevator. He thought the extra time wasted would be worth it to be this close to a female super.

I smiled. *I guess I'll have to get used to that. I suppose the costume almost instantly makes me a notable figure.* I stepped onto the elevator and pressed the button for the fourth floor. I looked through the older man's mindview as he stepped in, glanced at the floor button and just stood

off to the side.

They were quiet on the ride, and just watched me. Just for fun, I turned, winked and grinned at the younger man as I left the elevator. The older man stepped out on the same floor; he was here to see his nephew. I 'heard' him wonder if superheroes dated and if he could find a way to introduce me to his nephew. I smiled at him and said, "I hope your nephew gets better." Then we changed directions, and I followed the doors to find room 414.

The door was closed. I heard the mental voices of the mother and father inside. I knocked gently and waited. Todd Woorsten opened the door. His mouth dropped open and he just stared at me. *Well, I guess the costume does add an air of mystique.* He couldn't believe I stood there, right in front of him.

I said, "Hello, Mr. Woorsten. I thought I'd check on your daughter."

He stammered, "Umm, wow, thanks. Yeah, come in. Honey, Psystar is here, she brought Gina to the hospital. Psystar, this is my wife, Kassie."

I saw that Gina was unconscious, and I didn't hear any mental dream activity as I entered. I stepped over to Kassie and gave her a quick hug. "I'm sorry she isn't doing better."

Todd asked, "How did you know?"

"I can sense her. Do you mind if I ask what the doctors said?"

"She's unconscious, possibly in a coma. She hit her head on my seat because she wasn't wearing her seat belt. The doctors can't find any bleeding or anything that they can fix without some dangerous surgery."

"Would you like me to **try** to wake her up with my powers?"

"What would you do?"

"I can barely explain my powers to others, Mr. Woorsten. All I can say is that I'm willing to try two different things I believe I can do. Neither may work."

He looked at his wife and said, "Honey?"

His wife said, "If you can help her, please do."

"All right." I walked around to the far side of the bed, leaned over the bed so my head was close to hers, and lay my palm against her cheek.

As when she was in the car, I felt something there, but not a normal mindview or mental voice. Todd came over and held Gina's hand from the other side of the bed. Unfortunately, getting that close made his mindview very large and distracting to me.

I said, "Todd, this is hard to ask, but proximity to others distracts me from this. Can I ask you to wait at the least on the other

side of the room?"

He said, "Oh, sorry." He moved to the chair in the far corner, sat down and began wringing his hands together.

I went back to focusing on Gina's static. I mentally said 'Gina' a few times, trying to send that into her static. *I'm certain I can talk to other people mind to mind now. I did it at the accident scene, though that was with a shout.*

A momentary mindview appeared to me. I tried to grab at it, and had a visual of some kind of feelers, or tentacles, grabbing it and pulling it to the forefront before it could fade away. I pulled the mindview up close and decided to try to reach into it with the tentacles. They were able to go through, as if it were a window frame. I felt as though I floated, and pulled myself into the odd place. Everything felt very indistinct. I tried to sharpen the view, and it seemed to clear a bit. The monotone colors gained a slight amount of color.

I mentally called out to Gina. I sensed, more than heard a response, and flew through her mental 'mindscape' to it. It almost felt like areas of her mind had shut down. I found an area with a group of doors in it. I selected the largest one and attempted to force it open. It resisted my efforts, so I visualized mental tentacles to grab the door and yank it open. It failed to open even then, so I bashed on it and attacked until my tentacles could grab it and rip it off its hinges. *What can I say; I'm not the most subtle or patient person.*

Colors, lights, and images filled what seemed to be a vast chamber. I stepped into the room, and images of Gina's parents, friends, home and school floated around. This had to be her memory center. I spent a moment looking at some memories. They appeared much like videos to me, with a flick of my hand I had the ability to fast forward and rewind them at will, and at the speed I desired. I could even pause a memory to study it. This was fascinating, but wasn't what I was there for. I stepped back into the main chamber.

Several other doors blocked other exits in this central chamber, I was not sure what they all stood for, but I hoped one was her conscious mind.

I attacked another door, but it was a strong door. *That could make sense if someone hid themselves away in their own mind.* I used my tentacles to bash and tear at the door. I was annoyed at being thwarted, and it wouldn't open. Great banging sounds echoed through the air as my tentacle minions smashed and pulled at it. Finally, the door gave, and I ripped at it. I must have been a little hyped up; I ended up ripping the entire door off the frame. A flood of visions hit me. They didn't make much sense, and reminded me of Lance when he had been dreaming. Visuals and sounds both flowed from it. Creatures like faeries flew out

and around the main chamber that I was in. The detail was amazing, and the creatures were fantastic. This must have been her subconscious mind. *Oops. My bad.*

I attacked the next door, practically flinging it off to the side once it came free. As with the memory door, nothing came out of this one. I stepped just inside and found what I visualized to be pools of something. I put my hand near one, and felt a burst of happiness. This had to be an emotional center. *Interesting that it was separated from the other areas.*

I withdrew from the room, and attacked the next door. A flight of butterflies with smiley faces flew to me, around me and continued on their way. I heard a strange melody I'd never heard before. The odd beasties and sounds continued flowing around this area, they appeared to enjoy being free of their door.

I went back to attacking the door - it resisted being opened. My tentacles came from the air all around me, bashed at it and tried to rip it off its hinges. Then, I stopped the attack. *Maybe I'm using too much force.* I decided on a more subtle route. The tentacles dissipated, and I walked to the door. I imagined myself to be intangible, and walked through the door.

It worked. *Well, that was dumb, brute force beating down those other doors. I've been hanging out with the boys too much.* On the other side, I found a girl who looked similar, though not exactly like Gina. She said, "Hello."

"Hi. I'm Psystar, are you Gina?"

"Yes, that's me."

"You're in a coma; I'm here to wake you up."

"But I can't get out."

"How about I lead the way and you hold my hand and come along?"

"Okay."

I took her hand and moved to the door – it opened from this side. Perhaps she just needed someone to know someone was there for her. We left the room.

She stopped and looked at the strange sights and sounds flying around the main 'chamber' of her mind. "What are these?"

"I'm not sure, I think your dreams. Come, you need to wake up."

I pulled myself back to the mindview 'entrance' I'd come through, pulling her with me. Once she seemed to reach the area behind the mindview 'screen', the area went from gray and barely defined to full color. It was as if her mind became active again.

I floated back through the mindview so it merely filled my vision



and tried to separate myself. The mindview didn't want to pull back from my visual space. I had to push very hard to yank myself back away.

I gained a momentary visual of the hospital room, falling, and everything went dark.

## Chapter 28 – In Search of Mutants

### Rael's Viewpoint

Stephanie flew off with Tina. When we got in the car, I punched Lance on the shoulder. “Dude, we’re superheroes.”

Lance looked at me, grinned and said, “Heck yeah!”

“So, I’m thinking of going to the police station? Otherwise there’s the one mutant at Iron Cross that Captain McCain put in a basement lockup...”

“Let’s try the police station.”

“Works for me. Sucks that our best mode of transport is little Steph though. If you flew, we could practically ride on your shoulders.”

“Heh, I could grab you around the ribs and jump with you. Do you honestly think I’d drop you?”

“Not really. Not exactly cool looking though.” *I imagined for a moment Lance leaping around with me thrown over his shoulder. That is so not dignified...*

“True.”

“So ... there are police stations all over Metrocity. Which do you think will hold the mutants?”

“The jail has facilities, I’m sure of that – but I don’t think they’d put people they are holding temporarily into that.”

“I know; I’ll call my dad. He should know. Lemme use your cell phone.” Lance handed me his phone, and I called my old man up. He actually answered – I never knew with him, he took a lot of trips. “Hi, Dad, this is Rael.”

“Hey, kid. What’s new?” He sounded suspicious, since I didn’t call him often.

“Nothing much. I might have to give up competition martial arts though.” I smiled, my devious side had to make an appearance.

“What? Why would you do that? You love martial arts.”

“I figured I’d go hardcore. You know, get more into the down and dirty real fight scene. Competition is just too wimpy.”

“Kid, don’t make some kind of rash decision after spending so many years training.”

Lance looked at me with a horror-struck expression. He obviously couldn’t imagine feeding his mom a line just to get a reaction out of her.

"Nope. Mind's set, Dad. I already got into my first fight last night. Got my ass handed to me, but a couple of guys jumped me just before the fight, so I was slow in the big fight."

"Damn it, kid. What made you want to do something idiotic like this?"

"Well, it might be these strange ... **superpowers** I now have. Woohoo!"

"You shit. Are you jerking your old man around? You know I have a bad heart."

"Yeah, right, Dad. You have a bad heart about as much as I do now."

"True, true. Okay, what's my kid got going for him?" He sounded perked up now. *Not like he hadn't collaborated with Lance's mom and Steph's dad to 'activate' us years ago.*

"I'm faster and stronger, but not nearly as strong as the mammoth sitting next to me. My eyes look like a cat's, hearing is sharper, and I can pop claws out of my hands."

"Oh, no, you're a mutant too."

"What do you mean, 'too'? Why is that bad?"

"Kid, I'm a mutant. I've learned how to change my body so I didn't look unusual, but if you have claws now, you have to stay away from people. You'll get angry or hungry and want to bite them, or eat them."

"Yeah, that almost happened to me last night. I didn't do it though. My hands can change back to normal. They aren't stuck as claws."

"Whew. That relieves me. Listen, for a while, be extra careful near other people. Eat more than you think you need to and more often. Don't take a chance with this. I've fought enough other mutants to know that most sink into a hole and their mind never really comes back out."

"Yeah, I'm seeing that. I've already fought a mutant. He seemed like he had body armor on him, though, I don't."

"You probably aren't done changing yet, Rael. It takes a few days for our bodies to finish some of the changes. This is more like magic than science, or at the least, it is like science fiction. Strange shit happens."

"Cool, I hope more changes do occur. Is there any way to facilitate them? Like force building of body armor by getting beat up? Or flight by jumping off buildings?"

"I'm not sure, I don't know of any supers that tried something like that soon after changing. For the most part, we were all in shock about it. There wasn't the larger community of supers out back when I

changed.”

“Okay, I'll start jumping off buildings then and hope for flight. What other travel powers are out there?”

“Hmm. I've seen fliers, super fast runners, jumpers. I know of one teleporter. Shroud claims to travel through some kind of 'shadow plane.' I think he's full of shit about the other dimension thing, but he teleports. Wait, there's Muckman as well, he travels through the ground. Oh, and the swimmers.”

“Muckman?”

“Yeah, he's a little unhinged. His body transformed into a big mass of earth or mud. He can go through it now, but mentally he lost it somewhere along the line. You might see him sometime, I think he operates out of, or near Metrocity now.”

He continued, “So what super name have you chosen, or are you still thinking on it?”

“I'm going with Black Tiger. I'm wearing my brand new costume – thanks for giving the info to Lance's mom, by the way. It's black, has a gray tiger paw on the chest, black leather type boots. Shirt's a t-shirt style. I've got fingerless gloves on; fingers would just tear when I pop my claws.”

“Huh. Here I thought you'd go with some kind of martial arts outfit as a costume if you ever changed.”

“I thought about it, but this can be worn under clothing.”

“Smart thinking, kid. Hey, how are Lance and Stephanie doing these days? You still hanging out with them?”

“Yeah, they changed too. Spartan and Psystar are the nicknames. Stephanie flew off to the hospital to check on a kid she took there for help. Lance is sitting next to me right now. We're going to try to get into the police station to interrogate some mutants that attacked last night.”

“Good kid. Take the initiative and you can do some great things.”

“What I actually called you about is to ask which police facility they are likely to hold mutants at temporarily until charged?”

“Hmm, in Metrocity. I know the main jail has facilities, not sure about the smaller police stations though. The H.E.R.O. regional headquarters is there too, that might have something. Tell you what, I'll call Ron, he's an old police buddy of mine. He might be willing to make a call to find out, and maybe even smooth your way in. Make sure you go in costume. Police don't appreciate civilians trying to stick their noses into things. Are you joining the H.E.R.O. program?”

“Yeah, we've already spoken with Captain McCain here. It sounded like he wanted new people to join. We go in tomorrow for the

official paperwork and sign up. We do have temporary H.E.R.O. cards now though.”

“Nicely done. I’ll make that call and call you back when I can.” He hung up.

I looked at Lance, “Let’s go to Iron Cross Hospital then. We **know** one mutant at the least was being kept downstairs. They might keep more there just to have them sedated for a while.”

Lance nodded in agreement, “I like it. We need to get motorcycles or something. Driving around in your beater isn’t very heroic. I trashed my mustang last night. Put my foot right through the floor.”

“Dude, that sucks. I agree on the cycles though.”

I drove us to Iron Cross Hospital. After an uneventful fifteen minutes, we arrived.

I walked through the emergency room; they had already replaced the glass. *Fast work.* I figured I’d try the bold route, and immediately headed to the emergency room back area where I first met Kim. People watched us as we marched through the area.

We entered the back room, and saw that, surprisingly Kim was there. She glanced up from working on someone’s arm as we entered and blinked a few times, staring at us. I headed over. *She doesn’t know my super name yet, better mention that immediately.*

I said, “Hi, Kim, it’s Black Tiger, remember?”

She replied, “Of course. Do you have someone injured you are bringing in?”

“No, we’re heading down to speak to the mutant that beat me down last night, or any of the others if they are being kept here. We need to move on the kidnappings.”

She called over to Jenny, another nurse, who came over. Kim’s eyes watched us as she spoke, “Jenny, would you take over here? I’ll bring the heroes downstairs.”

Jenny said, “Sure thing. Hi, guys.”

Lance held out his hand, ever the gentleman. He shook hands with Jenny. I noticed he didn’t actually close his hand on hers, although she had an absolutely tiny hand compared to his. *Holy shit, he’s got big paws now, they grew.*

I put my hand up with the fingers spread and said, “Spartan, put up your hand against mine.” He did it. His hand dwarfed mine. Even his fingers were thick and long. I used to have about a ten inch spread from thumb tip to pinky tip with my fingers spread well out. He had to have a fifteen inch spread ... per hand.

I said, “Wow, your hands are huge.”

Lance said, “Nah, you’re just my little shadow. That’s why you

have black on.”

Kim laughed at his joke, “Shall we?” She held her arm toward the area with the elevator we needed.

I said, “Sure, thanks for joining us, Kim.”

She said, “You didn't really think that mask would make you unrecognizable, did you? You didn't change your hair or skin color, and the cat eyes are a real giveaway.”

“Not really to someone who knows me. But I'd like to keep most observers from linking my identities. Wow, what an odd thing to have to say.”

Lance said, “Yeah. I'm loving it though.”

Kim looked up at Lance and said, “You know, umm ... I forgot your name from last night already. Sorry.”

“Spartan.”

“I'd normally say that having hands that large is a sign of gigantism, but your head isn't oversized. You do have pretty big feet though.”

“Darn glad of that too. You try to land on little feet after jumping a mile or two.”

“A ... mile? Jumping? Wow. I like your costume, Spartan. You went a little ... dark with yours, didn't you, umm, Black Tiger was it?”

“Right. I definitely have the darker personality of our group. I mentioned to someone earlier today that I'd rather have all the criminals watching Spartan here than myself. Let me sneak up on them and waylay them. Bullets hurt me.”

“I remember. There are still some of the mutants in the lower area. There are either police or H.E.R.O. people down there though – I won't leave the elevator.”

She walked us to the elevator and pushed the down button.

She looked at my hands and said, “Your claws are gone.”

“Yeah, I discovered I can change my hands back and forth.”

“Very nice. I'm glad to see you gained more control. Have you had any more problems with, umm, biting anyone?”

“Not yet, though I've haven't been so close to anyone else but Spartan and Psystar – she was the golden haired girl here yesterday.”

“She didn't smell normal to either of us, though. Good aroma, not bad, like a wonderful exotic flower or something, so maybe that's something to do with it.”

“She's lucky like that; apparently it's an ability of hers. Super smell good power.”

Kim chuckled. “Certainly not the worst power to have.”

I said, “Hell no. Still pretty distracting to me though. It should be interesting being close to her with her new costume on.”

“So those are real costumes? Not just painted spandex or something?”

“Right. Supposedly they self repair to some degree. I should tear mine.”

“Neat. What does hers look like?”

“Hmm, upper chest, shoulders, arms down to the mid forearm are bare. The costume is all white, except for a gold belt that she color matched to her gold hair. Tight white short shorts. Top starts at the top of the bust and goes around the side to the lower back. There are three wide oval slits in the shirt from the belly button up to the bottom of the bust. Boots are mid calf with small heels, also white. The facemask is like mine, but white. Overall, sexy and stylish.”

Kim said, “It sounds like it's, ah, missing a lot. Very revealing?”

I said, “Well, there's a lot of skin showing, but considering that Spartan and I are also wearing body fitting costumes, it's not much different there. Neither of us looks sexy though.”

Her eyes ran up and down our bodies, “I wouldn't say that. Spartan looks very colorful, but it's very obvious what role he's in. That's always nice. Kind of like seeing a police officer, you know that you can get help from one for certain things. Unfortunately, I'm not sure I'd try going to you for help, Black Tiger, if I didn't already know you. I honestly wouldn't know if you were a hero or not, and in some circumstances from the side or behind, I might not recognize that you were even wearing a costume.”

I said, “Dude, Spartan, why didn't you mention any of that when I was designing the costume?”

Lance looked down at me. “You wouldn't have listened to me. You like dark things, and you're like a cat. You do what the heck you want to, when you want.”

*Man, two more inches sure make a difference when the big guy is standing next to me. I wonder if Steph feels like this looking up at me. Wait, I wonder what she thinks looking way up at Lance? She's what, seventeen inches shorter than he is now? Holy shit. Not to mention the massive difference in body width.*

I said, “Yeah, yeah, you're right. Spartan, we need to have you step on a scale while you are here, see how much your new size and ultra hard muscles weigh now.”

Kim said, “Dense muscles. So much so that we typically can't operate on a brick. You probably weigh over 500 lbs.”

“Interesting idea, the hospital must have a bigger scale. Perhaps the costume designer would be willing to cut you a deal to change your color scheme. It seemed very easy for her to change.”

“True enough. I like the idea of looking pretty normal though too. I could throw on a jacket, or just another shirt over this one, take

off the mask, and most people wouldn't know I was wearing a costume unless they stared at the tighter than normal pants. Black makes that harder though."

The elevator dinged at the high security level we were here after.

*Here goes.*

I said, "Thanks, Kim. Nice seeing you again."

"You too ... Black Tiger." She grinned.

"Spartan, you do the talking at first, you look more hero-like than I do for now."

He nodded, "Sounds good."

The doors opened, and a pair of police officers looked at us from just outside the elevator.



## Chapter 29 – Senility at Such a Young Age

### Lance's Viewpoint

I stepped out of the elevator, with Rael following alongside me. We moved closer to the officers, and they had to look up to look me in the face.

I said, “Good afternoon, officers. I'm Spartan; this is Black Tiger. I was involved in stopping the mutant attack last night up on level four. We're here to talk to any available mutants.”

The younger officer said, “You were the non-costumed super that got stabbed by some of them?”

“That's right.”

“I heard you wouldn't let the doctors take a look at you when it was done.”

“I made them check on the patients in the rooms and the other supers before me. I figured it'd be dumb to jump in and fight to save people, only to get the medical care myself and see one of them die. A lot of guards were injured by that point, too.”

“Yeah, we heard that too.”

“Do you mind if Black Tiger and I speak with some of the mutants?”

“You know we can't allow torture or threats...”

“We, wait a second, we forgot to call Ste ... what's she call herself now?”

Rael said, “Psystar. Officer, if we didn't have to harm or threaten them, would you allow us to talk to them?”

The officers looked at each other and nodded. “I'm not seeing the harm in that.”

Rael continued, “Our third partner was supposed to meet us here, let us go find her and we'll come back down. We shouldn't need to harm or threaten them at all.”

Rael got this devious smile on his face. He actually looked rather vicious with his cat eyes and fangs.

“Thanks officers, sorry about interrupting you without being ready ourselves.”

As we were turning back toward the elevator one of the officers asked, “Is it true you leaped right through a wall, Spartan?”

“Several. Why do you ask?”

“You're huge, I was just wondering how much you can lift?”

"I actually don't know. I smashed a few of those mutants through the outer concrete walls, but I've never tested my strength limit. I can throw a car dozens of feet up in the air."

"Cool. Hope we see you guys soon."

Lance nodded to him, "Thanks guys, have a good one until then."

We pushed the button and re-entered the elevator after a minute.

Rael swore, "Damn it. I forgot that I need to get my phone replaced. It got damaged in the blast last night."

I said, "I'll call St ... Psystar. Man, it's hard getting used to saying the new names."

"Good to get used to it though, never know where a camera or mic is at."

"Right." I gently took out my phone and quick dialed Stephanie's cell.

The phone rang a few times, and a man's voice answered. He said, "Hello?"

*What the heck, some guy's answering her phone?* I heard the sound of plastic cracking, and noticed I'd cracked the case on my phone by gripping it slightly. *Man, I didn't even really squeeze.* Rael's eyes snapped to it when it happened, he'd noticed as well. His right eyebrow rose.

I said, "Hello, who is answering this phone?"

"My name is Dr. Farwell. I'm a doctor at Metrocity General. Who is this?"

*Damn it, he'll be seeing the name on the phone.*

I replied, "Doctor, why isn't the woman owning this phone answering it?"

"She's unconscious right now."

"I'll be sending Spartan and Black Tiger there shortly. What room is she in?"

"407."

"Thank you." I hung up. I looked at Rael.

He tapped his ear, "I heard what he said. You jump us there?"

I nodded. We ran to the nearest exit. I grabbed Rael and hugged him to my right shoulder, then sprinted and jumped.

On the second jump, I saw a tree directly in our path as we descended. I turned so Rael was behind me and we slammed into a large branch. The entire branch snapped off and fell ahead of us. It didn't hurt me to slam into it, though Rael appeared to feel the impact against me. I moved the tree limb so it wouldn't be in the way too badly, then continued our jumping.

It took us perhaps 8 minutes to leap to Metrocity General Hospital.

We jogged into the main entrance of the hospital, and immediately aimed for the nearest stairs. We both took the stairs half a flight at a time.

The room was easy to pick out, hospital personnel stood partially in the doorway. We ran over to them. Given my height advantage, I looked over the nearest people to see that the room had about ten medical personnel standing in it.

I said in a louder than normal voice, "Excuse me, please."

The people nearest looked back, and then up at me. One of the two said, "Whoa." They pushed the others further into the room to make space.

I stepped into the room as a younger doctor or intern suggested that they bring her down for an MRI.

I asked, "Would someone explain what is going on here?" My tone made it obvious that I wasn't happy with the situation.

Most of them just stared at me. One man said, "She was with another patient. She collapsed. We brought her here."

Rael growled, "If she's not deeply out of it, you guys all being here are guaranteed to be driving her crazy right now. Everyone but Doc. Talker here, out."

A group of protests went up until Rael said harshly, "That wasn't a request." His fingers blackened and elongated into claws as we watched. His mouth was in a snarl, so everyone could see his fangs. They cleared the room, as though a fire erupted on the bed.

He ordered 'Doc. Talker' to move to the far side of the room, and walked over to the side of the bed. He laid his head against hers and stood over her for minutes, but nothing occurred.

I looked at the doctor. "She was here to see a girl she had brought in earlier. Would you take me there?"

He nodded and walked past me. I followed him to another room. He knocked on the door of room 414, waited a moment, and then headed in.

A middle-aged man and woman stood on either side of a bed with a young teenage girl in it. They all looked at us.

I said, "Hello, my name's Spartan."

The man said, "You were at the accident moving vehicles out of the way."

"Yes. What happened with Psystar?"

He said, "She came to see if she could help my daughter. She wouldn't, or couldn't explain what she wanted to try to do to help her, but leaned over by Gina's head for a minute or more. Her eyes were open, and they were glowing golden from within, but you could tell she wasn't looking at Gina, or anything here."

"She really looked like she was concentrating at times, her face and mouth got all screwed up like she was doing something hard, and her eyes glowed brilliantly gold a few times. It was really cool to see. Anyway, my daughter actually stirred after that long time. Psystar yanked her head back with some difficulty, as though her head was being held down. Then, she collapsed."

He continued, "Fortunately, sometime in the middle of it some of the doctors and nurses had come to the door to check on what was going on and were watching from the door. They rushed over to her when she fell to the floor. They took her to another room. We've been in here with Gina ever since."

I said, "Thank you. How are you feeling, Gina?"

Gina said, "I'm doing okay. It's weird though. I'm getting music and images going through my head."

"That's different than normal?" *Hello, that's probably what happens when you hit your head too hard in a car accident.*

"Yeah, they are **so** vivid!"

"Do you have any idea what happened?"

"I ... I remember being alone. Then she came through a door, **through it!** She opened it for me - I couldn't do it. You should have seen her! She had beautiful gold hair that swept back as if a breeze was blowing, and there was this gold glow all around her! She pulled me through someplace with all these animals and faeries flying around, and music playing. I just remember her pulling me back further until I woke up. I opened my eyes in time to see her jerk back and fall over."

*Hmm, I have no clue what she's talking about. Obviously, it is something mind based. So Steph can do more than just listen to what we are thinking.*

Gina said, "I wish I had crayons and a drawing pad. I want to draw what I'm seeing."

Her father said, "I'll see what I can find for you, honey."

I said, "I'm glad you're doing better, Gina. Take care, folks." I nodded to them and headed back to the room Stephanie was in.

I rushed too much when I grabbed and turned the door handle, I heard metal stressing and bending. I hadn't turned the handle enough and almost ripped the assembly out of the wall. *Man, I'm going to rack up tons of money in repair costs if I don't walk on eggshells when I'm irate.*

Stephanie's eyes were open when I returned to her room. She was looking at Rael. I went to the far side of the bed and gently took her free hand, since Rael had nabbed the other already.

She appeared very tired as she turned her head to look at me. At least she got off a smile.

I said, "How do you feel?"

"Tired. Worn out."

"I take it you tried something new with psychic powers?"

"Yeah. I think I got her out though."

"Gina's awake and seems to be doing pretty good. Her dad said that your eyes glowed gold when you did your thing with Gina."

"Really? That's cool. At least it matches my hair, then."

I laughed. "Leave it to you to want some glow or aura to match your hair."

"I'm hungry."

"Oh, we need to get you out of here then. You **don't** want to have to eat hospital food. Do you think you are strong enough to stand?"

"I doubt it, but if one of you helps me I'm sure I can. I'm a lot stronger now, I'd think standing should be easier even when hurt."

"You're injured?" I asked. I watched her skeptically. She looked dead tired; her eyes barely stayed open.

She mumbled, "No, just really tired. I could use a Vivarin."

Rael said, "Try sitting up."

Stephanie slowly sat up and mumbled, "I want to see Gina."

Rael said, "Okay." He took her hand and helped her stand.

She leaned against Rael for a minute, until there was a knock at the door, and the door opened. A doctor stepped in and looked surprised. "Oh, you're awake."

Stephanie stepped over to him, patted him on the shoulder and said, "No, you don't get to do your tests, Doctor."

She didn't walk straight when going to the door, so I stepped forward and offered her my arm. She hugged it and smiled up at me, blinking slowly a few times.

I said, "Your reaction time is slow. If you haven't recovered by the time we leave, either you need to not fly, or perhaps we find someplace around here for something to snack on before leaving."

She mumbled, "Fine, fine, whatever."

The doctor said, "Miss Psystar, I really think you should stay here for observation."

She stepped closer so she touched the doctor with her bust, and said, "And what did you plan to observe, Doctor?"

He blinked, glanced down, then back up at her face, "Umm, we can't be sure you haven't suffered some dangerous form of exhaustion. We could do, umm, tests."

She said, slurring slightly, "Doctor, I know what you want to observe. I don't mind being a test subject for some people, but not in a hospital. And I don't want people I don't know standing in my room staring at me, like I'm a zoo animal. I'm tired, like I crammed for a big exam for an entire weekend. That's all." She blinked slowly as she

talked up at him.

I stepped over to her and presented my elbow again. She hugged it again, then laid her cheek against my bicep and closed her eyes. *She's out of it. At least for a while, I think she does need to rest.*

I slowly led her back to the bed; she shuffled meekly along. That clinched it for me; I lifted her into the bed. She opened her eyes, blinked a few times while she looked around and started to sit up again. *Now she's just being stubborn.*

Rael held up a finger, it was back to normal now. He rolled her over onto her stomach, and then massaged her shoulders. He said, "Nobody resists a massage."

She groaned and mumbled something, but didn't move. He kept working on the bare upper half of her back. He whispered, "I'll get her relaxed so she stays here a while longer."

I nodded. *Hmm, what can I occupy myself with for an hour or so?* I noticed a flashing light on one of her phones and pulled off the H.E.R.O. phone.

I looked at the item on the screen. A train had derailed. Non-passenger, so that was good. They were looking for super strong heroes that could help get the units back on the track. *Only one way to find out.*

I showed the screen to Rael. He leaned his ear near Stephanie's head, nodded to himself and stepped back.

I motioned for us to talk outside the room, and we left. I'd missed that the doctor still stood there. I pulled slightly on his jacket and he followed.

I said, "Doctor, do you mind if she rests for an hour, perhaps two?"

"Not at all. I'll keep an eye on her on occasion. If she wakes up, what should I tell her? You know, doing some tests really is a good idea. It may give us an idea of what occurred."

"Just hold off for now. We've got to help with a train derailment. Have her call Spartan's cell phone."

"Will do."

Rael said, "I'm not in your league for strength, think it's worth it for me to go?"

I replied, "You can lift a car. That's enough to help, at the least. I wonder how much a train car weighs? How much does the locomotive weigh?"

"I guess we'll find out."

We went back downstairs, looked at the map on the phone, and I leapt the two of us to the location.

## Chapter 30 - Derailment

### Lance's Perspective

We landed at a chaotic scene. Dozens of people milled around talking with one another. Psycom stood out in his costume, talking with some officials. A fireman pointed at the two of us.

We approached them, looking over the scene as we walked. The locomotive still touched the tracks, but half of it sat at an angle on the ground. The back wheels had sunk into the earth. The train cars zigzagged behind it, only a few were still on the tracks. The entire train assembly had perhaps twenty cars. A few were on their sides or at an angle.

A pile of dirt and grass erupted upwards in front of us, and a towering figure made purely of dirt and rock stood before us. It had a rough head shape, and arms, but the lower body was merely a large cone or mound of earth. It shouted in a gravelly voice, "Muckman is here!"

We walked around him. It ... he ... looked at us and yelled, "I is Muckman!"

Rael and I looked at each other. I shrugged and called out, "Greetings, Muckman! I'm Spartan, this is Black Tiger."

He yelled again, "I is Muckman!"

"You, ah, mentioned that."

"Muckman help here!"

*Well, he sounds enthusiastic.*

Psycom and the others walked over to us. "Hey guys, I'm Psycom."

Rael nodded at him. "Spartan, Black Tiger."

Psycom said, "I can't lift a train car, but I could lift some of the cargo inside, or help stabilize to minimize damage."

Rael said, "I could help with that part as well. Spartan's the strong one."

Psycom said loudly, "Hey, Muckman! We need your help!"

"Muckman is here!"

"Yes, yes, we know that, you rockhead. You can make dirt hard, right? Strong ground?"

"Muckman makes dirt strong!"

*Okay, I'm beginning to think Muckman is missing a digit of I.Q. or something.*

The officials with Psycom introduced themselves. There was a

train expert, someone from the train company, a police lieutenant, and an FBI agent.

I asked, "So ... anyone know how much the locomotive weighs?"

The train expert said, "This one weighs about 750,000 pounds."

Rael coughed. "Holy shit."

I said, "Sooo, I guess I find out how strong I am now, right?"

They all stared at me. Psycom said, "You figure you can lift it solo? We'd planned on waiting for three or so bricks to show up."

I said, "There's only one way to find out, right guys? If I fail, we wait for others to work with."

The police lieutenant said, "Or you get a hernia."

I said, "Psycom, you were thinking to have Muckman..."

Muckman yelled, "Muckman is here!"

I continued, "Have him make the dirt hard enough for me to stand on while moving it?"

"Exactly."

Rael looked at Muckman and shook his head. "Wow. Is he for real?"

"Let's try this." We all walked over to the locomotive. The tracks by it were fine; it had passed the damaged area.

Psycom yelled, "Muckman! Make the ground hard right here. Hard dirt! Strong dirt!"

"Muckman makes hard dirt!" He surged over to the area, not really walking, but rather flowing as he traversed the distance.

We watched him move over there, unsure if he was really doing anything. We all looked at each other, shrugged, and the train expert helped pick out the best spot to lift from. He said, "You really don't have to lift the entire locomotive. The front wheels are on the tracks. If you are careful about that, you could just shift the back over to the tracks."

I said, "Excellent. Sounds easy enough. Just like deadlifts. Kind of." I clapped my hands together, a small boom sounded and air blew rapidly from them. I shrugged, "Sorry guys."

I grabbed where the expert pointed out and worked out solid footing to lift from my legs as much as possible. It didn't want to budge. I stepped back and drew in a few deep breaths. I stepped up and grabbed the heavy bar again. I imagined this to be a weight competition, and threw my entire body into the lift. It didn't move. *No! I am so not done yet.* I gripped the bar tighter, my mouth in a snarl. I stared at the bar, feeling anger building in me. I flexed my entire body and tried to lift again. I growled and threw my back into it. Adrenaline rushed through me, and energy erupted through my body. I could see shadows, and my face was glowing yellowish. The energy flowing



through me felt like I'd been hit with a raw injection of adrenaline. The train lifted off the ground. I screamed, "**Yeah!**" Every time I breathed, some kind of energy came out of my nose and mouth.

I heard one of the men say, "Holy shit, that's impressive."

The ground held firm; Muckman must have done something or I'd have sunk into the dirt.

I slowly walked forward and sideways toward the tracks. The energy pouring through my body seeped through the costume, causing a nimbus of energy and light around me.

Muckman yelled, "Muckman help yellow guy, go yellow guy!" He then went back to mumbling something; it always included his own name. He sounded like a comedian mocking someone less fortunate. I kept hearing snippets of "Muckman ... muck ... muck ... Muckman!"

I finally set the locomotive on the tracks with a loud clanking noise. I couldn't help but flex from the feeling of power and strength. Clapping erupted from the area. I stopped flexing. I'd forgotten about the others standing around in the area.

Rael looked up at me. "Dude, your glasses are backlit with that energy you're putting out. Very cool looking."

Psycom said, "Wow, nice work. I don't recall seeing a brick glow like that before, though plenty of blasters do it."

I roared, "Yeah, baby! Let's get the next one on the tracks."

Psycom yelled, "Muckman! We need you back here now."

"Muck ... muck ... Muckman is here!"

We walked back to the first rail car. After Rael and Psycom entered it, to help stabilize the freight. I grabbed where the train expert pointed next. It was much lighter than the locomotive. I put my back into lifting it and my strange energy flowed over the car. The entire thing lifted off the ground; all the weight was somehow shifted to where I held it.

From inside the car Rael yelled, "Holy crap, what are you doing?" I walked over to the tracks and carefully set the wheels on it. My body felt so juiced, I could have thrown the car rather than set it down.

The remaining rail cars went smoothly, each of them being only a fraction of the weight of the locomotive. Over and over, my energy caused yellow energy to cascade around the car to my hands, and I outright carried each one to the tracks. Reddish light bathed the area in front of me as whatever light my eyes generated passed through the red glasses.

Muckman, with some prodding, kept the ground hard for me. Psycom and Rael helped shift them and stabilize freight while I moved

the rail cars. Psycom righted as much freight as possible that toppled in the cars during both the crash and moving of the cars. His telekinesis worked wonders regardless of the shape or size of freight.

Within an hour, we had the train back on the tracks, and repair engineers were partially finished with replacing the damaged section of track. These emergency repair crews were fast. They had called in a specialty repair super as well; she appeared to have the ability to reshape objects.

The adrenaline-like energy continued to rage through my system. I dropped to one knee and worked at calming down. The energy had kept me in a hyped up state, or vice versa, I wasn't sure which. I felt the adrenaline calming, and the ground near me stopped glowing. My stomach growled as I realized I was hungry.

Someone walked up in front of me; it was the official from the train company. He leaned over slightly and put his hand on my shoulder. "Thank you, Spartan. You helped prevent a lot of delays and costs."

I nodded to him. "Glad to help, sir."

Agent Carson from H.E.R.O. approached and obtained the official story of who did what. He mentioned that he'd entered us into the system during a break. He anticipated that we'd be busy again prior to Monday.

I asked, "Is there any information yet on the mutants that attacked the hospital? There are still all of the kidnapping victims that we need to recover."

Agent Carson replied, "Not much. They kidnapped mutants and killed the new supers that looked normal. They came in through the windows, so security cameras didn't even get a good shot at them. As for the few mutants in lockup, those that are willing or able to speak are mainly doing it just to curse us. Others are under sedation due to their danger level. They grabbed some of their own before they fled, so we don't have many."

I said, "Let us help with the investigation. Our partner, Psystar, might be able to pull some information out of the mutants in lockup. Help us get in to interrogate them."

Agent Carson nodded, "Yeah, she's a telepath. That could work. All right, meet me at 9 P.M. at the county jail. Since I've got you in the H.E.R.O. system now, we shouldn't have problems."

Rael said, "Awesome, we might be able to save some of these people after all."

Agent Carson stared at him. "If they took the new mutants off sedation, and put them in a room with a normal person... I fear that a good chunk of them may be lost to us already. Very few supers that

have the extreme mutations, and who have attacked a human out of hunger emotionally or mentally survive that experience. It does something to them. It's why so few supers that we call 'mutants' are part of normal society. We're also getting reports of people being kidnapped by mutants..."

Rael said, "All the more reason to hurry on this then."

Agent Carson nodded. "Good point. I'll push it through and meet you at the county jail." He turned and walked off without shaking our hands right when I was about to step forward to do it. I shook my head. *People just aren't polite, or are they afraid we'll crush them or claw them?*

We spent another fifteen minutes talking with the various officials and shaking hands. Hunger pangs struck repeatedly. *That energy must take something out of me that I need to eat for.* News crews that arrived while we still moved the cars were interviewing people.

A few of the officials spoke to various news stations. One woman reporter and her cameraman made their way to us and introduced themselves.

The woman, a pretty brunette with long hair said, "News 5 reporting on scene with Taresa Budde. We're at the rail disaster scene as crews prepare to wrap up and head home. Who are you gentleman?"

I said, "I'm Spartan."

Rael said, "I'm Black Tiger."

She said, "We've not seen you at crime scenes before, are you new heroes, or have you recently moved to Metrocity?"

I said, "We're new heroes."

She said, "Spartan, did you put the locomotive back on the tracks by yourself?"

He said, "No, ma'am. Muckman hardened the ground to provide a solid footing. Besides that, we may have shown up to move the train back onto the tracks, but these men were here well before us assessing the situation and working on it."

Taresa said, "So, you are claiming you didn't do much?"

I said, "Exactly. We show up, lift some things, and leave. It seems to me that we have the easy job."

She said, "You do realize that if you, Black Tiger, Psycorn, and Muckman weren't here to re-rail the train that some massive equipment would have had to be brought here to do it? It would have cost tens of thousands of dollars at the least for the special equipment and all the manpower. Add to that the damage to the surroundings that the equipment would have caused, the delays, and the inability to use the tracks would have cost the train company and possibly the public

thousands more?”

I looked thoughtful, “No, I can't say as I'd looked at it that way.”

She said, “I notice that the two of you tend to stick together, are you a team?”

I said, “We are, along with a third who isn't here right now.”

I would have liked to ham it up for a while, but I wanted to get back to Stephanie. “Excuse us, Ms. Budde, but we do have other obligations to attend to.”

Taresa said, “Thank you for speaking with me, Spartan and Black Tiger.”

I stepped forward to shake her hand. She obviously wasn't used to that. Rael followed my lead or it would have looked odd. Then I grabbed him and we leapt off. It took a few minutes longer on the way back to the hospital. I didn't want to damage anything on the way.

## Chapter 31 – Mental Fatigue

### Rael's Perspective

We arrived again at Metrocity General Hospital and went to the fourth floor. I realized that when Lance stood somewhere he tended to cross his arms a lot. *I wonder if he is posing, though he does that a lot at Score! as well.* Stephanie still lay on the bed on her stomach, though she'd shifted her arms and legs.

I stroked her hair to the side and said, "Hey goldilocks, time to wake up."

I looked at Lance and said, "Think we are destined to just carry her out of hospitals?"

He said, "I suppose we could try tickling her. Or ... remember the last movie night we had that she stayed over on the couch?"

I laughed, "Yeah, even hanging halfway off the couch she didn't wake up just by touching her or talking nearby. What did we do then; put ice cubes down her back?"

He chuckled, "Backside you mean. Ice cubes down the undies did indeed wake her up. This isn't exactly a hotel with an ice machine in the hallway though. Also, getting a wet spot on her costume would make her look bad."

I said, "Hmm."

"You have a devious look on your face."

"Who, me?" I grinned. I couldn't help but consider wicked thoughts when she lay there in such a vulnerable position.

"What are you thinking, Black Tiger?"

I sighed, "Something I'd try in private, but not in a hospital room. Ah well."

I massaged her upper back again to see if she'd wake up. I smacked her lightly on the backside. She still didn't wake up. *I suppose I could tickle her. Nah, she said she bears us louder in her mind if we are close...*

I rubbed my hands together and said, "Fine, let's see if we can get inside her head." I let out a wicked laugh.

I leaned in close to her and touched my head to hers. ***Wake up Stephanie! Quit sleeping, you sloucher! We're going to take naughty pictures of you now!*** Her body jerked, she mumbled something and opened her eyes halfway.

I repeated myself, "Wake up goldilocks."

She mumbled, "It's too early to get up."

I replied, "You've had your nap, time to go."

Stephanie rolled onto her back and stretched catlike on the bed. "What time is it?"

I said, "Would you like me to rub your belly? It's about 6:15 P.M."

She looked at me, smiled and said, "Troublemaker." Then she swung her feet off the bed and sat up. She took a few deep breaths with her eyes closed, then stood up.

She said, "I feel better now." She stared at me for a moment while running her fingers through her hair. My eyebrows furrowed as I wondered what the heck she was doing. Then, I laughed; she must be using my vision as a mirror.

She looked at Lance and did a double take. "Why are you so dirty?"

He looked at his costume and said, "I was playing with trains."

She stared off in the distance for a few seconds and said, "Huh. Well, I guess I wouldn't have been too useful at that type of scene anyway."

Lance said, "Did you just...? Never mind. Shall we go now?"

"I want to check on Gina; then we can go." She led the way back to room 414 and knocked when we arrived. The girl's mother answered the door. She smiled widely at the sight of Stephanie. "Welcome back, Psystar, are you feeling better?"

"Very much, thank you. How is Gina doing? Has anything changed?"

"She's awake. Come in. Gina, Psystar is back to see you."

We walked in the room, with Stephanie leading the way. "Hello again, Gina. Or perhaps for the first time in person, and awake."

Gina said, "I remember you! You changed clothes though."

Stephanie grinned at Gina. "I did? How are you doing?"

"Great! See the drawings I've been doing?" Gina held out a drawing pad with a variety of odd creatures and scenes. *The art's rough, but the concepts are interesting.*

"Very creative, Gina. You must like drawing a lot." I watched Stephanie closely, I could tell she was thinking, or listening to something; she sighed. "Put those creative juices to good use, Gina. You have a much more interesting imagination than almost anyone I've met."

"Really?"

"Very much so. Most people can't access their imaginations so, uh, openly. I ... I hope your access to it is a gift for you."

"Thank you for helping me."

Stephanie hugged Gina. "You're welcome, dear." She hugged

Mr. And Mrs. Woorsten, and we left the room. *Something's up, I can tell she isn't reacting as happily as normal.*

A group of doctors marched up to us with a purposeful look. Stephanie stopped before them. "Yes?"

One of them said, "We'd like to know how you got her out of a coma. It could be useful for others."

Stephanie looked off to the side, away from everyone for a moment. Then she looked back at the doctor. "I broke down her mental walls, or doors. Memory, subconscious, emotion, etc. It's not something I want to do for everyone. I fear I unleashed something on her that she'll have to live with now."

"What do you mean?"

"I think her dream state is merged with her conscious thought right now. I fear that she'll either become an unbelievably creative person, or go crazy."

"You wouldn't do that for someone who has no life at all right now due to their coma?"

Stephanie sighed; she had a pained look expression on her face. "Perhaps for a long term coma patient. I don't want to take the chance again for a possibly short-term patient. I won't do something like that soon though. I need to get more in touch with my powers so I don't get wiped out so badly."

"So ... there's no way to duplicate what you just did?"

"Not that I know of. I'm not entirely sure myself what I did."

One of them griped, "Damn, that would have been a great paper. What about tests? We could do a variety of scans on you as you do it again?"

Stephanie glanced at Lance, and then sighed, "I'm hungry too, Spartan. Let's go eat. Doctors, if I find a way to let others wake people from comas, I'll pass it on, okay?" *Hungry? Where did ... oh, she answered his thoughts.*

They didn't look okay with it, but did look resigned to obtaining no answers about it tonight. Several of them whispered together angrily. I caught the words 'tests' and 'samples.'

Stephanie's face tightened in anger as we entered an elevator. As soon as the door closed Lance put his hands gently on her cheeks and said, "Deep breaths, be calm. You're with friends."

She leaned her face against one hand, smiled and closed her eyes. After a few deep breaths, she opened them again. "You're right, Lan ... Spartan. You should have seen what some of them wanted to do to me though. I'm not a rat in a lab."

My mind immediately went to dirty thoughts; looking at her costume, it didn't take too much for me to imagine no costume. From

there it all went downhill...

She said, "No, Black Tiger. I could handle that. They wanted to take blood samples, do MRIs, connect me up to a bunch of probes on me head and test me. One of them even wanted to try taking a sample of brain fluid. **Brain fluid!**"

I growled, "Maybe I should go **talk** to a few of them." My fingertips elongated into claws as I said it.

Lance said, "Black Tiger, you can't do that. Remember the whole thing about people's thoughts being their own? So long as they don't **act** on them, they own them."

Stephanie said, "Please don't leave me in this hospital unconscious and alone again. I mean, most of them weren't like that, don't get me wrong. But when you have even one or two people thinking that stuff it's just not right."

I nodded, "I'll stay with you if need be."

She looked up at Lance again, and then punched him in the chest. "So, did you enjoy your train fun? Oh, you jerk! You just got grime all over my face!" *Heb, she pulled that from one of our minds.*

Lance chuckled, "So I did, so I did..."

She punched him again in the gut, and he only laughed harder.

His stomach rumbled. He said, "I've been getting more and more hungry since we left the train scene."

Stephanie said, "Well, that makes two of us hungry heroes then."

I said, "Wasn't that a game?"

She replied, "Hippos were in the game, but it sounds similar."

"Great, Spartan, I think she's gone fun-nay on us."

Stephanie stuck her tongue out at me. I grinned.



## Chapter 32 – Chance Encounters

### Lance's Viewpoint

The elevator doors slid open, and a woman began to enter, then halted when she looked up to see us about to walk out. “Oh, excuse me,” she mumbled. She stepped off to the side, with her head still down. She looked deep in thought.

I said, “Officer Coyle, Anne!” I mimicked the way she'd said her name the last time we'd met. She looked more relaxed than at the accident scene. A form fitting green t-shirt and jeans showed off her form, she was extremely fit. Her dark brown hair was still in the long braid in back. She obviously worked out; her biceps were much more developed than most women were.

She looked up in surprise at my deep voice. “Spartan, was it?”

“Right, we met last night at the bar disaster.”

“Yeah, one of many last night. What are you doing here? Are these your partners?”

“This is Psystar, and this is Black Tiger, indeed they are my partners and friends.” We had to step out of the elevator, as it kept trying to close on us.

Rael held out his clawed hand, she shook it, staring at the claws. Stephanie hugged her, longer than I'd have expected. She stepped back, and Officer Coyle stared at her for a moment with her mouth open. Anne stepped forward toward Stephanie, and Stephanie grinned and hugged her again. Anne's eyes closed, and she fiercely hugged Stephanie back. Stephanie rubbed her back, as though she were consoling Anne. *Am I missing something here?*

When Stephanie finally stepped back, Anne cleared her throat. “Wow! What are you wearing?”

Stephanie grinned again, “Um, nothing, it's just me.”

“Thanks for that.”

“I could tell you needed it.”

Rael and I looked at each other and shrugged. *It must be a girl thing.* I continued, “Psystar wanted to see a girl she brought here from an accident scene earlier today.”

“You did?” Anne looked shocked at that.

Stephanie narrowed her eyes for a moment. “Damn, don't any heroes in town do anything **nice** for people?”

Anne said, “I'm sorry. I just, well, haven't heard of any heroes

doing that. I've only heard of them treating it like a job. They answer the pages, stop villains, save people, damage some property, and leave. Granted, I'm working mostly off hearsay, I just joined the force a few months ago. Most heroes are a mixed blessing to the force. Although ... Silverlash does charity work, I suppose. That's nice."

I looked at Stephanie for a moment and tried to think bluntly. *Do you mind if we invite her for a bite to eat?*

Stephanie said, "Sure, Spartan." Rael looked at her for a moment and raised an eyebrow. I grinned. *Nice, talking to you in my head works as well as out loud.* Stephanie glanced at me, grinned and nodded.

I asked, "I see you aren't in uniform. We were just about to find a nearby diner and get a bite to eat, would you care to join us?"

She looked at each of us, then back up at me. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, of course I am. Unless you think we look too goofy looking or something.." I'd let my voice trail off so it was obvious that denial would indeed back up that statement.

"I ... I'd ... that'd be great."

We walked to the exit. I asked, "So, does anyone know of a good diner near here?"

Stephanie said, "Lemme check." She separated from us and walked by the front counter. The hospital employees stared at her. She waved to them and sped up to catch up with us.

Rael said, "What the hell? She just said have a good night, I'm off to find a good nearby restaurant where I can eat, and leaves?"

When she caught up to us, Stephanie said, "The Ballisoo is a casual place two blocks over." She hooked Rael's arm and said, "Poor baby, so confused," then chuckled.

I said, "Umm, I'm with Rael, you didn't ask them anything."

"Sure I did, I mentioned I was looking for a nearby restaurant, and then sure enough some of them thought of nearby places."

"St ... Psystar, people are going to think you're weird if you don't give them time to answer."

Anne said, "I'm so confused."

I shook my head and waved toward the street, "Lead on, 'star. She did ask them, Anne, just in her own strange way."

We walked to Ballisoo. There were some odd stares from people, but no one accosted us. The place wasn't busy at 7:30 P.M. on a Sunday night, and the host was kind enough to put us in an out of the way table so we wouldn't attract too much attention.

I said, "We've got about an hour to eat, then a half hour to get to the county jail. Agent Carson is meeting us there so we can interrogate some of the mutants."

I pulled out a chair for Anne, and she lightly held my forearm as she sat down.

Anne looked at my arm, up into my eyes and said, "Spartan, your arm is like skin over rock muscle. I've never felt muscles so hard before." Rael coughed and laughed.

"I was in great shape before I turned. My muscles all grew and solidified. I'm pretty happy with the change."

Stephanie wet her napkin and looked into my eyes. I smiled at her, her eyes were a pretty amethyst color now, very exotic looking. She started wiping off her cheeks where I'd held them. I laughed, "Nice."

Stephanie snickered. She held up her menu so we couldn't see her face.

I held up my fist to Rael, "Delayed payback?" He bumped my fist with his and nodded, glancing at Stephanie.

Stephanie said, "Oooh, like **that** threat scares me." Poor Anne looked back and forth at us, missing some of our hidden humor with Steph's telepathy.

Rael said, "Sooo, anyone else find it a little odd walking around in costume and going into a restaurant?"

Stephanie said, "A little. I'm noticing that as many people notice my hair as my costume until they see the gloves and boots. Well, and mask."

I said, "Yeah, it's ... different. I feel like I'm being watched."

Anne said, "You are." Her eyes flicked over behind me to my left. "All of the wait staff is cleaning tables where they can see us now, and the few customers that can see us are pretty much staring."

Rael said, "You've got a good eye."

"Two of them, I hope. I take it you guys have known each other for longer than you've been supers?"

I said, "Yeah, how did you know?"

"The joking that friends do. I kind of miss some of my old friends out in Cali."

I said, "You mentioned you'd only been on the force a few months?"

"Yeah. I was in the marines for four years; then moved here because the police force is fairly large. There's a lot of advancement opportunity. How in the world did three people all knowing each other just happen to become supers? You could have won a lottery with those odds."

Stephanie said, "Probably our parents. We're all second generation, so there was probably something in our genetics that made us likely to turn when a meteor shower hit near us."

Stephanie suddenly ran her hand through her hair, like a model

might do. The rest of us stared at her for a moment, it was even vainer than we were used to her being. She looked at us all. "What? A couple of the guys were hoping I'd do it."

Anne's eyes shifted from Stephanie, to Rael, to the wait staff. "You mean the waiters and bussers?"

Stephanie nodded.

Rael said, "I thought you were trying to keep that quiet?"

Stephanie said, "It's pretty obvious from the hospital thing, and the accident scene anyone observant will realize what I did. Give me another week or two and the gig's up anyway. So I figure I'll have fun with it."

Anne said, "You knew what the wait staff wanted?"

Stephanie's amethyst eyes stared into Anne's. She glanced down at the table and bit her lip, then looked back up. "Yeah. I kind of know what everyone wants."

Her eyes were wide open. "You ... can read minds?"

"More like listen and watch. I don't do anything to 'read' them." She quoted with her fingers. "I don't intrude so much as just hear, well, and see."

"You ... see what people are thinking?"

"If they visualize something, yes."

"You laughed ... oh my." Anne turned a dark shade of red.

Stephanie had the biggest shit-eating grin on her face; she was blushing a little at this point as well.

Rael said, "Come on, guys, no fair, no fun."

Stephanie said, "Private thoughts, Black Tiger. She'd have to tell you herself."

Anne had the same look on her face that Stephanie had when she looked ready to flee the house before her big confession. *Obviously, she's thinking something embarrassing, and now that Steph knows, she wants to run.*

Stephanie's hand shot across the table to grab Anne's. "Please don't go. I promise I won't share anything you don't actually say or do."

I said, "Come on, you need friends here, stay."

Anne put her hands up in the air. "I'll stay, I'll stay. Damn, you've got a strong grip, amazon woman."

Rael looked back and forth at the women. "Are you talking about Psystar?"

Anne replied, "Yes. Talk about a strong grip, I didn't expect that."

Stephanie grinned, "Sorry, I didn't mean to grab you too hard. I have no idea how strong I am yet."

Anne said, "Stronger than a very strong man, I'd wager. Non-super, of course. None of the body building officers I work with have a grip even remotely that strong."

A waitress came to the table, along with a waiter trailing just behind her. She said, "Hello, I'm Jane, I'll be serving you tonight. This is Daniel; he's a trainee and will be assisting me." Daniel had a big grin on his face as he stared at Stephanie.

We all ordered, I noticed that Anne selected a healthy choice. I felt starved, and ordered a large appetizer as well as the meal. *The mega-strength kicking in definitely burned more energy, I'm famished.* I asked her to put it all on my bill.

Rael said, "You don't have to do that."

I said, "Dude, I've been involved in, what, four super incidents? If they're right, and you get paid more for saving people, then the hospital scene and bar scene ought to pay well. Steph's not working, just let me handle it."

*Darn it.* Anne glanced at Stephanie when I mentioned her real name. Ah well, let's hope she wants to be friends.

Anne looked at me and said, "Thank you, you don't have to pay, you know."

"It's my pleasure to."

"So, can you guys say what you all do, or is that boring stuff to talk about now? Or is it secret?"

I said, "I'm pretty obvious. Really strong, armored, jump really far. Pretty much a brick."

Rael said, "I'm a mutant, not like the eyes didn't give it away. Claw hands, faster, heal fast, somewhat strong."

Stephanie said, "I fly and read minds."

Rael said, "And smell good."

Anne said, "You **do**. I mean, I've seen commercials of that shampoo that people get all excited about, but wow. Your hair really does smell like that stuff ought to."

Stephanie smiled, "Thank you. That's actually why I started hugging you that second time in the hospital, you know."

"Because your hair smells good?"

"No, silly. Because **you** liked the smell so much the first time, then started coming at me wanting to keep at it. It's why I like hugging other people too. I get the enjoyment from them when they smell me, well, and when they hug me too. Hmm, that sounds strange when I say it out loud."

We all laughed at Stephanie, or perhaps with her.

Stephanie glanced at the wait staff attempting to be stealthy, "Wow, I'm glad I'm not in their group right now."

Rael smirked, "Heh heh. What do they want you to do? I only hear a few snippets."

"Umm, let's just say clean a table with my shirt front, and keep it at that."

Rael replied, "Hmm, wonder if I should go compare notes with them."

"Don't you dare."

"I'm adding that to my debt tin you owe me then. It just keeps piling up, you know." He wiggled his eyebrows at Stephanie.

Anne raised an eyebrow, "Are you blackmailing her?"

Rael said, "No, no, no, no ... **yes!** But not for money." He looked very happy with himself.

Anne said, "Ahh. I'll just forget I heard it then."

I shook my head. *I wish he'd tone that stuff down. Steph's going to get tired of it sooner or later.*

Stephanie glanced at me, and said, "I don't mind it at all. So long as he remembers that I'm the smart one." She winked at me. "Life's too short to get bent out of shape about that type of thing. Plus, I hear it from so many people now. Every time I catch a mindview of a waiter, they are pretty much staring at one part or another of me. Though at least the girls are paying more attention to you guys."

Our food arrived, and we began eating. During the meal, I bent the fork twice and had to straighten it out. The others mocked me for my 'oafishness.'

I said, "Hey, if you could lift what, 300,000 pounds, you'd bend forks too!"

Anne almost choked on her food, "How much?"

"The locomotive weighed about 750,000 pounds. I picked up the back end and moved it. Figure less than half the weight due to the half resting on the ground."

Stephanie coughed and spit up her water. She didn't look up from her plate. That made me look at Rael and Anne. Anne was turning red. *Darn you for not sharing, Steph! Mental fist shake!*

The trainee instantly appeared with extra napkins for her. She thanked him.

*I wonder if Anne was thinking something about me. Hmm, I could ask her out, but then I'd have to give out my personal cell number. Gab, superheroes can't date, can they? What if I put someone in danger?*

I said, "I'm kind of bummed that we're almost done. If we didn't need to hunt down this mutant pack that kidnapped those people I'd want to get a movie or something."

Anne looked at me, "So, you guys, do, umm, normal things?"

Rael laughed. "Of course we do. We've got normal jobs and

college. We work out ... wait, perhaps not anymore. I plan to continue at the dojo. This will just add in some more activities that we get involved in. I'm hoping to replace my carpenter job with just the heroing soon though. That'd be nice."

*Yeah, we could like, go on dates or to the amusement park. Or you could jump around with me to see if you like flying through the air. Or maybe mountain climb. Ooh, that would be fun now.*

Stephanie said, "Oh, jeez, you guys are dopes. Anne, would you like to join us for dinner and a movie Tuesday night, wait, make that Wednesday night?" *Stephanie knew I worked on Tuesday, thanks Steph!*

Stephanie nodded at me, smiling.

Anne said, "You guys are going to hang around in the house in costumes?"

Rael said, "Bah, we'll wear our normal stuff. I'm pretty sure Ste...damn it to hell! Psystar would know if someone planned on ratting our identities out." His fingers elongated into claws when he swore.

Anne stared at Stephanie, who smiled and nodded back at her. She nodded again, then again, slowly.

Rael looked back and forth at them. "Oh, this so sucks. Okay, we're making a new rule. If mind to mind communication is used, it adds to Steph's debt tin, and **will** be paid in full."

Stephanie ignored him and said, "I'll pick you up at your place, say at 6 P.M., Anne? If you aren't afraid of heights, I'll give you a flight over the city. Assuming you don't mind hugging me some more."

Anne smiled, "You actually fly other people, too?"

Stephanie grinned, "Uh huh. Seems to be pretty safe."

Rael said, "Yeah, this has been an unreal day. I have a feeling we might be in for a long night though, depending on what you can pull out of some of the mutant minds."

After I paid the bill, a group of wait staff walked over to the table. One of the guys asked, "Can we get your autographs?" He held his order pad and a pen in hope.

I said, "Why do you believe we're superheroes and not just going to a costume party?"

He pointed at my arm. "No one normal gets that big." One of the others said, "Or has cat eyes. Or gold hair."

I chuckled, "Okay, okay, I'll sign." I motioned them forward. Rael and Stephanie were good enough to sign them as well. We passed around the pads so each of them received all three of our signatures. Anne waved them off. She said, "Unless you want something like 'Semper Fi' on there, I'm not a hero."

I said, "That remains to be seen. You were a hero to the people

at the bar scene, I'd think. Plus, every military vet is a hero to me."

She replied, "I doubt it, about the bar scene, that is. They all had eyes for you, and for good reason."

I shook my head, "We were all there to help. We just had different ways to do it. So where are you off to now?"

Anne replied, "Back to the hospital. Ray was injured last night at a scene where someone turned into a mutant."

"Wow, I'm sorry to hear that. Wish him well for us, and we'll see you Wednesday night!"

We left the restaurant. Anne bid us good night and walked back toward the hospital.



## Chapter 33 - Interrogation

### Stephanie's Viewpoint

Lance used the H.E.R.O. cell phone to find out where the county jail was compared to where we were.

He said, "We've got time, how about you two fly there, I'll leap." I could see he wanted the extra time getting used to his jumping techniques. He was still having problems using the right amount of push off to get where he really wanted to be at the end of each jump.

*He might have the right idea there. I should practice flying with fast turns and stops to get used to how to do it. I could have kissed glass earlier today when I flew up from the accident scene.*

I ran my right hand down Rael's chest and around his waist. The form-fitting suit made it nice to touch him. He put his arm around my shoulder; then I stepped off into the air. Whatever this flight power was, I felt extremely glad that I didn't have to hold people up by sheer arm strength alone. Oh, I was much stronger, but it was just more comfortable holding someone loosely. More like a hug, or very close dancing.

His nose tickled my ear, and I caught him deeply smelling my hair. With no one else nearby it was easy to focus, or listen closely to his thoughts. He had a much finer sense of smell than anyone else I'd been near since my thoughts were no longer alone. I looked through his mindview; the city looked very different through Rael's eyes. It was far brighter, or perhaps just less dark. The sound of cars, music and shouting were crisper to my ears ... or his ears.

I made his mindview larger, so it covered my visual space, and flew using his eyes for a while. He suddenly shifted where he looked to an area off to the side and I threw my legs forward, slowing us suddenly. He immediately shifted his view back to me, and I heard my heart beat racing loudly through his ears. He said, "Are you all right?"

I pushed his mindview back, letting it float back off to the side of my visual space as usual.

I said, "Sorry. I was looking through your eyes when you changed where you looked, fast. I didn't expect it."

He said, "I thought you said what we were thinking was like a television screen floating in the air?"

"It is, unless I pull it up really close and replace my own vision with yours, or what you are thinking. Most people that aren't coming

up with a mental visual just show what they are seeing in their mindview. You see and hear so differently than I do, it was interesting to try.”

“Huh. I know I see in the dark far better than I used to. Everything looks clear to me, almost like daylight.”

“Yeah. Kind of a bummer losing out on the beautiful scene the city lights make at night though.”

“Gain some, lose some, I guess.” He shrugged. “It might make a good stealth spy technique someday, if you can keep viewing through someone from a distance.”

“I suppose, if I can hold onto a mindview at a distance.” I jabbed my knee up again to pick up speed and flew us to the county jail.

The jail was easy to spot from the air; it was part of the Metrocity Prison complex. Rael pointed, “Armed guards on the towers. Fly down just above the main street and go in slow, let’s land in the parking lot, a ways out from the entrance.”

I followed his direction. I enlarged his mindview for a moment. He watched the guards closely. They were well aware of us. More than one had a large rifle trained on us as we approached. I shrank his mindview again and slowed to land. We landed, and waited in the parking lot for Lance to come. It took him a few more minutes; then we saw his yellow and red costume leap from a building top some distance away.

It amazed me to see him arrive. He should have crashed to the ground. Instead, his legs absorbed the impact as though he had jumped down a few feet at most. He stood straight and walked to us, grinning the entire time. His muscles rippled as he walked. I debated that loose clothing or a coat would have made him look even larger, but the form hugging costume showed off the power in him. He was an impressive sight, a titan amongst men.

We turned as a group and walked to the main entrance. Agent Carson reached the gates before we caught up. The heavy front gates opened, a man in a suit flanked by two guards wearing body armor and carrying machine guns stopped to greet us.

Agent Carson shook his hand and said a few words while we closed the distance. I listened carefully, and I could pick up their mental words more than their speech. He explained that we were the heroes he had called about.

Up close, the machine guns were even more impressive. The barrel was larger than a normal machine gun, at least from pictures and movies.

Agent Carson nodded to us.

The suited man said, "I'm Warden Jamis. Welcome to Metro Prison."

Lance stepped forward with his hand out, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Warden. I hope this is the first of many meetings in our attempts to help Law Enforcement."

The Warden's eyebrows raised, and he slowly took Lance's hand. Lance's thoughts focused on not closing his hand. It surprised the Warden that a super bothered to shake hands. Rael stepped forward to shake hands; at least he didn't have his claws out. I shook his hand as well, having determined that the Warden wouldn't appreciate being hugged.

As we walked in, another pair of armed and armored guards followed us from the rear. Per their thoughts, they had standing orders about escorting visitors, especially supers, to minimize potential dangers from us.

We marched with our entourage into the jail building. The Warden led us into a high security area. The bars blocking off sections were over an inch thick, and several clear barriers delineated sections next to the bars. Each gate closed and relocked behind us as we moved into the area. Cameras hung at intervals along the ceilings.

Rael said, "I take it these bars are strong enough to restrain a mutant, and possibly a brick?"

The Warden stopped, grabbed a bar, and looked at Rael. "This is an alloy, not just iron or steel. It will handle the strength of almost any mutant we've seen, and many bricks. So yes, it is a very strong material. In some cases we have to use other measures to keep a super in check."

His mindview displayed images of drug therapy, special super-thick restraints, and rooms coated in different materials. I asked, "Are there any legal problems with the unusual measures? For example, keeping someone unconscious continuously?"

The Warden stared at me. "No. The Metavillain Law that passed five years ago solved the majority of issues here, as it did with the claims of overaggressive members of the H.E.R.O. program during the apprehension of super criminals."

*That's right; I remember reading about it now in a law class. Some criminals were being released because the heroes that apprehended them supposedly used too much force. The lawmakers used the evidence that the criminals escalated the situations to the point where the heroes needed to be able to match them, or the criminals would never be apprehended. I don't recall reading about the prison system being changed, but it makes sense.*

We arrived at an interrogation type room that I'd expect police to use. Cameras hung in all four corners of the ceiling, and the

stereotypical mirror wall took up one side. The table was made of extremely heavy-duty metal, and bolted to the floor. Four oversized, but plain, chairs were also bolted to the floor around the table. Large rings were part of each chair on the back, apparently to chain someone to.

The Warden stated that he would have the first mutant brought in. Lance offered to help if they wanted someone strong and armored to control the mutant. "Thank you, but my men can handle it. Wait here."

I saw in his mind, that he had supers as elite guards on staff.

Agent Carson looked at me. "Do you need us to do anything special to interrogate them?"

I replied, "Interrogate them as you normally would. We need them to think about the location where they would bring new mutants back. Locations where they've stayed at ... addresses especially. Why they did it as well. Make sure to give them a little time to think on each question. Hopefully their mind will wander and I'll hear it. Shoot, do you have a pen and paper?"

One of the men handed me a pen and paper.

"I'll need to stand near him, or behind him, and it's best if everyone else at least stays on the other side of the table so I don't get too much noise. It's already bad enough with just us, add in the mutant and any other security and it will get worse for me."

About five minutes later, the door opened, and guards ushered in an obvious mutant. They moved him to one of the chairs and locked leg, body and arm shackles to the chair and floor.

He had one horn in the center of his forehead. His eyes appeared bloodshot, with odd red veins running to the iris. He snarled, and all of his teeth were pointy. His forearms had small spikes running up them. His eyes shifted between each of us in the room.

The Warden said, "Do you need guards in the room?"

Agent Carson replied, "No, thank you. With three supers in the room, I believe we'll be fine."

Warden Jamis smirked, "He heals reasonably fast; you won't need to worry about some physical damage being done."

He walked out, motioning his men to follow him. I marveled at his thoughts about how we could handle the mutant. He could care less about some scumbag that attacked other people, or if we hurt him.

Rael stepped up to the table and set his hands on it. The fingers elongated into claws. "You were with the group that attacked the hospital?"

"Go to hell, hero lover."

"Too bad you weren't good enough for your boss, what's his

name?" *Shrinker, and it's a she. How original.* I wrote it down and nodded to Rael.

Rael continued, "What good is kidnapping a bunch of mutants? We mutants are the scum end of the supers in town. You should have captured the good looking supers."

The mutant yanked at his chains and bared his teeth. "Screw you, pretty boy. I don't see any bad marks on you." *Ab, they are collecting new supers that will be sympathetic to their hatred for heroes and normal people.* I nodded to Rael slightly again.

The guy became really angry. Angry at us. Angry at normal people. Angry at good-looking heroes. Angry at himself for getting caught. Angry for not killing off all of the non-mutant supers in the hospital.

He irritated me. *Nothing like a jerk that thinks he can go kill people and be all right with it.* My eyes narrowed as I watched the criminal from behind.

Rael said, "So what's the plan with them, huh? What's a dumbass punk like you, who can't even avoid getting caught plan to do with a bunch of kidnapped victims? Maybe the boss knew to replace your stupid ass before the night began."

The mutant roared and shook his chains, trying to free himself again. His anger was almost blinding; it made my skin tingle.

Rael screamed, "**Where are they being held, you sack of shit!**" His eyes went completely black, and it seemed like his teeth were longer as he yelled. Small fin-like spikes grew out of the back of his forearms. I believe I even saw similar spikes at the very top of his forehead, but his long hair covered the area well.

*W/boa! He's really mad, oh, no, that's me!* I concentrated on calm, everyone calm. It was very hard to focus on calm when I was so pissed off as well. *Damn this mutant, I'm getting mad because he's mad!*

It didn't work well. Rael leaped across the table and choked the mutant, who struggled to free himself. Lance grabbed Rael's shoulder and pulled back. Rael wouldn't let go, he continued growling at the mutant. Blood trickled down the mutant's neck where Rael's claws dug in. Lance grabbed harder, and the sound of crunching came from his shoulder. Rael withdrew and stood a step back from the mutant. Rael growled as he moved his left shoulder.

Rael said, "I'm going to rip your arms off if you don't tell us where the damn hideout is at. Where are the kidnapped mutants being held?" He grimaced in pain and glanced back at Lance, anger in his eyes.

The mutant just wouldn't calm down. I felt waves of anger from his large mindview. *Damn it, I've had enough, I need to use fear on this guy.*

I pushed Rael back from the mutant, he held firm a moment before letting me move him back a foot.

I stepped around to the right of the mutant and put my right leg over his so I stood over him. He snapped at me with his mouth in an attempt to bite me. It just made me angrier. I grabbed the horn on his forehead with my left hand, drew back and slammed my right fist into his nose. He stopped for a moment, slightly stunned. Blood ran from his nose. I punched him again in the jaw.

I mentally grabbed his mindview and pulled it close, and then went in, summoning my pack of big mind tentacles as I went in. I saw his image of himself in there, and grabbed at it with my tentacles. He bit and clawed at some of them, but I had a lot of tentacles out, and they wrapped him up.

I shoved further into his mindspace, finding a similar central room to Gina's, with large doors. I guessed at the largest door again being the memory door and slammed him against it repeatedly until the door crashed open. I screamed at him, **"Where are the mutants being held? Where?"**

Some of his memories were of attacking helpless people. Some he tortured and raped. He ate at least some of them. *Oh, my god, that's a damn disturbing sight, seeing the visual of eating someone from the cannibal's viewpoint.* Finally, memories I sought came to the front, images of an old warehouse down by the river. He remembered an empty interior, with a space planned for cages along the walls, and a reinforced pit with bars over it in the center.

He struggled violently against my tentacles in a bid to free himself. My tentacles slammed him around against the wall and floor of the chamber. In a fit of desperation, he clawed and bit at the tentacles. One of the larger ones ripped in half, he burst free of them and rushed at me. He backhanded me with the spikes on his arm and I felt pain. Blood sprayed from my face and mouth as I fell onto my back. Even in here, it hurt as if I'd actually been hit with those spikes and muscled arm.

He leaped onto me and punched me in the stomach, the spikes stabbed into me and I cried out in pain. Even though he didn't seem as strong as he appeared out in our actual bodes, he still hit hard. *I'm hoping he's a lot weaker mentally than physically.* My tentacles dragged him off me, and I wrapped up his arms and legs, holding him in the air. I stormed out of the chamber with him. I hoped that the rooms were in a similar order to Gina's, and headed to his emotion chamber. I used his head as a battering ram, smashing him against the door repeatedly until it burst open. It didn't tear off its hinges, as with Gina though.

I walked near each pool, sensing happiness, such a tiny pool

there, sadness, anger, ah, here was the one I wanted ... fear. I held him aloft with my tentacles, and threw him down into the pool. If I could feel some of an emotion standing next to a pool, being in it had to be far worse.

It was. He shrieked with such emotion that I could swear he was the victim in a horror movie. He surfaced a few times, and swam toward the shore where I stood. I directed a large tentacle to smash him on the head, submerging him. I felt more than heard the utter terror he was feeling. He didn't surface again while I waited, so I marched back out of the room. His screams echoed through his mind. *He deserves every damn second in there.*

I walked back into the memory center to look at his memory of the warehouse. My stomach and jaw certainly hurt as if I'd been punched and stabbed, hard. *Forget asking him, I'll rip the memories out.* I dug into his memories, looking at each floating video, speeding through it and pushing each away until I found one with the location of the building, at least by foot. He hadn't spent much time looking at street signs and addresses.

My jaw hurt, and I was still angry. Then, I noticed something in his memory of the warehouse that I hadn't seen before. A memory of his leader, Shrinker, as she spoke to the mutants before they went to the hospital. She directed two of the mutants to gather metal bars and create cages. Tonight they would capture the new mutants, and tomorrow they would kidnap humans to force the blood thirst on the new mutants after they went hungry for a few days.

*Let's see, so 'tonight' would have been last night. That means that this evening they are out capturing humans for food. So we have a day or two before they start killing the people...* There had to be fifteen or twenty mutants with them in total, including a huge four armed monstrosity, its lower arms ended in swords rather than hands. This mutant cheered along with the rest, hoping to feed on at least one of the victims.

They planned to feed helpless people to each new mutant. They would kill innocent people in order to corrupt some unfortunate who happened to change into a mutant instead of a non-mutant super. A fire erupted around me, my anger materialized it seemed. I waved it outward, sending a wave of destruction through his memories. Energy poured out of me, wreaking havoc, and continued blasting outward through the immense chamber until finally, I spun on my heels and walked out into the central mind chamber. My steps weren't steady; the blast really seemed to take something out of me.

I felt the ongoing terror and heard the mental shrieking from the emotion chamber. I was extremely worn down; I didn't have the energy to deal with helping or harming him further. *Serves you right for*

*planning that against people.* The mindview hovered above this central chamber. I launched back up through it, exiting his mind.

The shift back to my own vision shocked me. I stumbled clumsily back onto the table, and my visual of the mutant swung in an arc to see the ceiling. I felt my head bang onto the table, and everything went black.

Hands shook my shoulders. My head felt groggy. A high-pitched screaming wailed through the room.

Something dripped down my cheek to the back of my head, and my jaw hurt.

I opened my eyes. Lance leaned over me, looking at my face. I lay on the table. *How did that happen?* I heard him think, "Welcome back, how do you feel?" I was sure I didn't hear it out loud, the screaming didn't let up.

I blinked slowly at him a few times. My mouth hurt; I touched it and it stung. I jerked my head back at the touch, and banged it on the table. My glove came away from my cheek bloody. I sat up slightly and looked at the mutant. He was the one screaming. He looked beat up. Blood ran from his mouth, nose and ears.

Lance lifted me off the table by my shoulders, and carried me out of the room. The door shut out the majority of the screams. He set me down on my feet out in the hallway. Lance's mindview showed that my cheek was torn up, as though claws or something had hit me. My stomach hurt as well. Lifting the oval opening by my belly button showed stab wounds in my stomach. They still bled, though the shirt showed no damage.

Rael said, "Are you all right? You blacked out."

I said, "I ... huh?"

"You fell unconscious on the table, how do you feel?"

"Tired. My jaw hurts, so does my stomach."

Agent Carson said, "What the hell did you do to him?"

I blinked at him a few times; thinking came slowly to me. Finally I said, "They are in a warehouse, he doesn't know an address, but I think I can find it."

He repeated the words slower this time, "What did you do to him?"

"I threw him into his fear pool. The place his mind draws on for fear. I beat him into it and left him there."

"Oh, great. Is he going to get over this?"

I still spoke slowly, "I have no idea. Who cut me?"

Lance said, "No one did, you reacted like you had been hit, and the wounds appeared."



"We fought in his mind. My tentacles versus him."

"You have tentacles?"

I shrugged, "I visualize it that way. They helped me break doors inside his head."

Lance's mindview largely replaced my vision. I reached out my hand to lift my chin before realizing I didn't need to reach, and simply twisted my head to show my neck. My neck wasn't damaged, though it had quite a bit of blood on it.

Rael put his hand on my back and asked, "Who cares about that murderous scumbag. Did you get anything out of him?"

My head slowly cleared; I wished the pain would fade. "Yes. I know what the path to the warehouse looks like, and the building itself. I'm sure I could fly around and find it. It's near the river. They are kidnapping a bunch of normal people to use as food, to force the mutants to get hungry and attack them. They are building a bunch of cages and a pit in the warehouse."

The screams stopped from the room. All of us looked at the door, and then at each other. Agent Carson opened the door and looked in at the mutant. He was slumped in the chair, though we could see him breathing. He was alive at least.

Agent Carson looked at me. "I've heard of Psycom doing some kind of 'psychic blast' at enemies, but I've never seen a psychic do what you just did. It's a little disturbing."

Anger flared in me. *How dare he say I'm disturbing, when that sicko ate people?* I saw in everyone's eyes that my eyes began to glow golden as though being backlit from the inside. I stabbed my finger at his chest, "I'm not the disturbing one, Agent Carson. That sick bastard **ate** people, and I saw it happening from his viewpoint. He murdered numerous people, and was all too willing to capture normal people to feed to these new mutants. Ugh, I can't get these sick images out of my head now." I hit my forehead a few times with my palm until Lance grabbed my wrist.

Lance said, "He ... ate people? You saw him **eat** people?"

I couldn't get the visual out of my head now that I'd begun thinking of it. I fell to my knees and retched. It especially hurt with the stab wounds in my stomach and damage to my mouth.

Rael said, "He was thinking about people he'd eaten when you stood over him?"

"No, they were memories."

"So ... you can see more than just what people are thinking right now?"

Someone stepped up to me and handed me a wet cloth. I wiped off my mouth, and then stood up. "Thank you." It was an employee

of the jail I hadn't seen yet.

*Great, I didn't mean to let that out yet.* I sighed and looked off to the side, away from everyone standing there. “Yes, I can see memories. I can replay them like a video.”

“How far back?”

“I have no idea; I haven't tried looking very far back into someone's memory. Most of that jerk's memories seemed very recent. But the memory room was huge, I'm sure I could have wandered around, had I wished.” *Oh, crud. I wonder what my explosion of fire is really going to do in there. I hadn't been thinking much about it at the time, I was just pissed off and wanted to lash out at him. The memories it hit seemed destroyed, and it had to hit a lot of memories. Will that give him amnesia? Could I wipe out specific bad events from someone that went through something terrible?*

Rael said, “Are you okay, Psystar?”

He snapped me out of my reverie. I blinked and looked at him, “Huh? Yeah, I'm fine. I was just thinking about what I'd seen. Speaking of, did you grow more spikes in the room? I don't see anything odd now.”

Rael said, “Yeah, they went away after I calmed down. It's a little worrisome.”

Agent Carson said, “Psystar, are you interested in having me put in your file that you can help with interrogations? Or at least cases where we need to find something someone has hidden?”

I looked at him, “What do you mean?”

“Think of a kidnapping, where we can get a hold of one of the kidnappers. I don't work that type of case, but the FBI would absolutely love someone on retainer that could do that. There's such a small time factor in those cases that if you can't pull a rabbit-out-of-the-hat trick, the person often isn't found.”

“Yeah, I'd do that, I can break the sound barrier when flying too, so I can get around pretty fast. I won't help unless they've captured someone though. I can't work off from a note or voice recording or such.”

“I'll make sure that note is in there. It would just frustrate the authorities on hand if you were called in and couldn't help. You haven't discovered any precognitive or post cognitive abilities?”

“A precognitive can see the future, right?”

“Exactly. A post-cognitive can see the past by handling something, or touching someone.”

“Huh. I already see too much, I don't want to get past and future flashbacks, thanks.”

He went to work on his handheld. It was obvious that he added the information to my file as we stood there.

Lance's mindview showed my face healing nicely. That relieved me.

Rael said, "So, what's the plan? You and I fly down to hunt down the warehouse? Spartan jumps there and waits in the area for our call?"

Warden Jamis interrupted, "You're finished interrogating them already? You've only interrogated one."

Lance said, "I'm with the Warden. Let's interrogate at least one more. The next one we can mention that we already know of the warehouse."

I thought a moment, "Actually, you could mention the warehouse, the cages they are building to hold humans for food, the empty cages they plan for the new mutants, and the feeding pit. I'd think all of that is bound to make someone think of the building. And their leader is named Shrinker."

The Warden motioned to his men, "Take the prisoner back to his cell, we'll bring the next in."

The guards secured the unconscious mutant and carried him off. They were just as cautious with him unconscious as they appeared to be when he was awake.

Agent Carson motioned for us to re-enter the interrogation room. By the time the next prisoner was brought in, I had cleaned the blood off my face and stomach with the wet cloth. My wounds were healed by the time they arrived.

They locked the mutant securely to the chair and left again.

Lance said, "So, where were the kidnapped mutants being brought?"

The mutant stayed quiet, merely watching us. His thoughts betrayed the warehouse, but not the address or street.

He continued, "We already know about your warehouse down by the docks. Too bad you were dumb enough to use one on an obvious street." The mutant didn't think of a street name, but he didn't believe it was so obvious, even being located next to the unused fish market building. I motioned for Lance to pause.

I wished I could rewind the memory he was thinking of, and found I could pull the full memory to a person's mindview as if I were in their memory center. I dug into the memory. I could see the buildings nearby, and side views of the fish market. They always used a side entrance, where the shadows made it hard to see anyone entering or leaving. Crates were left near the door to make it harder to spot.

I asked, "How many of these failures did your group capture at the hospital, Spartan?"

Lance answered, "I believe six, unless the two that I punched

through the outer wall were also apprehended.”

His thoughts went to the secondary mission of killing non-mutant supers. He believed they were successful on that goal, if not a total success. He also believed he would be broken out of prison by a horde of mutants.

He never said a word. He was less bestial than the first mutant was, and knew that speaking might give away information. He studied Agent Carson, Lance, and Rael carefully. He planned on hunting them down and killing them, possibly feeding on them. He didn't look back at me much, he would have had to crane his neck way back, and he didn't view me as a threat, being a woman.

I said, “He's given me everything we need. By the way, thanks for being so calm, **Hazen**. It made interrogating you **so** much easier.”

His head snapped back to look at me, his eyes were large with worry. I smiled at him.

“We can go now. By the way, his name is Hazen Plachetka, if you want it for your records.” I stepped back around the table, next to Lance.

The Warden's men came in and took him away. He didn't struggle. His thoughts still showed his confidence that he would be broken out.

I said, “Warden, he's extremely confident that he'll be broken out. He was told in no uncertain terms by his leader, Shrinker, that all of them would be.”

Warden Jamis nodded. “Was a timeline given?”

“No, but if we are successful, it will be a moot point. We'll have captured more or all of them.”

Lance said, “Freeing the captives has to remain our priority though.”

We left the jail facility after thanking Warden Jamis for his aid. He wasn't in a good mood when we walked out. *My warning about an impending attack on the facility left a bad taste in his mouth.*

## Chapter 34 – Home

### Rael's Viewpoint

Agent Carson asked, "So what is your plan at this point?"

I said, "It would be useful to find out if a group of people have gone missing tonight. The hard thing here is that they may not have begun yet, so we'd hear nothing, or they may be done and no one has put in a missing persons report because it hasn't been twenty four hours."

Agent Carson said, "Listen, it's already late. Psystar looks beat. I'll put out a request for information on kidnappings tonight to see if the police or FBI hear of anything overnight. I'll send an email to the phone you've got with what I find out in the morning."

I replied, "That'll work. In the morning, Spartan can begin looking for the warehouse or fish market. I've got to work in the morning, and Psystar's got school. Damn, I need to get my cell phone replaced as well."

"If you stay active, you shouldn't need a day job, unless you want some kind of alter ego thing. You're eyes may be a problem with that, Black Tiger. People tend to remember features like that when they see someone."

"Yeah. The mutant's curse, I guess."

"Only a curse if you plan to be a hero and also live a secret life. Otherwise many people who, well, changed, live relatively normal lives."

"Humph, I suppose. I plan to join H.E.R.O. though; that's my priority right now."

I looked at Stephanie. She had that slightly glazed-over eye look of someone who is tired and not focusing well. *She does look tired. The mind thing must be pretty wearing, since both times she's done that tonight she's gotten worn down afterward.* She looked at me and I smiled at her. *Yes, I know you can hear me think this.*

Agent Carson bid us good night, and walked off toward his vehicle.

Lance said, "So we crash tonight, I go looking in the morning for the warehouse, right?"

I replied, "Yeah. You jumping home?"

"That's the plan. A little more practice before people see me bounding around during the day tomorrow will be a good thing. Take

care flying, guys.” He looked around at the nearby buildings, took a few steps, and bounded off. Gravity’s shackles fell away from him easily as he launched into the air.

I looked at Stephanie. “Shall we, beautiful?” *Speaking of that, her face is healed already.* I stepped over to her and slid my left arm around her back. She seemed to like holding people with her right arm. I was glad my gloves were fingerless; it let me caress her skin as I did it.

She looked up at my face. “Do you ever let up on thoughts like that?”

“Sure I do. I, ah, think about training, and fighting. I think about the carpentry job I’m doing or have to do the next day. Ah, hell. I’m probably the one who drags down the average time between thoughts on sex.” I grinned.

She laughed. “Why does that not surprise me? You kind of balance Lance out. His thoughts are almost always on what he’s doing, and he’s commonly surprised by the sex stuff. It’s part of why I enjoy flirting so much, he seems shocked every time.”

She put her arms around me and hugged me tightly for a moment. “I hope I don’t have to dig too deeply into minds like those mutants have. Their memories of the horrible things they’ve done are not pleasant.” She shivered and clenched her eyelids shut in an attempt to shut out the images. From her expression, she failed.

After a few moments, she leaned back and said, “Shall we fly home?”

I said, “Yeah, but swing by a Megamart first.” *A tamping bar will work nicely as a weapon.* I had the image of one of the five-foot metal bars in my head.

She said, “You want a digging tool?”

“Yeah. They are solid metal and weigh something like twenty pounds. It should work like a staff for me with my new strength, and the bar will hopefully be strong enough to put a hurt on some of the mutants. It’s not ideal to use a weapon I’ve not practiced much with, but I want some advantage at the start.” *I’d borrow Jake’s, but his will be all dirty, and I don’t want to bend his out of shape in a fight.*

She appeared to accept my thoughts of how I’d use it, for she altered our direction and sped up to fly to the nearest Megamart. Most other stores would be closed this late at night.

She landed us right at the front entrance. A couple near the entrance stared at us as we landed. “I’ll stay out here, just above the building. You look normal enough that people won’t stare at you in the store.”

I replied, “Will do. Do you need anything while I’m in there?”

“No thanks.”

I quickly headed into the store and looked for the Home & Garden department. In a few minutes, I found one, bought it and went back outside. It was rated at seventeen pounds, but with my strength being dozens of times what it used to be, the bar felt lighter than my other wooden staves.

I swung it around a few times to feel it out. It made a satisfying sound as the metal swished through the air. *Yeah, this will work.* I took the label off it. *That wouldn't do to get on video carrying a gardening tool with a label. I can see it now, getting labeled as the Gardener or some crap.*

Stephanie floated down to me, and laughed at my thoughts. She hugged me again in preparation for flight. I turned her chin up to me and kissed her. She looked surprised, but didn't move away or resist. After her initial surprise, she closed her eyes and responded to the kiss. Her lips were so soft. I ran the fingers of one hand through her wavy hair. Her scent was incredible; I could even taste her scent on her lips. *Hmm, I hope she'll still believe the line that we should all stay together a few more nights in case more changes occur.*

I didn't really want to end the kiss, and she appeared caught up in it. The realization that we'd been standing in a parking lot outside a superstore brought me to my reluctant senses. The kiss ended, she stood there with her eyes closed and mouth open for some time. She gently sighed and opened her amethyst eyes. Her pheromones were even stronger now. I could tell that she really enjoyed being kissed.

She slyly grinned at me, hugged me with her right arm and in a husky voice asked, “Wow... Got your staff held firmly?” Her chest heaved as she tried to calm down.

I grinned at her, “Yeah.” *Wait a second...*

“Good.” She giggled as she stepped and immediately launched at high speed into the air.

I studied the nighttime cityscape below us as Stephanie flew, avoiding any stray thoughts. It was easy to do when you traveled at several hundred miles per hour low over the buildings. If I hadn't been around supers my entire life, I'm not so sure I'd have been as calm cruising through the air with my only support being a small woman.

In a few minutes, we were back home.

We landed at my front step with a gentle bump. She grabbed my shoulder and pulled herself up to kiss me quickly on the cheek. “Well, I'll be off then, see you tomorrow after school, assuming we don't get an emergency call before then?”

I smiled, moved my arm to her waist and pulled her tight against

me. “You know, my dad explicitly mentioned that changes keep happening for days. We should continue to stick together.” I did my best to keep my thoughts blank and just watched her. I dropped the digging tool onto the lawn.

She looked into my eyes, then down. I thought I saw the hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth. “Well, I have school in the morning pretty early...”

I snickered, “You fly now. It’ll take you a minute to get home.” I worked my key out of my tactical belt, lifted her off the ground and held her against me. Then, I opened the door. She hadn’t resisted yet.

I backed up into the living room. She hadn’t looked up. “I ... I don’t want to stop being best friends with both you and Lance.”

She looked up at me, and my heart skipped a beat looking into her beautiful eyes.

I stroked her cheek with my free hand and said, “I will make you this promise. You have been one of two of my best friends for a dozen years. That will never end. Ever. If you are worried about a competition between Lance and me, well, you know his mind better than I do at this point. It’s not like he’s not interested in ex-marine chick Anne, or Tina. I think both of them are interested in him as well.”

Her smile grew into a mischievous grin. “Both like him a lot. LOT. Although Tina might like me as much as she likes Lance.”

“Whoa! She really swings that way? I thought it was your pheromone thing.”

“I thought so at first too, but... Well, let’s just say I have a little inside information.”

“Nice. I’ll invite her over more often.” I grinned.

“Gee, thanks, I think she enjoyed controlling me. She’ll probably try that crap again.”

*If she doesn’t, I will...* “Good. Have her over tomorrow night, then?”

“You’re bad.”

“Indeed, I am. You know it’s all in good fun, though, right? I don’t think either of us would make you do something actually harmful.” I couldn’t stop grinning now.

“Humph. So ... if I decided I really did want to go home, what would you do?”

*Scream? I could probably knock you out with a good thunk on the head, like Captain McCain did, you’d heal it fast. Or handcuff you to the bed, I like that idea. I’ve got stretchy workout cords in the other room; I could tie you up with those. Or best of all, just think really hard about you doing certain things. I knew she’d be reading my mind, so I made sure to visualize each of*



those events, while maintaining my firm grip around her waist.

She said, "You know, I can see through some of those. You wouldn't really lock me up without knowing I'd enjoy it, and I honestly don't think you'd hit me hard enough to knock me out. That means you only have one option left if you want to push me into staying."

"I could beg..."

"You, beg? Yeah, right. That'd a pitiful sight. You'd be so bad at it I might knock myself out by laughing so hard I couldn't breathe..."

"Ouch. Would you stay if I just asked? That and didn't push anything?"

She raised her eyebrow, studying me. "Okay."

I set her down and kissed her forehead. I said, "I'll even go use the restroom so you can change in the bedroom." I walked to the bedroom, grabbed a pair of sweats and went to the restroom to brush my teeth and such. Strange, I hadn't sweated all day, so I didn't need to wash up, and found that in more than a full day I hadn't needed to relieve myself. *Different, but very cool changes the body's making.* I quickly changed and opened the bathroom door.

Stephanie stood there in her costume; she held a shirt and a pouch.

I asked, "Everything okay?"

"I need to wash the blood off before I change."

"Your hands appear full." I slowly started unbuckling her belt. She didn't argue, so I slid it off her waist and dropped it onto the rug. When she continued to stand there with each hand full, I slid off her costume shorts. I heard her heart rate increase in speed, and her breathing quickened.

I removed her boots while I was on my knees. As I stood back up, I slid my hands up her legs and torso. Then I slid down her shirt, bunched it up and pulled it down her body. Her eyes were closed, though I knew she continued to see through mine.

She didn't move as I wet a hand towel with warm water and washed the blood off her stomach, face and neck. My acute sense of smell was besieged by her wonderful scent. *Steph's the one person I know of who can now go on a trek through a jungle and smell as good or better at the end of a hike than at the beginning.*

I stood again, pulled her against me and kissed her again, reveling in the skin-to-skin contact of our upper bodies. I heard the thump of the shirt and pouch, and her hands ran up my torso and around my neck. I felt conflicted. I wanted to be a good guy, but her being almost nude, and that fragrance made it very difficult to restrain my urges.

The kiss ended after a long time. When she opened her eyes, my heart again tried to leap through my throat. My mind barely retained control of my body. I gruffly said, "You're making it difficult to keep my promise." I bumped her nose with mine, knelt to pick up our costumes and left the room to put them in the washer.

*She seems willing to go further, but I don't want to push things too fast and cause a problem here. Man, this is hard being a good guy. There's no rush. I want a relationship, not a fling.*

I stopped back by the bathroom before I went to bed, "Hey, what time do you need to be up by?"

"I have a class at 8:00 A.M. Wait ... oh no. If I fly to school, it'll be obvious who I am."

"The campus is in the city. Fly either to a rooftop and go down through the rooftop door, or fly to an alleyway and walk a few blocks." She looked thoughtful for a few seconds, nodded and closed the door.

As she walked into the bedroom, it struck me. *I'm not sure if her snug costume is more sexy, or just a t-shirt.* Her face was beautiful, all of the damage fully healed. She slid in the far side of the bed and lay flat on her back. Her eyes were open, moving rapidly. *I'm betting she's debating sliding over here.* I wished she would do it.

Her lips curled ever so slightly into a smile, and she wiggled her way over to me, following what I'd pictured. I grinned as she spooned against me, and I put my arm around her. Without wind blowing her scent away, as it did when flying, it was wonderful just smelling her hair and putting my arm around her waist. I listened to her breathing and heart beat.

Some minutes later I heard Lance arrive home. His footsteps made the house reverberate slightly. I felt that Stephanie was tense lying against me. She seemed mixed on her emotions about ... this. Her body alternated between tensing up and relaxing until the fatigue caught up with her, and she finally succumbed to sleep.

I woke up to a hard elbow jab to the stomach. I opened my eyes and listened to the area around me. I heard Stephanie's heart beating rapidly, and her breathing was fast paced. Her eyes were open.

I whispered, "Hey, are you alright?"

Her voice was shaky. "No. I had a nightmare. I went through one of the mutant's memory of attacking someone and killing them. It was horrible."

"Ouch. I'm sorry."

She settled back against me and shivered. "They've become monsters. They may have been human, but they think people are animals ... food. They don't even think of themselves as human any

more. Strange, I would have expected to wake up in a cold sweat from that one.”

I said, “We don’t sweat anymore. It’s like our bodies are retaining everything and changing it into energy.”

I hugged her tightly until she fell asleep again.

I woke up by 5:00 AM. I didn't need my alarm; I was used to waking at that time on weekdays. *I'd rather not get up ... today, but until I know what H.E.R.O. pays, I need to go to work.* I slid out of bed, hated myself for doing it, and then berated myself for considering shirking work.

It took me less time than normal. My facial hair hadn't grown, so eliminating shaving and other activities certainly sped up the routine a notch. I walked out to the living room to do sit-ups, but it just wasn't the same. There wasn't the burn after a while. My body didn't feel the need to slow down at it, and I didn't sweat from the activity. *Well, I'm not sure that's a needed activity any more. I suppose I can keep it up until I'm sure at least.*

Normally, I'd have been all over getting to the gym before work, but I thought that Stephanie was going through enough of a shock that she could use more sleep for now. Also, weight lifting was unlikely to be useful at this point.

After an hour, I debated waking Stephanie up with an ice cube down her shorts, but thought it might be too much. I shook her gently, then not so gently. *Man, her deep sleeping hasn't changed.* Finally, I tried something similar to what I did in the hospital. I touched my forehead to hers and mentally called out to her until she stirred. *Obviously, the mind reading continues working even while she's asleep.*

She yawned and finally opened her eyes. She mumbled, “It's too early.”

I replied, “Unfortunately, it isn't. I need to get to work and you need to get ready for school. I'll see you this afternoon.”

I kissed her cheek and left the house, putting the makeshift staff into my car before I left.

## Chapter 35 – Campus Nightmares

### Stephanie's Viewpoint

*Bah, I want more sleep. Thanks a lot, Rael.* He left the room, and I slowly crawled out of bed. It was pleasantly quiet. My vision was entirely my own, and the only voice mumbled at a distance. It sounded like Lance's voice. It was pleasant to have my vision clear of mindviews.

My morning routine went faster. No legs to shave, or other ... activities to perform. Huh. The old cliché for the morning routine just became ... shower, brush teeth, done. Unfortunately, the bathroom was close enough to Lance to pick up his mindview again.

My curiosity got the best of me. I snuck into Lance's room. He still slept, but his mind was active, dreaming. His dreams focused on jumping around buildings. *Okay then, there's an odd dream.* I pulled his mindview close and watched for a minute, then imagined how funny it would be if dozens of giant bunnies bounded along the buildings with him. They actually appeared! They integrated into his dream, hopping along with him.

I quickly backed out of his mindview and ran out of his room, barely stifling my laughter. Even at the extreme distance to retain the mindview, they were still in his dream.

I checked the washer. *Good boy, Lance!* My costume was in the dryer, along with Lance's. *Rael must have worn his.*

I put on the costume, then jeans and a blouse over it. I wondered where to put the mask, then remembered that the material tended to stick together. Attaching it to the material over my abdomen worked quite well. *If I have to change into my costume, I can easily keep my mask with me. I like it.* The gloves and belt went into the purse, and I wore the boots with my jeans.

I grabbed my purse, left via the back door, and did a quick step-jab to shoot rapidly into the air. Rael was correct; it only took me a minute to get home. I grabbed my Monday set of books and notepads, and then shot back into the air toward the college. *Oh, this is **so** much better than driving through city traffic in the morning! Flying is so freeing, and there are no voices or mindviews.* I floated for a minute in the air over the city, enjoying the view from above. I had to get to school though, so I continued on my way there.

Plenty of students already walked around on campus, appearing

as tiny versions of themselves walking about the miniature campus when seen from far above. Even though the earliest classes were at 8:00 A.M., the cafeteria was a popular place before then, and human traffic was heavy around that building.

I looked for a building without many people, and flew in at high speed behind it. The ground zoomed up at me before I spun my body and made my stepping down motion. It was an almost perfect landing. Perhaps a little closer than I'd prefer, actually. I turned and walked fast in the opposite direction I had been flying in to go around the building.

No one pointed me at me, or otherwise caused a commotion, so I counted my first flight to school as a success. I stopped by the cafeteria on the way. The line to buy food annoyed me. I picked up six mindviews from the three people on either side as we moved past the selections. Occasional other mindviews appeared and disappeared, making selection of items a pain in the backside because so much of my vision was covered by them, plus the distraction from where they all looked. There were enough students and faculty that I heard loud talking from most of the cafeteria. I had to blink and focus several times to select my fruit bowl and yogurt. The young man tending the register stared at my eyes for seconds before he rang up the food. I smiled at him.

I glanced around the room as well as I could, but didn't see a table separated from other students by much. I walked to the far side, and had to focus on walking just to get through the nearby tables full of students. Mindviews deluged my vision as I walked blindly past. Most disappeared near the far end of the room, and I finally fell into a seat, with ten mindviews and a crowd of noisy voices talking around me in my head. I missed my mouth with my first bite of fruit, and bonked myself on the nose.

It frustrated me, attempting to eat with so much mental noise. A large group of mindviews joined as a group sat at the next table. I focused on my breathing to keep from hyperventilating. I felt tears run down my cheeks. *I'm so glad I'm not wearing makeup.* I could barely hear myself think.

So many pictures, images and sounds besieged me as I tried to stab the fruit and simply get the pieces into my mouth. I felt a hand on my shoulder. I blinked repeatedly and swiped my hand in the air in an attempt to clear my vision to see who it was. It didn't work, for all the benefit of having over a dozen eyes to look through, it was too much. I couldn't focus on one to see out of clearly. I failed to hear the voice over the din of mental and physical noise.

A hand took my elbow and helped me stand. I reached for my fruit and yogurt but couldn't feel them. I let the person lead me away;

anything had to be better than the mental assault I was under.

Mindviews receded, as did some of the loud mental talking in the area. The person continued pulling me along, until I finally could see, and I then held my ground. My strength was so much greater than the person that I felt their arm jerk with the sudden stop. I took a few deep breaths and gulped.

A middle-aged man in a relaxed suit jacket, jeans, and a button up dress shirt stood before me. One hand held my fruit and yogurt, the other my arm. He stared at me. I pulled his name from his mindview ... Professor Huben.

I said, "Oh, my god, thank you." I leaned against the wall next to us and gulped.

He asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine ... fine."

"I think you should go to the first aid station."

"No, thank you though." I ran my hand down my face. It surprised me that I wasn't drenched in sweat.

He tried to pull me along by my elbow, but again, he could barely move my arm. "All right, what happened in there?"

"Just a, umm, panic attack." *Doh, I need to figure out a cover story for times like that.*

"Really. It just happens to be over with now?"

"Yeah, it was just all the people in there. Man, I didn't think about all the people that would be here."

"What? Are you new here, in April?"

"No, I'm not new."

"Miss, have you taken any pills, or other drugs?"

"Huh? No!"

His mind ran through the possibilities, and he didn't plan on letting me off easily. I grabbed the bowl and yogurt from him and rushed off. I called out behind me, "Thanks for the help, Professor Huben!"

He debated coming after me, but decided it wasn't worth the effort. I made my way quickly to my 8:00 A.M. class. I'd be early, but it might be nice and quiet in there. I received a few pleasant remarks about my hair, as well as a few more mental only remarks about the hair and eyes on the way there.

There were only two students in the classroom when I arrived ... Dolly Steinhoff and Woody Camps. I didn't know either very well. It was a typical class, having about thirty students. I sat down in my usual seat and broke out my books. Both of their mindviews showed them staring at me.

Then, I realized how much different I looked with the new, wavy

golden hair and amethyst eyes. They didn't recognize me, and wondered who I was. I quickly ate the rest of the food and threw it in the trash bin by the door. Normally, the professors weren't happy about people eating in the classrooms due to the mess or the smell.

The rest of the class filed in over the next ten minutes. Every one of them noticed me. My study buddies, Megan Wollerton and Kell Lamphiear, recognized me. Megan sat at the table for two with me, and reached out to play with my hair.

She said, "Wow, what did you do to your hair?"

When I looked at her, she added, "Wow, new contacts too?"

*Ugh, I'm so mental. Why didn't I get a disguise?* I replied, "I, uh, you like the look?"

She said, "Yeah! It's beautiful, exotic too!"

I smiled, "Thank you."

"You've been crying."

My eyes got wide for a moment; I rubbed my face. "It was nothing."

As the last of the students filed in, I was again inundated with mindviews. Fortunately, once they sat down and paid attention to Professor Pomplun they were relatively quiet, though the quantity of mindviews made it difficult to focus on any one. His voice had an odd echoing quality to it as I heard it through multiple minds.

At one point, he noticed the strained expression on my face, and my hand against my head. He stepped over directly in front of our table and asked me a question. The answer he was waiting for was right there in his mindview, so I spit out the answer. Fortunately, by moving closer he had given me a larger mindview to work off from.

All in all, the class was a challenge to learn much from. The disruption to me from the mindviews was a real problem. When Professor Pomplun announced the end of class, a group of students very quickly left the room. It freed up so much mental space for me that I audibly gasped.

The professor stopped by our table and asked, "Stephanie, are you feeling well today?"

I replied, "Not really. It's ... it's hard to describe." I sighed. *How the heck do you talk about super stuff, without saying right out that you are a super?*

"I like the hair and contacts, it's quite a change. What is that perfume you have on?"

*Ugh. I feel like I did when I confessed to Lance, Rael and Tina. I just want to run away, but I'll be seeing these two for months just this semester alone.*

I waved my hand in the air, "I don't recall the name, a gift from a friend." I put my hands on my head.

Megan put her hand on my arm, "Come on, Stephanie, what's wrong?"

"Damn, damn, damn. I can't get so close to groups of people anymore."

"Why not, did something bad happen to you over the weekend?"

She imagined me being mugged or raped.

I replied, "No, not like you're thinking. I'll see if I can figure a way to describe it by the time our study group meets after lunch. I might be called away though; I'm kind of waiting for an emergency call."

"Oh my god, is your dad in the hospital or something?"

"No. Just hold off until then."

Professor Pomplun was frustrated. He tried thinking of possible problems, or things he could say to help. Understanding college age women had never seemed his strong suit.

Megan said, "Okay, fine. I'll wait until our study group meets. I hope I can concentrate on my classes now that you've thrown this mystery at me." *Hmm, she colors her hair and starts wearing contacts. Wasn't dating before, so no breakup.*

I shrugged, "I'm sorry about that."

She said, "I'll walk you to Bio. See you Wednesday, Professor." He nodded to us, but watched me intently.

I nodded to Megan, "Thanks."

My head snapped up to look at the professor as he debated talking to the counseling department to make sure I got some help.

I said, "Oh, come on. Professor, please hold off on calling for some kind of help for me, please?"

He looked surprised. "What? Did I say something out loud? Was I thinking that hard about it?"

Megan asked, "Huh? Did I miss something?"

He said, "She just read my mind. All right, if you promise that you'll seek out help on your own. At the **very** least, I want you to talk to Megan or other friends about the problem. Don't sit on a problem. Use the resources available to you."

I nodded. "Thank you."

Megan and I walked to the next class. Her thoughts entirely focused on me. Why did I change my hair? She never recalled me saying that I wore contacts, yet here I wore such a different color. What was this perfume? Megan had some nice perfumes, but nothing like what I was wearing ... it must be expensive.

Finally, she couldn't contain herself, and asked, "Since when did you wear contacts?"



*I don't want to lie about wearing contacts. Aha...* “Do you like the new color?”

“Yeah, very pretty. Very exotic. Are you trying to steal even more looks from the boys?”

I laughed, “No, that wasn’t the thought. I guess I just wanted to be ... different.”

“Did you get a tattoo as well? Such a huge change on the hair and eyes, you had to have gone all out this weekend.”

I laughed again, “No, I didn’t get a tattoo. I, uh, was in the hospital for a while Saturday. It made me change my outlook on some things.”

She stared at my face as we walked, trying to pick up something, anything to clue her in. Suddenly she grabbed my shoulder and stopped. I hadn’t expected the sudden movement, and didn’t stop as fast. Her thin frame wasn’t possibly strong enough to stop me, and I ended up yanking her forward a few steps. I quickly stopped.

Her eyes narrowed. “Wow, are you grumpy?”

“No, I ... you’re putting me in a difficult spot, Megan.”

“Good. Fess up to me. Since when have you ever gotten your eyebrows colored? You’ve only ever had your hair highlighted, never such a huge change in color.”

“What are you, a super sleuth or something now? Yeah, I changed them at the same time as the hair.”

Her face kind of scrunched up. “Damn it, Stephanie. Come on! Share with me!”

“Everyone’s staring at us, Megan. Let’s go. Study group.” *Maybe I should skip a class, go visit some of the writer’s club people and have them make me up a good story. That’d be worth fifty bucks or so...*

We arrived at Biology. I stopped and stared into the classroom. *Oh, no. I hadn’t even thought about the auditorium classes.* Dozens of people had already packed into the theater seating. Seating that could easily fit forty people closely around me within mindview range, if not many more. A cold chill ran down my spine.

Megan stopped and looked at me. “What’s the matter?”

I saw my own horrified expression in her mindview. “I can’t go in there. Too many people. Way too many people.”

“You have to go to class, Stephanie.”

I licked my lips and looked around. I stepped inside the entrance and looked around the room. Too many people filled the classroom. No seat had less than a dozen people near it. Students walked past us, mindviews appeared and disappeared. The verbal chatter even here was noisy without counting the mindviews.

“No, I can’t sit in here.” I walked back out, past some incoming

students.

Megan made an exasperated sigh sound. "Okay, fine. I'll take notes for you today, all right?"

I hugged her. "Thank you, Megan."

She returned the hug, just about moved back and stopped. Her eyes narrowed again while our faces were only six inches apart. She smelled my breath, and it was the same scent as my body, even more potent. I stepped back before she could kiss me. Not that I would mind kissing her, rather that some guys had stopped to watch the two of us hugging each other.

I said, "Go, we're attracting a crowd. I'll catch what I can of class out here, and walk with you to DNA class."

She had a pleasantly mesmerized look on her face. "Wow. All right, I'll meet you out here."

I waited outside the class, sitting against the wall. When the professor began class, I shifted my position to be just within mindview range of several students. I had to move early on, as they slacked off and didn't pay attention. The next group had two students who dutifully paid attention. I took notes through their mindviews. This could work. I also gained the benefit of seeing how multiple people linked topics together from prior classes and this one.

Once, one of them, a girl named Kelli, mistook something the professor said. I whispered my clarification to it to myself. All of my mindview participants looked around. They heard me. Several of them agreed with me in their minds.

Kelli had the image of my face in her thoughts. She had **seen** me whisper it to her. She looked around, attempting to find me. She missed out on some information. I couldn't help but think. *Kelli, pay attention to the professor. I'm not seated near you.*

Now all three of my mindview linked people looked around. Two of them wondered who Kelli was, and who I was. Why couldn't they see me?

*Damn it. All of us are going to miss this class. Pay attention to the professor! The tingle ran over my skin. Yes! Can I make people pay attention to someone? It's worth trying.*

I stood up and focused on spreading my pheromones. *Pay attention to the professor. Pay attention to him.* I walked to the doorway and stood there a minute, feeling the tingle go in waves over my skin.

A wave spread out from me, where nearly all students shifted all of their attention to the professor. The professor shifted back and forth from his projector, to the white board, to looking out at the class and simply stopped talking. He stared for a moment at all the uniformly rapt attention such a large group paid to him. Then he

looked directly at me, highlighted in the doorway. It took me a moment to notice, I had been focused on spreading the pheromones and watching the reactions of the students.

Even at the doorway, the mindviews steadied, all those within range focused on the professor, who started off past them. The mental 'verbal chatter' cut down to a minimum. I felt people standing around me as students walking past stopped and watched the professor in the doorway with me. The tingling stopped.

Professor Stonewall closed the cap on his marker and walked to the steps on the side. He then walked up the stairs toward me. *Oh shit, he's looking at me.* I turned to leave, but my path was blocked by a dozen students all tightly packed behind me, watching the professor. Apparently, I'd forced a bunch of students walking by in the hall to watch the professor along with those in the room. *Great, I've trapped myself.*

He looked around at all the students. The other areas of the room looked around as normal, but the entire section near me watched him like a hawk. They all dutifully stared at him, yet I was the only one moving around. The mindviews still didn't bother me as much as usual, even though I had the equivalent of thirty television screens filling my visual space. They all looked at him, which is what I would have done. *I could push the people out of the way, but I know I'm a lot stronger than they are. I might hurt some. Oh shit, oh shit.* The seats began right at the back of the room; I couldn't even scoot past people against the wall. I couldn't look around for other options; my vision was filled to the brim with mindviews that all watched the professor. I was trapped.

He reached me, now everyone also had me in their vision, though they focused almost entirely on him. He said, "Hello."

I couldn't single out his mindview to read his mind; there were too many others right beside me. I heard what he said at least, so few of the mental voices had chatter, and his voice echoed through all of their mindviews.

"Umm, hello."

"You are disrupting my class, Miss...?"

"No, um, I was focusing them, some weren't paying attention. I couldn't hear..."

"I didn't hear people talking. Again, you are Miss...?"

"Stephanie, sir." I looked down. *Oh, man, he's going to be pissed off at me disrupting his class. I wish I could single out his mindview.*

He said, "Come with me." Loudly he said, "Class is to read chapters 32 and 33 during the rest of this class, then you may go."

He started down the steps, and then stopped and looked back at me. "Come with me."

"I, uh, I need my books."

"Your books? You're a student?"

"Yes, they're outside on the floor of the hall."

"Well, then get them. You people, in the doorway. If you aren't in this class, move along. Now."

Some of them obeyed. I debated running. It wouldn't help though. He knew what I looked like now, and it was a pretty unusual look. I stood out like a sore thumb the size of those spongy giant hands used for sporting events.

I stepped out, and had to fumble a bit to grab my notepad and backpack. I still had so many mindviews up that I couldn't see. They all continued to stare at the professor, so the hallway was blind to me. I moved back into the room; a little worried about the number of mindviews I'd pass. They still focused on the professor though, and were reasonably quiet.

I walked down the steps through the room toward the podium area where the professor stood. The mindviews doubled in number, and I felt short of breath. Even focused on the professor there were dozens of them due to the packed seating. By the time I was about two-thirds the distance down the steps, I found myself entering the area where people hadn't been affected by the pheromones. Thoughts went wild as to their content. The amount of mental talking and shouting became overbearing.

I shook my head slightly; then put my hand on my head, but I couldn't hear myself think, nor could I see through the swarm of confusing images. I had a falling sensation, and the voices blissfully stopped.

I heard voices. More and more voices came into being, until the world became a shouting match in my head. Mindviews sprung into being, and I saw through dozens of eyes again.

I cried out in alarm, and put my hands on my head, hoping to block them out. It didn't work. People purposefully crowded into a small area to see what was happening. It was too much, I blacked out again.

I awoke again. At first, I heard their mental voices, and then the mindviews appeared. There were far fewer this time, perhaps a dozen. It was still too many to see or make much sense out of.

I mumbled, "Too many people. I can't see. There are too many people here."

The voices kept chattering, and then approximately half of them quieted down. A few disappeared entirely. Half a dozen mindviews

were still active, and a few handfuls of mental voices talking around the room. I could focus with this many.

I put my hand on my head - I was lying down. *I seem to be doing a lot of this the last few days.* I didn't need to open my eyes to look around. I'm not sure it would have helped anyway. Six mindviews nearly filled my entire visual space, even with my eyes closed. They were fairly large, so the people must have been very close to me. The majority of them watched me. They noticed that I was awake.

Professor Stonewall was there, as were two students in their later medical degree programs. Another professor I didn't recognize, Megan, and a nurse from the health center. Apparently, the nurse had just arrived.

She asked, "You said she had a cut right here?" She looked and pointed at my forehead, which had a small amount of blood on it. She wiped off the blood, but there was no cut.

*Oh, no.* My eyes snapped open. I believe I accidentally said, "Shit."

I closed my eyes for a moment and sighed.

I opened them again and said, "I'm fine ... Nurse Lateire."

Nurse Lateire said, "I don't believe so, dearie. You fell down the steps and hit your head. Fainting in the first place isn't good. Have you been eating properly, or had an illness?"

I replied, "No, I'm fine. I mean, yes, I've been eating just fine. I workout almost every day, I'm extremely healthy, thank you."

"I believe we should have a doctor take a look to be safe."

"**No.** Thank you though." *Sheesh, what is it with everyone wanting me to see a therapist, or a doctor, or have an MRI, or testing.*

"Dearie, you fainted **twice.**"

"Yes, well, I'm fine now." I sat up. They moved back a foot or two when I did.

Professor Stonewall connected the dots in his mind. He replayed the scene of my eyes glowing at the back of the classroom, and the cut healing. He had watched it heal. The unusual hair and eyes combined with the timing of the meteor shower clinched it for him. He recognized that I didn't want to let out my secret.

He said, "Nurse, I need to discuss class with her in my office. Let me work at convincing her, hmm? We see that she's not actually cut, so there's no apparent injury."

The nurse replied, "I can demand a doctor's note before I allow her to return to class..."

He said, "If she acts any more strangely, or won't comply with reasonable requests, then I promise to give you a call and request that note. Will that fulfill your requirements?" *Oh, crap. His idea of*

*reasonable requests is an interrogation on my apparent changes and whatever I did in class.*

“I suppose so. You hear that, young lady? If you have any more fainting spells, you call Health Services. If you give Professor Stonewall a problem, he'll call Health Services.”

I sighed and nodded. “Yes, ma'am.” *I wonder if I could give them all temporary amnesia... That might be easier right now. I need to make sure Megan doesn't get in on this discussion.* “Megan, if I have to go talk with Professor Stonewall right now, how about I meet you at Professor Gently's DNA class?”

Megan replied, “You sure? I could accompany you...”

Professor Stonewall was most astute, he said, “Megan, I need to discuss some things with Ms. Quinn. I'd prefer not to have an audience. I believe she would as well for this.” *Thanks professor. Although ... he's obviously good at picking things up, this 'discussion' may not go so well for me.*

Megan nodded. “Oh. Sorry Steph. I'll see you in what, an hour and a half then?”

I nodded. “Okay. If I don't show up, call in a rescue squad to free me from Professor Stonewall.”

She laughed and walked off. *But I wasn't joking...*

Nurse Lateire, the medical students and Megan all left the room. The professor I didn't recognize asked if he was needed. When Professor Stonewall shook his head and thanked him, he said, “I hope you're feeling better, Stephanie.” Then he left.

Professor Stonewall said, “Well, shall we continue to my office now? Will you be fine walking there?”

I nodded. We walked back to his office. His mindview showed him keeping watch over me like a hawk. He was extremely observant. He motioned to one of the chairs and closed the door. He then waited until I sat down before he sat down behind his desk. “You mentioned you are a student, Stephanie. Are you in my class?”

I couldn't help but squirm. This was uncomfortable as could be. I looked at the doorway for a moment, debating on escape yet again. *Running won't help; I have to see him again for class in two days.* I sighed. “Yes sir. I'm in your class.”

“I've either never seen you before, or you've always worn a wig.”

“I've been your student in multiple classes.”

“You changed this weekend, didn't you?”

That startled me. *Whoa. How's that for direct?* His mindview showed that he paid great attention to the meteor shower events of the weekend. He hadn't expected any of his students to change, though.

When I backed out of his memories I saw his current view, and my eyes were backlit ever so slightly. He watched them intently. *Crap. Nice one, Stephanie.*

I sighed and said, "Yeah, I changed Saturday night."

"Why weren't you sitting in the class with everyone?"

"I ... I can't." My eyes teared up as I softly said, "Well, not now, not anymore." He replayed his memory of my mumbling about too many people around me just after I woke up a short while ago.

"I'm curious about the change, do you mind if I call Brent in? Brent Gently, professor of genetics."

A horrified expression crossed my face. Professor Gently was one of my primary professors for my genetics degree program. Professor Stonewall was honestly curious though. He didn't have any ill thoughts.

*However, if he spreads information about my secret, oh, man, this is escalating out of my control. What if everyone knows I'm a super? Wait, what if? They could find out where live, I suppose, although if I don't move out into the country, someone's going to see me flying around anyway. Why can't I be a public hero? Lance wants to be a public hero. I never really thought that part of being a super through. I'll bet that Lance has though.*

I was deep in thought, so he made the call anyway. "Would you like some water, or orange juice?" I totally missed the content of his call, because I was so distraught.

I appeared paranoid in his mindview of me. I sighed shakily and attempted to calm down, "Sure, I'll have some orange juice."

The door practically burst open. Professor Gently rushed in. He glanced at me, then at Professor Stonewall. "What the heck is the emergency?"

Professor Stonewall motioned to the other empty chair. "Sit. Stephanie here is a new super. I wanted to ask her some questions, and I knew you would kill yourself if you weren't here."

Professor Gently closed the door and sat down in the other guest chair. He said, "Excellent! Hi, I'm ... wait a moment, I know you ... Miss Quinn?"

I nodded. I couldn't look him in the eye, I felt like I was about to get yelled at by my father.

He was highly excited, "I can't believe someone actually **in** our genetics program changed. What happened? Obviously your hair and eyes changed." He reached over and tipped my chin up. I looked him in the eye. He said, "Wow! Amethyst eyes, very neat." *Neat? Is that a technical term?*

I nodded and sighed again. "I hadn't really planned on letting anyone know. I'm signing up for H.E.R.O. later today."

He cried out and grabbed my upper arms, “No! You can’t leave our genetics program!” He looked at each of my arms where he held them. “Holy cow, you have a lot of muscle in these small arms.”

I interrupted him, “I’m not quitting my degree. I’m not sure how I’ll do all my classes now though. I ... I can’t sit in a room full of people anymore.”

They both looked confused, and couldn’t fathom a reason why something like that would change.

I continued, “Will you two promise me, **promise** that everything spoken in here stays in here?”

That deflated their enthusiasm. Professor Stonewall’s mind whipped through a series of people he had wanted to discuss this with. Possible testing to do, perhaps some papers or a book collaborated on with me. Professor Stonewall quietly asked, “Are you sure? Could this change in the future?”

I said, “It might. I don’t know what will happen yet. But I want it out on my terms. Coming to school today is already causing me problems. Just not for now, please.”

They nodded.

Professor Gently said, “You have much firmer biceps than most women. Is that new?”

I said, “Yes and no. I always worked out a fair amount, but I’ve gained more muscle. I’m far stronger than I used to be.”

Professor Stonewall asked, “So, what happened? What was the change like?”

I grimaced. “It was painful. I remember the feeling that my blood was burning. I think I was unconscious for a chunk of it, and then when someone broke my shoulder I blacked out. I woke up again in the hospital in the middle of a fight. I ... I helped stop this rampaging mutant, and someone knocked me out again. I woke up in the middle of an interrogation with some others who had been changed as well. I think the changes had pretty much finished by then.”

Professor Stonewall said, “Hmm, the burning sensation might have been your nerves responding to changes. Or perhaps extraneous heat generated by the cells changing in your body. How did your hair change color? Was it spontaneous?”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “Umm, no. The gold hair grew out and the old hair fell out. So I have an entirely new head of hair. I’m not sure how the eyes changed color.”

He continued, “Your eyes were backlit in the classroom, they were a minute ago slightly, and yet they aren’t now. Any idea what causes that?”



I shrugged. "Possibly when I get angry, or use certain of my abilities."

Professor Gently asked, "Have you found out what powers you have?"

"Several. I can fly, for one. I ... here." I held out my hand, palm upright to Professor Gently. He looked at it, and then took my hand. "Smell my hand."

He raised his eyebrow, and then sniffed at my hand. Then he held my hand tighter and buried his nose in my palm, and took a deep breath. "Wow! Is that natural?"

I nodded. Professor Stonewall thought of different things that could cause a pleasant aroma. The only obvious one was a sort of scent, or pheromone. He asked, "May I?"

I stood up and held my other hand out to him, across the desk. He gently held my hand and mirrored Professor Gently's sniffing, and then deeply smelled.

He said, "That has to be a pheromone. It only affects males? Wait that can't be, everyone in class near you was staring at me, I assume you were using this on them."

I replied, "It affects almost everyone that I know of."

Professor Stonewall continued, "You can emit this at will?"

"What you smell now is just my normal state. What I did in your classroom was intentional."

He asked, "You mentioned that you couldn't sit in class any more. Smelling unusually good wouldn't prevent that, nor would flight. What changed to make you not want to sit in class?"

*I could just say it, but a demonstration might be more interesting.* I pulled his mindview close and entered it. I didn't interact with his thoughts. Instead, I dove into his mental center, and went to the largest door. I hoped this would be standard with most people. It wasn't closed, or hard to enter on the professor.

I wanted information on his home and family. I glanced around the massive chamber and saw many images of a woman and the same children. I motioned to them, and the images came to me. I pulled out names and ages for his wife and children, as well as the street address. Then, I pulled up a random memory of a shopping trip he'd done for some books. I noted the names of the books he'd picked up and read the covers of, as well as those he bought. I flew out of the center and back through his mindview. I shook my head to clear it, leaving his mindview had an odd, stunning effect on me.

When I could see again through my own eyes, I smiled at him. They both wondered why I had been sitting there staring at Professor Stonewall for a few dozen seconds, though both noticed the golden

backlighting to my eyes, darkening the amethyst iris.

I said, "Your wife's name is Joyce, she's forty one years old, has light blue eyes and straight blonde hair. Your son is Anton, he's seventeen years old, is very thin, and has blond hair and light blue eyes. Your daughter's name is Ninette. She's ten, and has dark brown wavy hair, and gray eyes. You live at 934 Tellmont Street, in a brick faced house that is tan on the sides and back."

It took me a moment to review the bookstore memory; then I continued. "You went to Hampton's Bookstore last week. You picked up two science fiction novels and held a total of eight books in your hand. If you want I can list the titles."

They stared at me, wondering what I'd done. I said, "I'm a mind reader."

Professor Gently wondered if I knew that he'd been 'checking me out' as I spoke to Professor Stonewall.

I winked at Professor Gently and smiled. "Well, I know now. It really doesn't bother me; my costume is far more revealing than the shirt and pants."

He blushed. Professor Stonewall looked back and forth at us and said, "What do you know now?"

I replied, "That he's a man. I answered his thoughts. Fine, let's play a game. You picture something, I'll answer it."

*I'd heard of psychic tests they did many years ago for this type of stuff, but with the mindviews it really ought to be a joke.*

Stonewall thought of a blue car, Gently thought of a DNA strand. I described both, pointing at the person with the appropriate image. Next were a brown bear and a volleyball game last week at Delaney's Bar for Professor Gently. I described both, spending more time describing the bar scene. I added, "You never struck me as the sort to go to bars, Professor. You should try Score! - a friend of mine works there."

He said, "Wow ... that was unbelievably accurate. Tim, I don't think we need to test her anymore, there's no way she could have guessed all that."

Stonewall closed his eyes and rapidly ran through a succession of topics from classes he'd been working on. I rattled off the topics as he thought through them.

I said, "Proof enough?"

Professor Gently nodded, "That is ... impressive. So ... you obviously see a visual of what the person sees, or you would have problems with the volleyball game. How did you pull some of those topics, they couldn't have been visuals, right Tim?"

Professor Stonewall said, "No, most weren't, though a few were.

I'm very impressed. That's a real gift."

I said, "Yeah, a gift until you try sitting in a classroom full of people, and it sounds like dozens of people are all crowding up to you and loudly speaking at the same time, plus seeing floating television screens in my visual space for every person nearby. It gets too crowded to even think for myself."

"Floating television screens?"

"Yeah, people nearby cause what kind of looks like a floating television screen here." I waved my arms in my visual space.

"Why didn't you have problems in the doorway of my classroom then? There were dozens of students sitting close to the door, plus a dozen standing right by you looking in."

"I'd already forced them all to pay attention to you. They weren't thinking so many random thoughts, and every mind was focused on you. It made it far easier to deal with, though not pleasant, by any means. Call Professor Pomplun, ask him what I was like in his class this morning."

Professor Stonewall shrugged, looked up the extension in his directory and called Professor Pomplun. I listened to both sides of the conversation in Professor Stonewall's mindview.

Professor Stonewall said, "Don? This is Tim Stonewall, Biology Department. I'd like to ask you if you saw Stephanie Quinn in your class this morning, and if she looked odd to you."

Professor Pomplun replied, "Yes, she looked like she had a nasty headache, and was distracted most of the class. She occasionally made odd pushing motions with her hands as well, usually off to one side or another. At the end, a friend of hers and I tried to ask her what was wrong, but she wouldn't reply. I think something bad happened to her over the weekend that is too personal to talk about. I've debated calling the counseling group to hunt her down and get her to talk. I'm worried that those pushing motions are her trying to push away the bad memory, or worse yet, someone she's remembering doing something to her."

Professor Stonewall said, "Thank you, Professor. Two of us are having a discussion with her now about it, so you can hold off on calling counseling. She asked me to call you as proof of it being hard to be in a room full of students."

"Oh, excellent then. Is there anything I can do? I hate to think about one of my students having a problem like that without people to help her."

"It doesn't appear that the problem is the same as what you think it is. She's asked me not to discuss the topic with others, but I

believe I'm all right in saying it doesn't involve someone doing something to her.”

“Good, I'm extremely glad to hear that. Would you let her know that I'm available if she needs to talk with someone?”

“I'll do that. Thank you, Don.”

“Thanks for calling, Tim.”

Professor Stonewall looked at me, “He said you looked like you had a headache and were distracted during class. Also that you tended to make pushing motions with your hands.”

“Yeah, and you saw me walk through your crowded theater style classroom. There were too many people in there for me. I think I blacked out when I got near the section that my pheromones hadn't affected.”

I smiled, “By the way, Professor Pomplun said much more than that, Professor. I heard everything you heard. For the record, no, I didn't get mugged or raped. I **did** get shot twice, had my right shoulder and left humerus bone broken or crushed, and a few odd stabbing problems.”

Professor Stonewall's jaw hung open; Professor Gently stared at me with his closed. Professor Gently asked, “Are you serious?”

I nodded, “I am.”

“Would it be prying to ask to see the wounds?”

“I don't mind, they don't look unusual now though.” I began unbuttoning my blouse.

Professor Stonewall put up his hand and said, “Wait, I don't want you undressing in an office with two professors.”

I grinned at him, but didn't stop unbuttoning. “I'm wearing my costume under this; I mentioned I'm joining H.E.R.O., right?”

I finished unbuttoning it, and pulled off the shirt. Both of them were momentarily distracted by the body fitting uniform and the oval openings over my abdomen.

When I saw their reactions, my grin grew even more. “If all criminals would just have the reaction you two do now, I'd be able to distract them enough to stop the crime pretty easily.”

Both of them blushed, and avoided staring at me.

I said, “Guys, I'm not afraid of being looked at. I've seen, um, a **lot** of people's minds as they stared at me so far. I get to be a narcissist without looking in a mirror now.” I chuckled at my own joke.

I held out my left arm again. “I was told that a brick crushed my humerus, but I can't find any marks.”

Professor Gently examined my biceps and triceps. “I can't spot any visible signs of damage. No soreness?”

"None." I turned the chair and leaned my right shoulder forward. "I don't recall exactly where he grabbed me and broke my shoulder, but it hurt like mad. He's got big hands too; it might have had multiple breaks."

"I can't believe how solid your muscles feel. That alone would be interesting to study ... muscle density."

*Oh, this will be fun watching their reactions.* I pulled up my bottom of my top half of the costume to just below my breasts. I pointed at the two locations of the bullet wounds. "I was shot approximately here and here. I also had three or four stab wounds about here." Sure enough, both of them looked both uncomfortable and excited to see me pull up the top that far. *Let's really poke fun at their reactions...*

I reached back and grabbed the top of my pants. "Oh, and I was clawed on my butt..." I made a motion as if I would pull down my pants. They were like a deer in headlights. They wanted to look away, but couldn't. Professor Stonewall's mouth was open, and he wanted to get the words out to ask me to stop.

I laughed, "I'm joking on the butt thing. However, your mental reactions are pretty enjoyable to watch right now... You know, Professor Gently, it's going to be hard thinking of you as this stodgy professor figure if you keep thinking like that. I'm sorry for picking on you. Well, a little at least. I know that your thoughts are your own; you shouldn't be beat down for just thinking something and not acting on it. I won't mention it to anyone outside this room." *I feel like I have a tiny Lance standing on my shoulder.*

He said, "Well, thank you for that."

Professor Stonewall said, "You, ah, could put your shirt back down now. So I take it that you heal fast as well?"

I replied, "It seems like every super I've met heals fast. Bullets push their own way out of my body in a few minutes at most. Maybe even one. Hey, I've got an idea." I grabbed his scissors off the desk organizer, and sliced into my forearm. "Ow ... that hurt." *How can Rael like getting cut or beat on?*

We all watched as the cut reformed in front of us. It took mere seconds to repair the damage. I leaned over, grabbed a Kleenex and wiped the blood off the arm. "See? All healed."

Professor Gently's mindview lit up with possibilities to test in the lab.

*Ooh, this has possibilities!* I looked at him, "If you wanted to get a small group authorized for a few credits of special study, I'd be willing to donate the blood and hair to test, Professor. So long as I'm in that study group as well." I gave him a sweet smile.

He said, "I'm absolutely positive I can arrange that. To be able

to directly study the DNA of a metahuman would be amazing. Although, generally on a study like this, I'd only bring in graduate students. So be forewarned, you'd have even more studying or other work to do on it for the credits. I don't imagine the university going for free credits even if money, or in this case blood and tissue samples, are given."

*He's being kind, I hear his mental worries about being years of knowledge behind the more advanced students. But since I hold the key to making it all possible, he's willing to do it.*

I said, "The group would need to be reasonably small though, Professor. I have a difficult time with more than six people in close proximity to me at a time."

He asked, "What exactly does it **do** when that many people are near you that makes it so difficult?"

I spent a few minutes describing my range and the effects on my vision and hearing of the telepathy. He was intrigued by the fact that they blocked my vision.

He asked, "So can you see past the mindview, how many fingers am I holding up?"

I said, "At first, no I didn't see your hand. When I think to look in an area, and only have a few mindviews up, they move out of the way of where I'm looking directly. Two fingers and a thumb, by the way."

"All right, you said you have a difficult time with more than six people at a time. You just said they overlap, don't these mindviews stack up?"

"No, they don't. They all spread out in my vision. They overlap very little unless I have many in my vision, and even then, they seem to try and stay as fully visible as possible. At six, I have a small amount of space where I can actually **see** past them all. Get a group of ten people near me, and the damn things cover my entire vision plus overlap each other, I can't see on my own at all then. Actually, even six is pretty rough depending on how close the people are."

"So ... you're blind when near that many people?"

"Not really blind. I see out of all of their eyes. I just can't see out of my own. But add in all those mental voices and even a quiet room to you sounds like a cacophony of talking to me. Everyone talking at once, all the time."

"Oh my. That sounds like a challenge to be able to focus then."

"It is. I'm worried about how I'll handle classes. If one of my smallest classes is hard to sit in, I'm thinking I'll have to sit outside the room and take notes from someone else's mindview every day just to handle it." I sighed and ran my hand through my hair. "This room

probably seems quiet to you two. But I hear you both loudly, plus the mindviews, plus an occasional mindview from someone on the floor above or below us, or who walks near this room. There are about eight other people at any point in time that I hear mentally talking as though they are in this room as well.”

Professor Stonewall blinked a few times; he was mentally processing what I'd said. “You could sit near the professor. Perhaps an ideal location wouldn't be outside the room at the back, but outside the room at the front. This assumes an empty room or hallway on the side of the room the professor stands on, of course. Alternately, a seat in the corner by yourself at the front may work, though that may cause a significant amount of distraction to other students.”

Professor Gently said, “So you can fly, read minds, heal fast, and emit pheromones or other scent agents. That's a nice group of powers. I wasn't aware that metahumans had so many.”

“I'm second generation, which might be part of it. My father is a super as well. I didn't have any powers until the meteor shower on Saturday though.”

“Hmm. That you know of, at least. You've always been unusually fit. You're bright as well as beautiful. Those aren't common traits, or the average Intelligence Quotient would be 130 instead of 100. Were you sick often, before the change?”

“No. It was pretty rare for me to get sick. I don't know what would happen now with an illness at the rate I'm healing wounds.”

“We could test that sort of thing by introducing viruses and bacteria to test blood samples. We could even test damaging blood cells with a variety of agents to see how they heal.”

“You're getting awfully excited about me being a guinea pig, Professor Gently.”

“I am, indeed I am. How can I not be? Our program has tried obtaining supers for testing in conjunction with our program, but there are so few out there, and they just aren't willing to be, err, well, guinea pigs.”

“Actually, you mentioned 'read minds' as one of my powers. I've had a few cases so far of being able to talk to others mentally as well. I did it a few times to people in your class, Professor Stonewall. The first time was an accident. Kelli was one of the people I was using to make notes off from. Then, she misunderstood something you said. When I corrected her; she and the others I had mindviews of heard me.”

“That's full blown telepathy then. Very impressive.”

“Empathy might be in there as well. If I have a mindview of someone, I see, hear, and feel what they do. Wait, I taste it and smell it as well. It's nice when Rael smells my hair.” My mind wandered a

moment until their thoughts interrupted me. I sighed, hardly ever a moment of peace anymore.

I continued, "In answer to your unasked questions, Rael is one of my best friends, who also happens to have an extremely sharp nose. When he smells my hair, he's touching me, so the mindview is very large, and I get the sense of smell strongly through him too."

"So it's more like a window into their consciousness then, not just what they are thinking?"

I shrugged. "I guess. I've only had it for a day and a half now. Sometimes the sense of touch can be a little overwhelming when we both feel something similar." I realized where my own thoughts went on that and blushed.

Professor Stonewall's eyebrow raised, but his thoughts didn't explore the line of thought. Professor Gently wrapped his mind around the thought in depth.

Professor Gently said, "Let me get this one straight. If you were eating something you like, such as a chocolate sundae, and enjoying it, and I were eating something similar, you would be having both taste sensations?"

I replied, "Well, the enjoyment of it at the least. I suppose if I focused on your mindview I would probably taste what you did, and might enjoy that or not. But I would still sense that you enjoyed it, and that leaks through to me. I've been right by two very angry people, and I ended up getting angry because of them, I think."

Professor Gently continued, "So if you are enjoying the touch of something, and they are enjoying the touch of something, you get double that enjoyment?" He was trying to get an answer to his own naughty thoughts, without overtly asking the question.

I blushed more deeply. "Uh, well, I've only tried kissing a few people."

He leaned back in his chair, imagining some wicked scenes. "Wow, I'd think some people would find it difficult to not spend an inordinate amount of time doing certain ... activities, um, such as eating desserts, of course."

I laughed. "I see what you are thinking, remember, Professor?"

Professor Stonewall was staunchly thinking about other topics, he forced himself to think about the regeneration, and then flight came to mind. He wondered how one controlled flying.

I glanced around the room and said, "I'll demonstrate, Professor. Though there isn't much room in here." I stood up and did my step push to become airborne, then pushed down to stop, since I normally kept floating up. I floated in the air and looked down at them.

Professor Stonewall said, "Thank you, and that is fascinating



Do you mind if I test something?" He pictured pushing me on the shoulder to see if I would move.

"Sure, give it a try. Worst case is that I bump the wall or fall. That would be pretty minor compared to being shot."

He stood and walked around the desk. Then he pushed me gently on the stomach. I didn't try to stand my ground, or air as it were. The push caused me to float gently toward the wall, until I bumped into it. I pushed off the wall and stepped down to float to the ground.

"All right, I can see both of you are wondering if I'm capable of carrying people. I still have about 30 minutes before my next class, since I so rudely interrupted Professor Stonewall's Bio class. Would you both like to have a short flight over the city? Individually, of course."

Their imaginations ran wild. I grabbed my blouse and put it back on. I said, "I'm not going to promise to fly everyone in the department or something. I might, but I won't promise."

Professor Stonewall asked, "You **are** offering to go outside right now and actually fly us over the city?"

"Yes."

"Wow, thank you."

"I can say what it's like, but until you do it, it's just not the same."

"Don't we have to worry about our clothes, or wear goggles due to the wind?"

"No, something about my flight keeps it easy to breathe and reduces the wind shear a huge amount. It still gets cold, and the air becomes harder to breathe high up, so I won't go too far up."

I walked with them out to a lesser used door. I said, "Who's older?"

Professor Stonewall said, "I believe I am, why?"

"Then I'll fly you first." I put my arm around his waist and hugged him, then smiled and winked at him. He got the look I had been seeing on people when they first get close to me. He couldn't resist leaning down and smelling my hair deeply. I closed my eyes and simply enjoyed his sensation. "Ready?"

He leaned back and looked at my face. "Ah, how should I hold onto you?" He attempted to think of ways to do it without facing harassment possibilities.

*I could be nice ... nah. Besides, I enjoy being held.* "You'd better put your arms around my waist."

He glanced around nervously. He very much didn't want to be seen holding a student in such a way. He did do it though. I grinned

and made sure my left leg was outside his body. Then I step-pushed and we were slowly airborne. I grinned, then jabbed my left knee upward. We shot into the air. His semi-loose grip became a death-hug. I angled us to fly horizontally perhaps twenty stories up.

"I promise I won't drop you, you can let go of me if you'd like, Professor."

"You're certain it's safe?"

"Very."

He let go of me with one arm, and I shifted him slightly so we flew at an angle to each other, letting him have a better look at the city.

He said, "This is beautiful."

I smiled, "You ready for stage two?"

"Stage two?"

I grinned. Then I jabbed my knee in the air again and kept it up so our speed climbed. The ground soon zipped by under us at hundreds of miles per hour.

He asked, "Are you all right? You're shaking."

I answered through gritted teeth, "I'm pushing our speed up, or trying to."

Finally, I felt a rush of tingling down my spine, and our speed greatly increased. Then we dimly felt the boom, and we were flying faster than the sound barrier. We reached the outermost limits of the city in minutes, and I curved us around the outside of the city. I angled us up to be well away from the city before I dropped our speed, then slowed us down and took an angled route back toward the University at a slower pace.

After about ten minutes, I landed us by the building. I slowed down near the top of the building rather than risk coming in too fast with a passenger. We gently stepped to the ground.

He hugged me and said, "That was unbelievable. Thank you for sharing it."

I returned the hug. "My pleasure."

"You should make sure not to fly too low at Mach One, or angle downward, so as to avoid breaking windows and injuring people's eardrums."

I nodded.

I did the same with Professor Gently. The flight went smoothly, and I was able to hit Mach one easier that time. He was far more excited about the mechanics of the flight. How I sped up, slowed down, and changed direction.

We landed, and he also gave me a hug.

I glanced at my watch. "I have to get to my next class or I'll be

late.”

Professor Gently said, “That’s my class you’re in.”

“Oh, right.”

“Walk with me.”

“Okay. I don’t know if I can go into the classroom though, unless everyone happens to sit at the very front. Like that’ll happen.”

“That’s fine. Class won’t begin until I arrive, no matter what though.”

Professor Stonewall said, “Thank you again for flying me. I’ll try to think of other solutions to your unique problem in classrooms.”

“Thanks, Professor Stonewall.”

We all headed back into the building. Professor Gently and I stopped by his office to gather his class gear, and I grabbed my backpack from Professor Stonewall’s office. Then we walked to DNA class together.

I asked, “So are you really going to look into the study group course or lab work?”

“Yes, I am. I’ll setup a meeting with the head of genetics, Dr. Dehart this afternoon as soon as possible.”

We arrived at class, and sure enough, everyone had spread out as usual. I sighed. There was no classroom behind this one, so I couldn’t try that trick.

I couldn’t avoid sounding depressed. “I’ll sit out here.”

He squeezed my shoulder and said, “I’m sorry. Would you like a chair from the room at least?”

“No, thank you. It doesn’t seem to bother me to sit for a long time. Probably the healing preventing soreness in the muscle or something.”

“I’ll see you after class, or on Wednesday before class then. It’ll take a few days to get the course passed through, even if everyone is excited about it up through the Dean level.”

“Okay, thanks for that.”

“No, thank you. It’s an exciting prospect.”

He walked into the classroom then, and I walked around until I received his and a few student’s mindviews, then sat down along the wall and pulled out my materials. The class didn’t go badly, in fact. Keeping the professor in a mindview allowed me to gain the material directly from the source, while still seeing the whiteboard and projector.

With the mindview of Professor Gently, at the end of class I was able to dig into a few of the topics he had been talking about, but didn’t actually give all the details on in class. I was still writing notes when the swarm of mindviews and mental chatter clouded my vision and hearing.

Then, I heard Professor Gently say, "Most students are finished taking notes by the time I'm done talking, Stephanie."

I replied, "I pulled a little more info from you that you didn't mention in class. Sorry, but you didn't cover everything in full depth." I grinned and looked up to see both Professor Gently and Megan standing there.

She said, "Hi, Steph. What are you talking about? You just missed class."

*Doh.* "I, ah, listened from out here. I'm still having problems in groups that large."

Professor Gently said, "Well, I'm glad you found it worth more attention." He thought it was somewhat disturbing just to 'pull more information' about something from someone though.

I replied to his unvoiced question, "But wouldn't you have, if you could have in school? Why do worse than possible only because some of the lesson isn't taught?"

He sighed, "True, true. I probably would have as well. It's just a little unnerving thinking that someone can do that. Listen, I need to catch Dr. Dehart before he runs off to a late lunch or some such, you two have a good afternoon." He rushed off.

Megan looked at me oddly. "So ... what was **that**? I feel like I just missed part of a conversation."

"You kind of did. We talked before class along with Professor Stonewall about my problem with classrooms now."

"Uh huh. Yeah. And what did they say?"

"They are okay with me sitting outside the classroom and taking notes so long as it doesn't affect my exams or papers." *Yeah, yeah, I'm on a roll! Who needs a stinky old writing team to give me creative ideas?*

"Well, that sounds kind of bull. Not that they'd mind if you scored well and turned in papers, but just not sitting in the classroom? Sounds odd to me."

"I know, I know. Can I not get the first degree for this? Please?"

"All right, fine. I skipped lunch, so do you want to do a mid-afternoon lunch?"

I nodded, finished packing up my books and notepad and we headed toward the cafeteria. My steps slowed as I realized where our next stop would be. "Oh, no."

"What now?"

"I can't go back in the cafeteria at lunch; it was horrible even at breakfast time."

"Are you serious? We always stop there before going to our study group."

I started walking again, though I believe my heart rate had doubled. "Okay, how about this idea. Can I give you money to get me a large sandwich and water, and we eat in one of the alcoves down the hall? I'm famished; I don't think I can skip lunch."

"Yeah, I will. You know, if you weren't my friend, I'd be really pissed off at you right now."

"I appreciate that. Some things are really hard on me right now. I need all the friends I can get." I hugged her.

After the hug, her thoughts locked onto wondering if I was trying a new herbal supplement that caused the scent. She noted that my breath even smelled that way, and that could only happen by something internal to the body, unless I was strange enough to gargle perfume.

I stayed outside the cafeteria, while Megan went inside. Mindviews from passerby appeared and disappeared quickly. Megan finally bought our lunches and came back out. We moved a few corridors away to a hallway with study areas on each side that wasn't busy with students.

She said, "Some people are mentioning in there that a super flew in and out of campus a few times today. Pretty exciting, huh?"

"Yeah, what do you suppose he was here for?" *Claiming I saw Bigfoot wouldn't hurt either...*

"Dunno. Do you think he might be working with the genetics people? They said the super was headed that way."

I kept my eyes on my food. "I ... suppose that's possible. Maybe we'll have a guest speaker or something."

"Wow, that's a really cool idea! Oh, we need to swing by a copier if you want direct copies of my notes from the short Bio class this morning. Otherwise, you can borrow my notebook."

"I saw enough from outside class, I think. Like you said, there wasn't much to lose out on."

"So, tell me where you had your hair done. I've never seen gold like this as a color before."

*Hmm, I think I'll just stick with the actual places I go, and hope she doesn't try it.* "I go to Lady K's."

"You aren't too excited to talk about this, are you?"

"Not really."

"That's really strange, Stephanie. If you don't cough up some information, I'm going to agree with Professor Pomplun and have a counselor talk with you. You're definitely depressed about something if you get your hair done, and won't even talk much about it. I can tell you want to talk, but seem to be holding back. Wait a second; did someone threaten you if you talked about something?"

*“No, that's not it.” How depressing to not be able to chat with a girlfriend about normal things. I love the new hair color and style! If I mention much about it, it might give away what happened. There's no good story for the eyes, you have to order contacts. They don't exactly have colored ones in stock for all prescriptions, I'd think. Even the scent, if I knew of a brand, I could jabber about it, but nooo...*

It turned out to be a boring meal. She kept thinking about prying into my problem or the changes, and yet she had gotten such lackluster responses that she stopped asking. I was depressed about being unable to talk about things without everyone at school knowing I'm a super.

We marched toward the library to meet with the study group when my phone rang.

I answered, “Hello?”

Lance said, “Hi Steph, I’ve got the location. They just brought some people in. I think we should hit this place during the day, it’s already been a day and a half since they captured the mutants.”

“You want to do it now?”

“Ideally, yes. By the way, Rael replaced his cell phone over lunch; he’s on his way here.”

“Where’s here?”

“Ah, the corner of Commons and Stone streets. There is a bunch of warehouses in a huge facility. They are numbered, just fly in and look for my yellow and red on the rooftop of one of them.”

“It’s an emergency?”

“What do you think? They have a bunch of innocent victims and want to force others to become cannibals. That’s not cool.”

“I’ll be there as soon as possible.”

“Great. We’ll be waiting.”

I looked at Megan, “I have to go. Will you apologize to the study group for me?”

She replied, “Sure.” From the perfectly centered mindview of my face during the entire phone call, I knew she’d been watching me, studying me to try and figure out what was going on.

“Listen, I’m really, really sorry I’ve been out of it this morning. Thank you for being here for me.”

She brightened up a little. “It’s what friends are for. I still think you are holding out on me though.” She pouted at me to make me feel guiltier.

“I ... yeah. Hopefully I’ll figure out a way to talk about it and explain things to you soon.” I hugged her, kissed her on the cheek and ran to the nearest exit.

## Chapter 36 – More Food

### Third Person Perspective

Shrinker sat in the warehouse, some dozen feet above the floor on the edge of metal racks meant to hold pallets and boxes. The warehouse stood empty of freight, having been unused for some time. It was alive with new activity, as her mutants finished their preparations.

A pair of cages stood to her far right. New, unturned mutants waited in it. A group of her minions stood guard over them. Soon they would be free of the cages, once they'd tasted blood and their allegiance was solely to Shrinker. Most of them looked very human. A few wore normal street clothes, quite different from the leathers, skull and spike jewelry, and heavy tattoos her mutants sported. The rest of the new mutants still wore the garb from the hospital.

She hoped most would change more radically after the blood. Her people stopped several fights between some of them in the last few hours. They hadn't eaten in some time, and were about ready to attack anything – or anyone – for food. They would soon be ready to be forced into a cage with a human, one at a time.

The screech of metal brought her out of her reverie. She looked to her left, as Kralgon bent the last bars of the second “food cage” into place. The cages were a mishmash of bars bent and wrapped around each other rather than welded together. Kralgon's bricklike strength came in useful for the building of the cages. She now had room to keep another score of captives if she didn't mind them being crammed in close. She didn't.

Humans, Shrinker hated them. They were weak, fearful, and relied on others to fight for them. Once the heroes were eliminated, the humans with weapons would be of little danger to a force of mutants. Kralgon alone could destroy a garrison of army men. Perhaps she'd keep a few of the non-hero metahumans around as pets. Those who would call her Queen.

One of the more average mutants moved around the cage, testing the bars. He failed to break or bend them. If a mutant capable of lifting several thousand pounds were unable to do it, she was sure a normal human would have no chance of escape. He looked back and caught her eye, then nodded. He said something to Kralgon, clapped him on the shoulder and they both laughed darkly.

Several more mutants worked on the new cage top for the pit in

the center of the warehouse. The feeding pit, as Shrinker dubbed it. Kralgon had built the crude cage top that they attached to the ground now, along with a heavy locking mechanism on the other side of the "door." The new mutants needed to know they would be stuck in the pit with a "meat" human until they gave in to their blood thirst.

She hopped off the shelf, and walked toward the van they acquired earlier. "Tim! Kralgon! Vox! With me! The rest of you finish the pit; watch the food and our recruits!"

She wanted this done. Once the new mutants were usable, the entire group would be able to assault the jail and free every mutant there. Her group would grow into an unstoppable force. Not even the Goth mutants in Metrocitey would be a concern to them.

They climbed into their stolen van and drove toward their next location.

Tim asked, "So, when do we hit the jail to free Zen and the others?"

Shrinker replied, "Not for a few days. We need to blood the newbs, get them to change completely. Then, we need to make sure they are loyal to us so we don't get backstabbed during our attack. That or have some of them run off. They still think they are human."

"You figure blooding them will make them loyal to us? Err, to you?"

"Once they realize that they can't go home, that they aren't like the rest of the humans, yeah, I figure they'll turn to our line of thinking."

"Most of 'em won't be into our metal music, or lifestyle, or anything yet though."

"I know. That's a concern, at least for the short term. I think it'll take a few ... examples ... to teach them that their old friends and so-called loved ones are afraid of them now."

"Huh. Well, that shouldn't be hard. People look at most of us and look afraid mighty quick like."

Kralgon chuckled, the deep tones echoed through the van.

Vox asked, "To the theater, right?"

Shrinker said, "Yeah. As before, Kralgon, Tim and I will be outside. Kralgon, you destroy the electrical. Vox, you get a ticket to the biggest show and help usher people to the exit."

Vox nodded. She had already given him instructions on his part. He parked the van just out of the way, behind the theater. "I'll text you in a few, once I find out which theater we'll be coming out of."

Shrinker nodded. She thought it was a good choice. No telephones in the theater and cell phones ought to be turned off or silenced. With a good reason for people to rush into their trap few of



the humans would take the time to make calls until they were outside ... and it would be too late then.

Vox walked around to the entrance, joked with the cashier about what the popular mid-day showing was today, and bought his ticket. As always, his leathers, chains and green spiked hairdo elicited staring from the 'normals.'

He sat at the back of the theater. Even in the dark room, his eyesight was near perfect. He counted the potential victims – fifteen, and sent a text to Shrinker with the number and location of the room's emergency exit.

Shrinker moved the van after receiving the text message, located the wiring coming into the building, and sent Kralgon to rip it apart just before Vox's time.

Vox snuck out fifteen minutes into the start of the movie. When the power cut out, he hit the fire alarm and ran back into the room. The emergency lights went on, and the movie screen black. He shouted, "Everyone to the exit at the front, quickly! That's the fire alarm!"

People whispered, but at his shout, they jumped up and moved to the front of the room. Vox blocked the way of the few people that planned to exit via the normal entrance. He pointed to the far door. They glanced at his appearance, and rather than move past him, they turned and fled to the emergency exit.

Kralgon jogged back to the van. Shrinker had parked it at an angle so it blocked anyone from exiting and moving to the right of the door once outside the entrance. Her team waited for the humans to emerge. The hearing of each of them was good enough to hear the music on the movie stop, listen to the fire alarm, and hear the hubbub of the people coming toward the door. She stood immediately outside the door. Tim stood to her left, by the van. Kralgon stood to her right by the outer wall of the theater.

The door opened and the first pair of humans rushed out. Blocked by the mutants standing in front of them, they stopped for a moment out of confusion. Shrinker quickly grabbed the pair by their arms. Her eyes glowed green from behind the iris, and the people shrunk to a half foot in height. She quickly dropped them into the duffel bag at her side and grabbed the next pair exiting the building.

A few made it past her as she shrunk the next pair. The couple broke into a run as they saw the tattooed monsters standing outside the door. Tim used his long tentacles to lift them off the ground and pull them back to him. Kralgon blocked the rest from going far, slamming his lower right sword-arm into the wall to distract and confuse the people.

As they screamed, others attempted to move back into the theater, but Vox pushed them forward. He appeared human, but his strength was still ten or more times that of a human.

Within a minute, Shrinker had a duffel bag jammed with terrified, tiny humans. People streamed out of the other exits nearby, their exit delayed without having someone to rush them out.

Shrinker and her crew quickly loaded into the van, Kralgon's weight causing it to tilt as he entered and sat down. Vox stepped on the gas, drove onto the grass, and bounced over the curb onto the street. Shrinker began taking the humans out one by one and ridding them of tiny bags, purses, and any cell phones or electronics she could find. One was already on the phone when she picked him up. She snarled at them, her fangs were huge to the tiny people.

She said, "If any of you try making another call. I'll eat you." She didn't feel the need to elaborate on their future role as main course.

Vox said, "Damn it ... hero." He stared at the far left corner of the intersection ahead of them.

Shrinker glanced toward the left where Vox stared. Pedestrians had stopped on the sidewalks in the area and stared at the hero ahead. Hellshock had just dismounted his cycle and stood near the curb. Lightning crackled along his forearms, he thrust his hands forward and a pair of blasts shot out and melted the left pair of tires on the van. Vox lost control of the van, snapping the steering wheel as he yanked it too hard.

The van smashed into the back of a parked car. Vox and Shrinker flew through the windshield. Shrinker protected the bag of food as she landed on another car. Vox hit the street and bounced a few times. Kralgon barely moved in his seat, though the driver seat broke from the force of his left hand and his weight. His massive strength allowed him to stay in place. Tim wrapped his tentacles around the seats and also stayed in the van.

Kralgon growled. "I've had enough of this asshole; he hit me in the hospital too."

He spun and kicked out the back doors of the van. One bounced and narrowly missed hitting pedestrians nearby.

Hellshock already summoned up a lightning ball. Larger and far more powerful than the blasts he used to melt the tires; these were his main form of attack. He used both hands to summon and aim it, and then launched it at Vox as the mutant crawled to his feet. It blast Vox back into the nearest vehicle and scored him with a massive burn mark on his side. He fell to the ground, twitching. Small arcs of electricity leapt over his body.

Tim hopped out of the back of the van behind Kralgon, who

already marched toward the hero. He wrapped a tentacle around a trash receptacle near him and threw it toward Hellshock.

Hellshock saw that the two mutants on the left were down. He recognized Kralgon, and wasn't sure he could take the monster down. He wondered where the kidnap victims were. They had to have a cage or something still inside the van with them. He knew he had to delay them long enough for more heroes to arrive so they could stop Kralgon together. He wished that new brick from their last encounter were here.

Rather than waste time with the mammoth mutant, he decided to remove another from the equation. He had stopped where he did because of the power line running from the ground up along a pole. He grabbed it and forced the electricity out of its normal path into him, and then sent a continuous line of lightning at Tim.

Tim hadn't even been looking at Hellshock when the blast struck. He had turned and wrapped both tentacles around a car. He had planned on throwing it when the lightning struck.

Power to the nearby building went out as it rerouted through Hellshock. In a one on one fight with a villain, he wouldn't have done something to damage the area like this, but versus four mutants, the hero worried that he would be overwhelmed. The massive arc of electricity struck Tim, and the mutant flopped to the ground. Tiny arcs of electricity leapt over his body as he twitched.

Kralgon stood only thirty feet away from Hellshock. Instead of continuing toward the hero, he opened his mouth wide and roared. Waves of force blasted out of his mouth, tearing up the pavement as they moved toward Hellshock.

Hellshock hadn't expected a ranged attack. The shockwave caught him unprepared, and he flew off his feet into his own motorcycle. Kralgon leapt over to him.

Near the van, Shrinker yelled to Kralgon to throw him to her. Once she saw Hellshock's attention move to Kralgon, she crawled out of the car's windshield and move to the curb. She placed her hand on a telephone pole, and it quickly shrunk to the size of a bat in her hand. A flick of her wrist caused it to snap off near the base. Kralgon grinned, grabbed the hero by his leg, spun and threw him toward her.

She swung her makeshift bat, and near the end of her swing, the pole returned to its normal size, smashing into Hellshock mid-air. He flew back across the street into another car.

A beat officer caught sight of the attack from down the street. After a rapid radio-in of the location and what occurred, he ran toward the mutants. He stopped nearby and shot rapidly at Kralgon. The bullets bounced off his chitinous armor plating. Kralgon glanced at his

shoulder, and then at the officer and laughed. His ominous, booming laughter echoed in the streets.

Kralgon walked toward where Hellshock slowly moved, when he heard Shrinker. “Get Tim, and then get back to base! We aren’t here for fun!”

Kralgon looked at her, then at Hellshock and sighed. He never got to have fun. They weren’t in any danger here. One weak super hero and a cop, big deal.

Shrinker dropped the pole, stepped over to Vox, and then used her power on him, reducing him to toy size; she then fled into the nearest alley.

Kralgon turned and marched at the officer. It wasn’t too much out of his way to squash this gnat.

Hellshock crawled to a knee. He had a few broken bones, of that he was certain. He saw Kralgon turn toward the officer and began summoning a lightning ball. Electricity coursed down each arm into the spherical shape between his hands. It quickly grew to the size of a basketball, and he twisted his palms toward the mutant.

The ball leapt toward Kralgon, striking him in the back. His muscles locked up for a number of seconds before he could move them again. He shook his body after the effect wore off and growled at Hellshock. He cursed, grabbed the car next to him and threw it at the hero.

The car landed on Hellshock, smashed him to the ground as it bounced off him, and bounced twice more past him. Kralgon laughed and jogged over to Tim, who was unconscious. He grabbed him around the torso with his two right limbs, and then leapt up to the nearest building top.

He had no problems leaping a fifty feet at a time, and quickly moved away from the trouble scene.

## Chapter 37 – In Search of Mutants

### Lance's Perspective

I started the day normal enough, though I added an extra egg to my breakfast. I had to treat everything as though it were very fragile. I could feel everything I touched, yet it all felt so ... flimsy. I mentally thanked Rael for picking up plastic plates and glasses rather than glass or ceramic.

As I ate, I squeezed my hands and arms. The muscle deformed as it always had for me. *Why did Stephanie say I felt like rock or steel?*

I debated going to the gym, but knew that none of the weights would push me at this point. The thought made me sad. I very much enjoyed testing my limits in the gym. My body against the weights in a daily struggle. I'd have to find a new way to push myself, now that I'd changed.

I costumed up, grabbed a pair of binoculars, and left the house in search of the fish market and warehouse district. While the city had numerous warehouse districts all around the city, the fish market could only be down by the river.

Jumping was a real joy, so long as I avoided the extremely long jumps. I had a few close calls where I almost leaped directly into a building. I wasn't afraid of getting hurt, but really didn't want to damage anyone's property. That shortened my average jump by quite a bit. I didn't want to fly through some office window and have to explain that one. At least I got used to landing on my feet without thinking too much about it.

While hopping toward the river section, I landed on a rooftop and spotted some women down at street level loading a moving van. They were having problems with a table. I jumped down off the roof and landed about fifty feet away, and then walked over to them.

When I was close, I called out, "Hi, you ladies need some help with the heavy stuff? I can spare a few minutes."

They looked me up and down, looked at each other, and grinned. One of them gave an enthusiastic, "Heck yeah!"

I made sure to watch my grip on items so I wouldn't crush them. I began to fear that my nickname would become Smasher or some such if I kept destroying items. I discovered that moving large items when they all felt like big Styrofoam items was easy.

One of the girls asked, "So, what's your name?"

“I’m Spartan. I’m sorry; I should have introduced myself right away.”

One said, “I’m Kirra, this is Trina. What do you do?”

“I just joined the city’s H.E.R.O. program. It’s kind of a job, I guess. Not like a nine to five thing though. Anyway, I try to save people and stop criminals.”

“And you just stop and help people move?”

“I didn’t see any guys here to help you. I figured I’d help.”

“They are supposed to show up later today. We were going to load all the smaller boxes first.”

“Well, you can take it easy now, and have the guys help with the smaller stuff too.”

I carried an armoire out the front door when something flashed from my left. I glanced that way, and saw a pair of women. One had a camera and snapped pictures. She had a large, professional looking camera. The other had a notepad.

I placed the armoire in the moving van, and the woman with the notepad asked me, “Hi, I’m Jessica Angel with the Metro Times. Are you Spartan, and what are you doing here?”

I stopped for a moment. “Yes I am, and I’m helping these ladies move their heavy items out of the house.”

“Was there a crime here?”

“No. They just looked like they could use the help.”

“You aren’t being paid to be here?”

“No. Why would I be?”

“Do you know the women?”

“We just met when I stopped to help them.”

“Do you often do this?”

“I’ve never seen anyone in the middle of a move that lacked a crew of guys to help out. So I stopped. Is that unusual?”

“Generally, yes.”

“Oh, well, perhaps I can help make it normal then. I’m sorry, Ms. Angel, but I’d really like to help the ladies finish with the big items. I need to find some criminals I’m hunting for this morning.”

“You need to find them? How do you plan to locate them?”

“I know an old building that is next to their hideout. If I can find that, I find them.”

“I’ll make you a deal, Spartan. If you give me an exclusive on the story, I’ll find that building for you.”

“Really? That’d be great.”

“Sure. What’s the building, and how can I get in touch with you for the location?”

“The building is an old fish market. It’s down in a warehouse

district near the river, but it's been closed down for who knows how long." I gave her my cell number to call me with the location and shook her hand.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to finish helping the ladies..."

"Thank you, Spartan. I'll give you a call shortly. Are you planning on capturing them today?"

"The sooner the better. We believe they are kidnapping people, so it's a high priority for me."

"I'll head back to the Times and hit the research room now. By the way, if you figure that people are in danger soon, does it make sense to take time out to help people move?"

"Uhh. Good point, I hadn't thought about that, just figured I could help someone. Awesome on the help, thank you for that." I held out my hand to shake the photographer's hand. She shook it after glancing at the reporter.

The photographer asked, "Mind if I take a picture of our hands next to each other? I've never seen such large hands."

"Sure." I held out my left hand, she put hers next to it and snapped some pictures. My thumb tip to pinkie tip was at least double the width of hers.

"Thank you."

The reporter said, "We'll hopefully see you soon, Spartan."

"You too. Take care."

*Wow, this is the best job ever. I have enough extra time in the day to help people with things like moving, and the news people are actually nice. This super thing rocks. Injuries even heal fast. Apart from breaking some things, like my formerly awesome mustang, it couldn't go too much better. I'd best finish up here quickly though, Jessica's right. I'm possibly endangering lives here.*

I returned to helping the girls move the last of the large items. It took very little time without the normal fight one put up with against large items. When finished, they asked to take some pictures with me. *All right, fine, I can ham it up with the girls. Woot!* We took a number of them, and I bid them goodbye before leaping to the rooftops again.

It took me a minute or two to hop to the river district. The jumping had become almost natural to me, even after such a brief break-in period. A slight push-off of the calf, and I cleared a street to go from one building to the next. The thighs were only involved in the larger jumps. I wondered if a normal person standing on Mars, or perhaps the Moon would have the same effect. I knew I weighed more than I did before, and gravity still seemed to affect me the same, so I fell rapidly. Before the change, I'd have to cushion a shorter fall with both legs, or a longer fall with a tuck and roll to avoid directly

absorbing the impact on my body. Now my body just seemed so strong that I could take the full brunt of the impact up my legs without any negative effects. Well, unless I was off balance or missed my footing, that is. Getting the distance correct was my only challenge at this point.

I wandered from building to building, looking for the buildings Stephanie described. So many of them looked the same, I couldn't find any that stood out. I got frustrated. Why couldn't the villains just come out and fight? That'd be more honorable. Too much to expect of people who busted into a hospital and murdered others who were unconscious and couldn't defend themselves, I guessed.

It struck me after about half an hour that a general all points bulletin would be out on the mutants from the hospital event, but I didn't have a H.E.R.O. phone on me to respond if any were spotted.

I stopped and called the H.E.R.O. headquarters. I asked for Captain McCain. He picked up after a moment.

"Captain McCain here."

I said, "Hi, Captain, this is Spartan. I'm calling to see if I can get my own official H.E.R.O. phone and if there is anything left to finish up on paperwork. Agent Carson said he entered me into the system."

"Sure. I'm just catching up on all the paperwork from the meteor shower over the weekend, so head on over."

"Thank you, sir." He hung up.

Thanks to Mom's pushing, I already knew where the headquarters was located, in the far northeast of Metrocity. I leaped there quickly, routing my path through the massive river district one last time to see if I could get lucky on spotting the market. Nothing stood out to me.

The H.E.R.O. parking lot had few cars in it. The entrance to the building consisted of a huge arch, with dual pillars on each side. A massive bas-relief of a shield was attached to the building to the left of the entrance. Wide steps led up to the entrance, with smooth ramps on each side. Statues lined the way.

The entrance chamber itself looked impressive, with a glossy stone checkerboard floor, pillars around the edges, and pictures of H.E.R.O.s I recognized from the news over the years hung on the walls.

The receptionist greeted me and sent me to Captain McCain's office. His door was open, so I knocked very gently on the frame.

He looked up from paperwork in front of him and stood up. "Hello, Spartan. I'm glad to see you joining H.E.R.O." He held out his hand to shake mine, and we had a firm handshake.

"I'm glad too, sir."



"It's nice to be able to really shake hands with someone. Most heroes stop shaking hands entirely."

"I hope to never see that day for me, Captain."

"I agree, keep it up. Just don't crush any hands, please."

"Of course not. Speaking of, how is your hand doing?"

"It's fine now. You've got quite the strength boost. If you don't mind the extra cost, I grabbed a Brick edition of the H.E.R.O. phone. It's built with an alloy case to prevent you from crushing it if distracted."

I pulled out my old cell phone. "Wow, you rock. I've already cracked my personal cell."

He held the phone out to me. "Here you go. It's already tied to your profile in the system. Agent Carson did set you up, in fact. I just need either banking information so you can be paid, or you can have it applied into a H.E.R.O. account. Your H.E.R.O. card will act as a debit card. Here is your official card, by the way."

He handed me an official looking card with my picture in costume, hero name, and official status.

"Wow, this is awesome. Thank you. Hey, how did you get a picture of me in costume?"

"When Dr. Turnquist contacted us to determine if you were in the H.E.R.O. program, we requested costumed pictures back from her."

"Nice. Is there any reason to keep money in a H.E.R.O. account?"

"Yes. Do you really want to pull out a personal credit card when you are in costume and want to buy something?"

"Well, no. And vice versa, I suppose. Can I put seventy percent to my bank account and leave thirty percent in a H.E.R.O. account?"

"Sure. Here are the forms for the bank information. It'll be moved today, although the full amount is in your H.E.R.O. account right now."

"Can I ask how much I have so far?"

"Of course. You can pull up the current balance by punching in your pin on a screen on the cell phone, just write one on this form and I'll enter it now. You can change it online. You currently have fifteen thousand dollars from scenes you have been involved in. I already deducted the two thousand for the brick phone. By the way, it's a secure phone, if the topic ever comes up. Also, it's subsidized by the H.E.R.O. program. Please don't crush it; it would cost several thousand above that to replace out of your own account."

"Holy cow!"

He smiled. "I told you the commission is good. Stay busy

helping the city and you'll be rewarded. Now, you still need to fill in a few things on these forms, and sign the places I've put an X by. Then you're set."

I quickly filled out the information. I noted that his pen felt ... solid. I shook it, then gently squeezed. It had a squishy exterior, but didn't feel like a normal pen.

"What kind of pen is this?"

He smiled. "Go to Big & Strong, down on Capital Street. It's more expensive than most stores, but they cater to the super community. I'd spoil it, but if you haven't been in there it's a pleasant surprise. Their office section sells heavy duty pens like this."

"Awesome. I'll check it out after this mutant problem is resolved."

"I've got an email from Agent Carson saying that your team is making good progress. Where are you at now?"

"Psystar pulled out some information on where the mutants are hiding out. It's an old warehouse, but there isn't an address. I've got someone looking into the location now for me. The mutants plan, or planned, on kidnapping people to force the bloodthirst on the new mutants. As soon as I get the location, I'll go scout it from the rooftops. Then I'll call in Psystar and Black Tiger to take it down. I did promise that I'd call Agent Carson before we go in."

"You have someone working on it? What does that mean?"

"Uhh, I met a reporter. She offered to hunt it down for me in return for a story."

"Hmm." He looked thoughtful for a moment, and then shrugged. "I suppose if it gets the job done, lives saved, etc. Which reporter? I hope it's not a rumor mag."

"Jessica Angel and her photographer."

"Ah, she's reputable. She's a go-getter, I've heard she does most of her reporting on the street."

"Ok, is that a good thing?"

"I just mean that she's not afraid to get herself in dangerous situations to get a story." His eyes flicked to my utility belt, where I'd put the new H.E.R.O. phone, then to the pouch with my own cell phone. His eyes narrowed and he said, "How did she plan to contact you, you don't have the phone I lent your team, and didn't have your new one yet."

*Rub rob.* "I, ah, gave her my personal cell number."

"Well, you'd best **hope** she's reputable now. With that number, and her resources, I'm sure she can find your name and home address."

"I suppose."

He suddenly laughed. "You certainly can't get out of giving a

story now, can you? She'll show up at your door until she gets it."

"Maybe that wasn't my best idea..."

"Don't beat yourself up over it for now. Hopefully, she'll find the mutant hideout and help us all."

"Yes, sir. I can't wait to go and bash some criminal heads for murdering those people at the hospital."

"Spartan, you saw how many mutants they brought to the hospital. I'm hoping we caught a good number of them, but there's an unknown number out there. Don't go in brashly. Also, I've already got reports of missing persons. I believe these mutants working with Shrinker are behind it. Also, just a little while ago a call went out from a theater about mutants kidnapping people in a flower shop van. Hellshock answered the call. I've not heard the result yet."

"Peoples' lives are at stake, Captain. As soon as we can, we need to get in there and save them."

"I agree. What I mean, is to call in extra support if it looks too big."

"Ah, okay."

"This is it for the paperwork. You're official now. You've got your phone. I'm satisfied with the courses I see on your record on Law Enforcement, and linked them in your file. You mentioned you had a parent that is a super?"

"Right, my mother, though she's not in the H.E.R.O. program."

"She obviously had some good insight on your future. You should thank her. Hell, I'd like to thank her. Now, go do some good." He waved toward the door.

"Yes, sir. Thank you for setting this up so quickly."

"Glad to have extra heroes in Metrocity. Make sure to stay a hero. Too many get it in their head that the city and people owe them, and become snobbish. I'd like to see that kind of attitude changed."

I nodded. "Will do. I'm off to search for the mutants again." I reached his door before it struck me. "Captain, Hellshock just answered a call for something these mutants did?"

"Yes. Perhaps 5 minutes ago. I take it one of the others had the H.E.R.O. phone I gave you?"

"Yeah. Will old events and locations show up on my new phone?"

"They will. Look under events in progress."

I pulled the phone out of my utility belt and played with the menus on the phone until I found the event and where it occurred. "I think I'll jump there first. Maybe I'll get lucky and capture a mutant."

Captain McCain smiled, "Excellent thinking. Take care, Spartan."

I stepped back over to him, shook his hand and left H.E.R.O. headquarters. *I'm officially a H.E.R.O. now! Yeah, baby!*

Outside the building, I took a moment to determine where the event was in relation to my current location. Then, I leapt toward it. It took me a few minutes to arrive. From a nearby building top, it was easy to spot. Fire engines and police cars blocked off the area, their lights highlighted the trouble intersection.

A crowd stood around the outer perimeter of the intersection, so I walked to the nearest building top, and then hopped down into an area clear of people and debris. A car lay on its side against a building to my left, a telephone and utility pole lay in the street not far from it. A few cars had odd burn marks in them, as did some of the blacktop.

A group of people stood to the left side as well. One of the officers noticed me, and called out, "Hey you, hero!" It was obvious he spoke to me.

I walked over to them, and then noticed Hellshock in the center of the group. I recognized the cycle lying on its side as his from various news clips. I said, "Greetings, guys."

Hellshock looked toward me. Like me, he wore colored goggles, so I couldn't see his eyes. His red and black costume, with white lightning bolts had a few tears in it. The hero favored his right arm, holding it against his side.

He said, "Oh, sure. Now you arrive. I wish you'd been here ten minutes ago when that huge mutant was here."

I replied, "Sorry about that. I just picked up my H.E.R.O. phone. What happened?"

He said, "Four mutants. A female, the huge four armed guy, one with tentacle arms, and the last looked pretty human. I'm assuming he's a mutant and not a blaster or psychic."

I nodded. They seemed to be collecting mutants, not other types of supers. "There was a kidnapping?"

"Yeah, people called it in from outside a theater. The power went out and a fire alarm went on. I didn't see any people though. The mutants were driving that van over there." He pointed with his left arm. The tears in the costume were more numerous on it.

Several officers were in the midst of investigating the flower shop van already. It was obvious that no people had been found.

Hellshock said, "I think the female is the one they call Shriner. She did have a duffle bag. Perhaps she shrunk the people and put them into it. She was definitely more interested in getting away than fighting me. With the monster here, I couldn't stop them all."

I said, "Dang. That bugs me. If I'd just gotten my phone earlier I could have helped."

"Don't berate yourself over it. Do what you can to help. You won't be able to get to every crime scene on time."

"I'm hoping to find their lair. My team will go after them."

"Call me if you need help. Here." He took out his phone with his left hand and quickly navigated the screen. In a moment, my phone beeped. I took it out and saw a friend request by Hellshock. I glanced at him and grinned, then clicked the accept button.

He said, "That'll make me a bit easier to find in the hero list and call for aid."

"Very cool. Thanks, dude."

"Lemme finish up here and I'm going to rest a few hours. Call me if you need to, Spartan."

I nodded. There was nothing left for me to do here, so I decided to continue my search.

After jumping up to the nearest building top, I leaped to the river section of the city, and renewed my search for warehouses. Perching on one of the twenty-plus story buildings near the river, gave me a good overview of building types. I almost wished I'd gone for a cape with the costume. It would have looked much cooler, perching on a rooftop while the cape billowed in the wind.

Unfortunately, Metrocity spanned about twenty miles along the river, which meant a huge amount of riverside cityscape to examine. *I'm reasonably certain that only the inner ten miles or so will be for businesses like that though. That's still a huge number of buildings. I hope Jessica Angel has more luck.*

I searched, but couldn't locate a specific fish market or warehouse from the hundreds spread around the river. *I wish I'd been able to see what Stephanie saw.*

Around 1 P.M., my phone rang. I answered it, "Hello?"

"Spartan?"

"Yes."

"This is Jessica Angel, Metro Times. I've got your location."

"Great!"

"You want the corner of Commons and Stone street. The fish market is connected to Commons. Your warehouse ought to be in that block."

"Thank you. I'll head over and scout it out. You want me to call you after we're done for the story? It'll probably be a few hours before we try anything."

"I'd appreciate that. I'll wait for the call then. Spartan, don't forget about me. I'd really prefer knowing before you go in so we can get some pictures right after you are complete."

"I won't forget, and thanks again." We said our goodbyes and

hung up. *Yes! Things are moving along. Now to go see what the bad guys are up to.*

I looked up the location on the new cell phone, and then leaped toward it.

I found the address after some searching, and watched it with the binoculars from a building top some distance away. A gray van with darkened windows pulled up to the building shortly before long, the garage door to the warehouse opened and it drove in.

My old phone rang. It was Rael, but I thought he'd lost his phone. "Hello?"

"Lance? This is Rael. I just wanted you to know that I picked up a replacement cell phone."

"That's great news! By the way, with the five or so events I've been involved in; my rewards so far totaled **fifteen** thousand dollars. Dude, we so don't need a day job. Not that I'll leave Score!"

"Kick ass. This carpenter gig's even easier than it was before now though. Everything is so light it's easy to move wood pieces. The only thing really rough is hiding the eyes. I'm getting a lot of shit from the guys about wearing sunglasses all morning."

"Well, now you have an option to do heroing full time."

"Yeah, even a grand a day would be pretty crazy. You were involved in extra events though, and they may count more for you for the train scene. I would have given you more credit than me, if I were Agent Carson."

"Humph. You'll want to get down to H.E.R.O. HQ to finish your paperwork, get your phone and get paid. I've found the warehouse, by the way. I've been watching it for a while. A large gray van with darkened windows entered a little while ago. I'm guessing with more normal kidnap victims. I think we should hit the place now."

"I agree. Give me your location and I'll head there. You want to call Steph?"

"Sure."

I called Stephanie's cell phone and filled her in. She must have been with someone, for she acted strange during the call.

## Chapter 38 – Preparing for Assault

### Rael's Viewpoint

I was fortunate that I'd kept my new makeshift staff in the car with me. I called my foreman and let him know I couldn't make it back for the afternoon. He got pissed off at me. *Ah well, I hope he doesn't push me to quit.*

I drove to the address Lance gave me, parked a short distance away, and then snuck up to a nearby warehouse with my staff. A hard leap and I was on top of it. It took me a minute of jogging around it to spot Lance and Stephanie crouched on another warehouse. The warehouses weren't close enough to leap from one to another, so I hopped down, jogged to one side of their building and leapt up onto the rooftop, then ran over to them.

Lance nodded to me as I arrived. Stephanie smiled at me.

*I wonder if just Lance and I should enter the warehouse. Stephanie skin isn't armored, and she has no physical attack skills.* She looked up at my face, her eyes were narrowed and lips pursed. *Shit, forgot about the mind thing. Sorry Steph.*

I said, "I don't want to exclude you. I just want you safe. If there are a group of mutants all fighting, I'm not sure the way you take out mutants will work. You have to be up close, and every time so far the mutant has been held down by somebody else. Plus, you seem to fall unconscious every time you do some kind of heavy mental work."

She sighed, "I know. I can project fear though. If I start that before going in, we might have an edge. You and Lance alone will be in a lot of danger if you have to face half a dozen mutants. On top of that, I hear people thinking from thirty or forty feet away. That includes behind doorways and walls."

"Good point. I'm used to sparring against several opponents, but these will all have claws, horns, blades and who knows what else. I brought my new staff. I'm hoping to use it to keep a bit of range during the fight so their claws can't come into play."

Lance glanced at it, "You think a tamping bar will hold up to a fight?"

I replied, "I hope it does for at least part of it. It's strong metal, and it will help keep them away from me for a few hits at the least. That's the idea, anyway."

Stephanie placed a call to Agent Carson, letting him know where the location was at, and that we were about to strike. Lance sent a text to someone as she made the call.

I stared at them both. "What the hell? Are you guys tweeting that we're about to go into a fight or something? Put the phones down."

Stephanie put her hand up in the air, palm toward me, and then made another call. "Anne, this is Psystar. I don't know if your duty area includes the warehouses near the river, but if it would help your career out, why don't you come to warehouse 17 in the lot by Commons and Stone street. We're about to raid it to free kidnapped people, supers and whatnot."

I clearly heard Anne speaking on the other side of the phone. Enhanced hearing had its benefits. Anne replied, "Sure, I'll come. Shall I make a call in to H.Q.?"

Stephanie answered, "Not yet, let's make sure the bad guys or people are here first. If you hear the fight start up, you can call it in. I know there are two cages with people being held, plus more with the new mutants, you might be able to help free the normals."

"Awesome, I'll be on my way in a few minutes."

"Oh, Anne? Bring a police shotgun or something heavy duty. These mutants heal fast, some are armored, and even those without armor just don't take the same damage from a pistol shot that a normal person does. Don't even bother with using a pistol."

"Will do. I've got solid slug ammo for my shotgun."

Stephanie said, "From the mutant's memories, the cages they were going to build should be on the north side of the warehouse. The center has the pit, and is mostly open. Crates are stacked up along the south side. The door they use is on the west side. I think we should use a different door."

Lance said, "Let's come in from the rooftop."

"There aren't any windows in the rooftop."

"Bah, every warehouse in comic books has a window on the rooftop. Oh, fine then, east side door."

Stephanie said, "I'll fly us down directly along the wall in case they have sentries, motion sensors or cameras around the building. Agent Carson is on his way, as is Officer Coyle. Hopefully she can help with the non-supers we free in there."

"Good thinking. I sent a message to Hellshock as well. I spoke with him earlier, he'll help."

I rubbed my hands together. *Yeah, this is going to rock. Our team assaulting an unknown warehouse filled with dangerous mutants, other heroes coming in to aid the fight, police showing up. It feels like a first person shooter video*



*game.*

Stephanie said, "You guys need to be ready for a possible blast of fear. I'm going to try to use it on the mutants, but I don't know if I can avoid you. I'll fly to the far side of them, so hopefully the distance will help."

"No, you stay on this side. I'll leap at one or two of them, and Rael can rush past them as well to fight on the far side. I'd rather not have you fly past them; you'll get too much attention. If we bowl into the place and start attacking, they'll focus on us."

"Okay. Spartan, if you get a chance during the fight to just rip a bar or two off the cages with all the non-supers, please do so."

"Hah, you called me by my super name."

"I need to get used to doing it. Not that anyone has slipped so far..."

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"Anne caught it too."

Lance looked at her sheepishly, "I noticed. Sorry."

I said, "Guys, come on, focus on the task at hand. We ready?" They both nodded.

I continued, "Let's do this."

## Chapter 39 – Mutant Warehouse

### Third Person Perspective

Lance thought, *So here we go, probably our biggest fight so far. I don't think I'll need to hold back on my normal punches.*

Stephanie took both of the boys' forearms and flew up. They came down directly vertical by the door they wanted to use.

Lance moved to grab the door handle, but Stephanie moved in his way. She made a face as if she had fangs and were biting, and her hands clawed at the air. Then, she pointed at the door. Lance thought, *Ab, she can hear one of them thinking on the other side of the door.* She nodded at him.

Lance slowly took hold of the door handle, turned it and shoved it inward, hard. The thunking sound of the handle assembly ripping out echoed through the area. The door banged against the right hand wall. Ahead was a lit corridor. A mutant stood backlit in the corridor, leaning against the wall. He looked up in surprise.

Rael stepped forward, whipped up the metal staff and jabbed the sharp end at the mutant's head. The mutant dodged, and the pole caught him on the side of the head. Blood flew as the metal gashed his head.

Lance stepped forward to grab him, but the mutant kicked at his torso. He was much faster than he appeared. The foot slammed into Lance's gut and the hero flew back through the air. While Lance soared back, Rael slammed the staff down on the mutant's arm. There was a loud crunch as the bones in his forearm snapped, and Lance crashed into the wall of the warehouse next door. The concrete crumbled behind him, and he slid to the ground. The kick barely hurt him.

The mutant swung at Rael with his good arm. Rael blocked with the makeshift staff. Stephanie moved at the mutant from the side, her bright white costume distracted him, for Rael landed a direct stab at his head with the dull end of the pole. It cracked into the mutant's head with a sick crunching sound and the mutant collapsed to the floor.

Rael whispered, "Oops, guess it works too well."

Lance caught back up with them and whispered, "Darn it, don't kill them."

Rael shrugged. "He's not dead, I hear his heart beating."

Rael took the lead. Lance followed him, with Stephanie

following behind. It looked like they were in an office area. Doors led off into side rooms. They checked a few; they were offices that had been converted into bedrooms, with multiple beds per room.

Rael walked down the primary corridor until it branched off to the right, as well as continue directly ahead. Stephanie pointed straight ahead. Lance thought, *She's right; that must head toward the main warehouse.* Stephanie nodded her agreement. Rael continued straight.

They heard a piercing scream from ahead and broke into a run. Rael opened the door at the end of the hall; it opened into a large warehouse area. To the far left were metal racks made to hold pallets. They were empty at this time. To the near right sat some pallets with boxes on them. To the far right were several large cages built of metal bars bent and twisted together. Groups of people were in each of them, they looked very afraid. In a pair of cages just to the left, were the kidnapped mutants from the hospital. Most had on hospital garb, though a few wore bloody street clothes.

These new mutants stood pressed against the bars, watching the events in the occupied section of the warehouse.

The main attraction was in the center of the warehouse. A group of mutants stood around a pit, watching some event. Another scream came from the pit. The mutants ruggedly laughed and jostled each other as they watched. The one mutant that stood out was the huge four armed monster from the hospital. About a dozen mutants stood there, including the huge one. These mutants looked set in their lifestyle. Most wore black leather jackets, gloves and boots. All had a variety of tattoos, colored hair, and skull jewelry. It was clear they distanced themselves from normal society.

Lance thought, *Great, this is going to be nasty.*

Rael thought, *This is going to be a fun fight. No way in hell am I going to hold back here.*

Stephanie thought, *This is going to suck, that's too many.*

They stood a good fifty feet away. Lance sprinted toward them, Rael caught up a moment later. Unfortunately, one of the mutants on the far side of the pit spotted them.

Lance leapt at two of the closest. He held his arms out to each side in an attempt to catch them both during the jump and force them ahead with him. Rael sprinted off to the right; he kept up with Lance's jump speed. Lance thought, *Nice.* His left arm caught around a mutant, but he ended up punching the right-hand one in the shoulder. The mutant spun wildly as the left hand mutant and Lance sailed past the rest of the mutants.

They crashed to the floor. Lance rolled up, the mutant didn't

move fast, so Lance grabbed his leg, swung him and threw him as hard as he could at the cages. A resounding clang rang when he crashed into it, and several bars dented in slightly. Several humans in the cage screamed. The mutant fell to the ground, barely moving.

Rael surprised one with a hard metal staff swing to the head, and the mutant fell in a heap. He used the staff to block a clumsy claw swing at him by another mutant and moved past them. Two close mutants moved in at Rael.

Stephanie stayed back a moment, *Fear will make them run around, but we still need to take them down. Confusion might be better to spread, hopefully make them easier for the boys to knock out.* She concentrated on spreading confusion, willing her skin to tingle. She wanted them to attack each other, mentally visualizing them all chaotically attacking their own friends.

Lance looked back toward the larger group. Three more rushed at him. Two had claw hands; one had tentacles instead of arms. The mutant with tentacles had rough, bumpy skin. The most aggressive one was on the left. He took the lead, so Lance charged forward at him and swung a hard body punch. The mutant's claws slashed into Lance's chest, drawing blood, but the claws didn't dig deeply. Lance's punch thudded loudly into the mutant's chest, and he flew into the air and across the warehouse. He went into and through the concrete outer wall. Building material blast out into the parking lot and the mutant disappeared from sight.

The group of mutants in the center watched the two fights in an attempt to decide which opponent would be easier to manhandle. They failed to see Stephanie float up behind them. Her pheromones spread over the group, and they found it hard to remember why they were there, or what was going on. One of the hungrier mutants mistook another near him for prey and leapt on him, clawing and biting at his former ally.

Rael backed up slowly as he fended off the attacks of the two mutants with his staff. They were clumsy opponents. Not that they were not dexterous, but the mutants apparently had little to no combat training, and must have been using their enhanced speed and strength for any fighting to this point. He found an opening and slammed the staff down onto the knee of one of them. The mutant fell, his lower leg lay at an odd angle to the rest of the leg, and he screamed in pain.

The second clawed mutant leapt onto Lance, while the one with tentacles watched. He bit into Lance's shoulder; one hand raked Lance's back. Lance swung his arm outward and flung him away into the metal racks on one side of the warehouse. A portion of the

racking assembly fell apart as the mutant crashed through the support beams. The sound of snarling and growling filled the warehouse.

Stephanie continued floating a few feet in the air; her eyes were barely open as she felt the waves of tingling sensation pulse over her body. She watched as two of the mutants fought each other. The thoughts from the group were jumbled as they couldn't decide on an action to take, or which of the three fights to join in.

Finally, the female shook off the effect. Shrinker grabbed the shoulders of the two mutants attacking one another. Her eyes glowed from within, and they shrunk to the size of action figures. She threw one of them toward Rael, the other toward Lance.

Rael saw two more mutants walking toward him, and went on the offensive against the remaining mutant he faced. The mutant attempted to grab the staff several times, and finally succeeded. Rael moved quickly in toward him, felt an odd tingle surge through his body, and suddenly found himself behind the mutant. He thought, *What the hell was that?* He spun and raked his claws at the mutant's back, scoring a handful of deep gashes down the mutants back. The mutant fell and Rael thought, *Damn, I might have cut his spinal column. Too bad, sucker.* He grabbed the staff and rolled just as a mutant leapt over him.

Rael's staff made a continuous whooshing noise as he swung it around at high speed, only stopping when it banged against one of the mutants. Two currently faced him, one on either side. *Interesting. We mutants obviously have very different traits. Some of these are far slower than I am. I'm guessing that huge four armed monster is a lot stronger.* The mutant with the broken leg crawled toward Rael, bloodlust on his face.

Lance was distracted watching the fast paced fight Rael put up with his group of mutants. He also saw that the huge monster stayed next to the female mutant, and their gaze was focused on him.

He looked away too long, the tentacled mutant grabbed at Lance and wound his left tentacle around Lance's right arm. Tiny protrusions in the tentacle dug into his skin, but failed to tear the skin apart. Lance yanked on the tentacle, pulling the mutant off his feet and close to Lance. The mutant bit at the arm he had wrapped up, but Lance's left fist pounded into his jaw before he chomped on the arm. The mutant attempted to pull back, but the tentacle wound around Lance's right arm too many times. Lance drove his fist into the mutant's jaw several more times before he fell unconscious. The sounds of the blows echoed through the warehouse.

Shrinker screamed, "Kralgon, kill the large one! You three, help on the turncoat!" Unfortunately for her, the three stumbled about. Stephanie's confusion controlled them for the moment.

Lance thought, *Apparently ol' four arm is named Kralgon. Who names*

*their kid that?* He said, “You could just give up now, you know.”

Kralgon laughed a deep toned rough laugh. “I shall rend you limb from limb, fool! Then you make good food.”

Lance replied, “Well, that doesn’t sound very appealing. Is your name really Kralgon? I mean, really? Did your mom name you that?”

Kralgon snarled and said, “I renamed myself when I became more than human.”

“Holy cow, you named **yourself** that? Don’t you have any friends to tell you how dumb it sounds? I mean, you sound like a cleaning product or something.”

“Your throat will make a nice gargling sound, after I cut your head off, hero.”

Lance thought, *Oh, well, insults aside, this just got serious.*

Kralgon took a solid stance, all four arms at his sides and legs apart, and then took a deep breath. Lance leapt off to the side; he recognized the same stance Kralgon had used in the hospital before destroying the hallway with that roar. Kralgon turned his head to lead Lance slightly and let loose the roar. The concrete floor ripped up as the condensed shockwave tore through the air. It hit Lance and blew him back off his feet. It rippled through his body with jarring force, threw Lance about thirty feet away, and Lance had moments of his vision being unclear as he bounced to a stop on the concrete floor.

Rael spun around, fending off claws and bites. The mutants rarely kicked, the few times they did, he easily swept their remaining foot out from under them to knock them over.

Something stabbed at his ankle, and he saw a tiny mutant biting him. He squashed the mutant with the staff, but one of those behind him scored a set of claws down his shoulder blade. The shoulder burned from the tear, he growled in response.

Shrinker stared at her underlings, and realized another party was here. She looked around and spotted Stephanie floating in the air. Shrinker leapt at her, clawing her deeply in the heroine's shoulders and arms. They floated backwards while Shrinker hung onto Stephanie and moved in for a bite. Stephanie lost her focus, breaking the tingling sensation flowing through her. She elbowed Shrinker in the jaw, causing her to drop back to the ground.

Rael spun, and again a momentary flash of blackness and he stood behind a mutant. He continued to spin with the bar and clubbed the mutant from the back of the head, then again with the opposite side of the staff against his tailbone. *They don't have a clue why I'm shifting around like this any more than I do, so I doubt one of them is doing it.*

Lance shook his head in an attempt to clear his vision as he climbed to his feet. He had difficulty obtaining solid footing, with his

inner ear shaken from the vibration. Kralgon ripped the cage top off the floor pit, leaped and swung it down at Lance. Lance's fugue cleared in time to see Kralgon descending toward him. He threw his left arm up and blocked the cage top just in time. It smashed into his arm with jarring force, driving him to one knee, which in turn cracked the concrete underfoot. The bars that struck Lance's arm bent outward.

Lance grabbed a bar with his right hand and tried to force it upward. *This mutant is unbelievably strong; no wonder he could stab through me at the hospital.* Lance dropped down and swung his foot at Kralgon in a leg sweep. The mutant lost his footing and fell backward, releasing the cage top.

Shrinker rolled and grabbed one of the bars used to construct the cages, and leaped back at Stephanie, swinging the bar. Stephanie attempted to dodge sideways, but her floating speed didn't allow the same movements as when she was on the ground. The bar slammed into her side, she flew back and slammed into the metal racking system with her lower back. The impact stunned the heroine, and made her short of breath, it gave Shrinker time to run and leap at her again. Shrinker succeeded at grabbing Stephanie's right shoulder and the left side of her abdomen, and dug her claws into Stephanie's body. The mutant went to bite Stephanie's shoulder and neck, and Stephanie barely grabbed Shrinker's head in time to prevent the bite. Shrinker was significantly stronger than Stephanie was; it took all her strength to fend the mutant's head off, while Shrinker's claws continued to dig into Stephanie's shoulder and side. Blood flowed freely from the heroine's wounds.

The confusion wore off the remaining mutants enough for them to stumble toward Rael and the two mutants on him. One of the two continued to crawl in an attempt to reach Rael, but he moved continuously, to allow himself to face primarily the one standing mutant.

Their heads were only inches apart; Shrinker's mindview of Stephanie was huge. Stephanie mentally grabbed the edges of the mindview and pulled herself in, flying at her best speed to the common place for the memory room. The door was open and visuals floated around the room.

Stephanie summoned up the fire she had seen at the prison, intent on destroying Shrinker's memories in the hopes of ending the fight. She focused and blasted the fire through several memories, then caught sight of a memory where Shrinker used her shrinking power on a mutant at the hospital. *Wait, she's a super. The memory of the change may be potent enough to take her out of the fight.* She flew through the room, watching memories fly past her in search of the one. Stephanie knew

that prior to that memory, Shrinker would have no mutations, and the memories ought to look different.

Her arms bled, and she noticed that blood ran freely down her chest from her neck area. Finally, she came upon the memory, she had her tentacles grab it and fly back to the mindview entrance. She pulled back out through the mindview, and slammed the image of the memory over it.

Stephanie had lost some strength while in Shrinker's mind. Shrinker had closed on her upper shoulder and he tore into it with her fangs when the memory took over her mind. Attaching the memory over the mindview locked Shrinker onto reliving the memory of her change, and she fell off Stephanie to the floor. She flopped and twisted around as though feeling that painful fire rip through her system again. Stephanie blinked a few times with the shock of how much injury she'd sustained, and passed out. Her body floated backward toward the office end of the warehouse.

Lance saw Rael fighting off four mutants. They were practically a blur as the four performed a complex dance to dive in under his staff. Lance yelled, "Rael, jump up!" Then, he threw the cage top horizontally at Rael and his attackers.

None of them leaped up. Rael glanced toward Lance at the sound of his own name and saw the cage top flying through the air toward him. Suddenly, Rael was on Lance's side of the cage as it smashed into two of the mutants with the force of a semi, throwing them across the warehouse and snapping bones where the cage top struck. Rael's opponent count cut in half; he went on the offensive. Howls of pain echoed through the huge chamber.

Kralgon leaped at Lance. Lance met his upper hands, but Kralgon's lower blade arms stabbed into his left thigh and right side of his abdomen. The arm blades bit through Lance's body armor and dense muscles as though they were barely there. Kralgon pulled them out and stabbed again. Lance twisted his torso enough to avoid one of them, but Kralgon's left arm stabbed into the hero's abdomen again. The blade went deep into his torso. Kralgon laughed in anticipation of victory.

Lance released his arms, grabbed the blade hand inside himself with both of his own and snapped the blade off. Lance was rewarded with a close up roar from Kralgon that stunned the hero, and then Kralgon punched him. He flew backward into one of their large vans, toppled it over onto its side and bounced past the van against the outer wall.

Kralgon held up the lower arm stump, staring at the broken blade for a moment. He looked toward Lance and snarled, and then



leaped over the van toward him. Lance swung a kick at Kralgon as he descended. He sliced his remaining blade into Lance's shoulder as Lance's leg connected. The mutant flew hard toward the cages, denting the bars severely inward on one of the human 'food' cages. Lance scrambled to his feet and jumped at the mutant before he pulled himself out of the bars. The hero's flying fist smashed into the mutant's chitinous chest armor just before their bodies crashed together. The bars dented in further. The screams of prisoners tore through the air.

Kralgon pulled his head out from between two bars and appeared ready to roar at Lance again. Lance straightened his fingers and slammed them into the mutant's neck. *Yay for martial arts training!* Kralgon let out a muffled "guh" sound, but the horrible wave of vibration didn't occur.

Lance said, "How about a knuckle sandwich, fugly?" The hero slammed his right fist into the mutant's head several times until Kralgon's remaining blade pierced into his ribs. Lance stumbled backward off the blade.

One of the mutants remaining leaped at Rael. Rael dropped to the ground and kicked, he struck the mutant in the torso, tossing the mutant directly up. Another mutant used the opportunity to dive at the hero, and gashed Rael's leg with a claw. Rael rolled to his feet, saw the mutant falling back to them, and clubbed him with the staff as though it were a long metal bat. The mutant flew back toward the office area and smashed through the wall.

Kralgon coughed and choked out, "I like my meat pre-cut, hero scum." Kralgon climbed out of the bars, stabbing again with the third arm. Lance sidestepped off to the right, and the blade missed, but he grabbed the hero's wrist with his left hand. The mutant twisted and swung Lance off his feet and around Kralgon, and Lance slammed into the cage with many tons of force. It hadn't hurt Lance much, but the bars dented in a foot or more. As Lance fell to the ground, Kralgon grabbed the wrist with his other good hand, and whipped Lance up in the air and back down to slam into the concrete floor. The thick concrete floor snapped with a thunderous crack. Lance put a foot on the ground, twisted and tried to leap while still lying down. It worked; Kralgon bounced behind Lance for thirty feet or so before releasing him.

Adrenaline surged through Lance as he bounced on the ground, and he slammed his fist down into the concrete to halt his sideways leap. It brought Lance to a sudden stop. *Dang, this guy needs to go down soon. I'm worried about the others if I can't stop him. His chitin's good enough to stop most of the damage of my punches.*

Lance grabbed Kralgon's left stump, the force of his fingers cracking the chitin on Kralgon's arm, and then swung the huge mutant. Lance's red goggles glowed slightly orange from the yellow light emitted from his eyes. Yellow fumes flowed off his costume. He threw Kralgon across the warehouse. The mutant smashed through the metal racking system and the outer wall. A ten-foot section of the wall blew outward with the mutant.

The explosive sounds nearby shook Stephanie out of her unconsciousness. She blinked and looked around. Shrinker stood up as she watched, looked around and spotted Stephanie floating in the air. They stared each other in the eye a moment.

Stephanie said, "You like that memory, Shrinker? I'm sure I can dig out something far more amusing to me, or perhaps I should just clean out your memory and force you to be a hero." She hoped she could back up the bravado, but wanted Shrinker to be unsure of what she could do in a fight.

Shrinker snarled, "You couldn't keep me down last time. You're making a mess of my toy soldiers though. And I'll make you pay for doing that to me." She glanced over at the mutants lying on the warehouse floor.

Shrinker leaped at Stephanie again, who in turn jabbed her knee into the air. A moment too late, for Shrinker grabbed her right thigh and dug her claws in. They flew at the concrete outer wall at high speed as Shrinker's eyes glowed. Stephanie tried to project fear in a pheromone, and felt her skin tingle. Too late, the warehouse grew into a massive building a dozen times its former size. The claws slipped out of her leg as she shrank, and then Shrinker hit the wall at a few hundred miles per hour.

The concrete exploded outward and Shrinker tumbled onto the ground outside. Her right arm and ribs had shattered from the impact, and the effects of the pheromone took effect. She looked around and saw two police vehicles approaching the area with their red and blues flashing. Another vehicle was nearby with a man running toward her with a heavy rifle. He shot once from the distance, and a sizable chunk of concrete flew from the ground where it hit. Obviously, these reinforcements knew to use heavy firepower now.

Shrinker took a tiny object out of her pocket and flicked it toward Agent Carson, allowing it to grow back into a full-size wrecking ball. It missed the Agent, but bounced and smashed into a police car, knocking it onto its side. Agent Carson remembered a spree of thefts some months ago of wrecking balls throughout the city, it must have been Shrinker behind them.

The mutant turned and fled from them. She'd noticed that

Kralgon was missing from the warehouse after she recovered from the memory attack. While they still had numbers, it was obvious that just being mutants wasn't enough. The hero mutant in black was too experienced at fighting. She would get her revenge on the heroes another day. Another shotgun blast caught her in the back as she ran, but it wasn't enough to drop the mutant.

Shotgun blasts rang through the warehouse from the far end, near the offices. The mutants Lance had originally thrown were back in the fight against Rael, though he had taken down the two that avoided the thrown cage top. There were too many for Rael to take one completely out of the fight without being swarmed by the others.

Lance looked around, but Stephanie had disappeared. Officer Coyle slowly moved into the warehouse with a shotgun, unloading at one of the mutants from the farther end of the warehouse. She barely hesitated between shots, firing as rapidly as the gas-powered shotgun would fire the slugs.

Next to her stood Hellshock. Still injured from his earlier encounter with the mutants, he summoned electricity along his left arm and blast it at a mutant near the center pit.

Two of the mutants were distracted by the shotgun blasts – one from being hit in the torso. Rael abandoned the staff, and tore into one of the remaining mutants by claw. His claws dug in several inches per strike. The three of them growled like feral animals, fangs bared on all three. Several times his closing move somehow shifted him behind the mutant, allowing him to swipe at the mutant and score deep wounds in its back.

Their occasional sword and claw swipes had torn many gashes in his black costume. Blood flowed from the wounds on Rael's body. All the mutants in Rael's melee moved somewhat slower now due to wounds.

Hellshock continued electrifying mutants near Rael until the hero faced a single enemy mutant.

Power rippled through Lance's system like wildfire. A yellow aurora surrounded him, fumes came through his costume, and the bright light lit up the red goggles from the inside. He looked back at the terrified people and ran to the nearest cage of people intended for food. He grabbed two of the bars and ripped one off the cage. He quickly did the same with the cage next to it. Then he pointed toward the vehicle entrance and yelled, "Run to the garage door and get out of here!"

Stephanie looked around the massive chamber in shock.

Obviously, Shrinker had used the shrinking power on her. Her flight still worked, she hovered in the air near the hole in the wall Shrinker went through.

The outer wall near the racking system burst in, and Kralgon re-entered the warehouse.

Lance muttered to himself, "What, he couldn't have used the hole I knocked him through?" Kralgon grabbed a metal bar from a pile apparently used for making cages and ran toward Lance, growling deeply as he ran. His face was contorted in rage.

Lance waited for him. When he was nearby, the hero slammed his large palms together, causing his own shockwave in front of him. Kralgon stumbled and rolled at Lance. The bar swung in a low arc and smashed against the hero's leg. It bent, but the hero's leg barely moved. It didn't have the mighty rending power the mutant's blades had.

He grabbed at Lance, and the hero's left hand gripped the mutant's right. The reddish glow from Lance's goggles highlighted his face. They swung at each other with their free fists, and the mutant's remaining blade stabbed Lance several times, as they landed punches on each other, until Lance finally grabbed that arm and snapped that blade as well. Kralgon's punches didn't hurt much, but the blade did. Every punch Lance landed on the mutant's armored skin shattered a section of armor and entered the giant's body a few inches.

Stephanie noticed Kralgon smash his way back into the building, and decided that Lance needed assistance more than chasing Shrinker was worth. She pumped her knee up and shot toward them. Lance's shockwave stunned her for a few seconds as she closed on them, delaying her arrival, but she shook it off, flew behind Kralgon, and grabbed his horn.

Kralgon shook violently each time either of them landed a blow on the other. She immediately grabbed the edges of his mindview and flew in. She found the memory center easily, and summoned her ring of fire. She concentrated on making the fire into a blazing inferno around her, and then sent it in a shockwave through his memories. She continued to pour energy into the blast, and an ever-widening explosion tore through the chamber, devastating everything it touched. Stephanie spent a few seconds forcing more and more destruction of the memory chamber. Afterward, she barely had the energy to float back to the mindview opening to exit his mind.

Lance saw spots in his vision. He realized he'd taken a massive amount of damage from the many blade strikes. His torso hurt all over, as well as locations on his legs. He felt soaked, and assumed it was from blood.

He had seen something tiny and white, like a little faerie, fly

behind Kralgon's head as they traded blows. *Since when do faeries exist?* Blood began streaming from Kralgon's nose, eyes and ears of its own accord. Finally, he jerked and stopped stabbing at the hero.

Lance grabbed his shoulder with his left hand, and rained down a series of hard blows on the mutant's face with his right. The booms and cracks from the impacts echoed through the warehouse. Lance felt certain he ruined Kralgon's jaw, at least until it healed in a few days.

Kralgon fell unconscious. Lance coughed, and blood spattered his forearm as he instinctively covered his mouth. He couldn't even quickly count how many times he'd been stabbed and slashed. He stood tiredly over Kralgon's body for a moment.

The tiny faerie floated in the air above him on her back. *That's an odd position to fly in, how do wings work upside down?* He fell down to one knee and used his right arm to prop himself up, standing had become difficult. The floor had a pool of blood under the two of them. The sound of footsteps closed in on him, it was hard just to look up at those incoming.

Rael and Officer Anne Coyle stood before Lance. The barrel of her shotgun had a trail of smoke leaking out of it. Rael knelt down and put his clawed hand on Lance's shoulder.

He asked, "You okay? You look like shit." He made a whipping motion with his other claw, spraying blood on the floor.

Lance coughed up blood again and croaked, "I feel great. I think we beat them." His vision was unsteady, and he focused on breathing for a moment.

Officer Coyle said, "Oh, wow. This is Psystar!" She brought her hand down, holding Stephanie in her palm. She was tiny, no more than six inches tall. She appeared unconscious.

Rael said, "She needs to stop doing that." He winced from his own gashes, and watched one on his forearm stop bleeding before his eyes, the worst of the wound sealed over. He noticed that it didn't completely heal. Rael assumed that his body must be healing the worst damage all over before it completed the healing on particular wounds.

Officer Coyle used her radio to announce that the hostile mutants were all down in the warehouse. Lance couldn't make much sense of it; he had to focus on staying conscious too much.

Then, Lance noticed that a blade still stuck out of his torso. *Hub, look at that.* He heard footsteps come from behind him. *Gah, hero can't be down at the end of the fight. We won, gotta look heroic or something.* Lance forced his muscles to obey; he slowly stood up and turned around.

Agent Carson, Kim Angel and her photographer, and two officers walked toward their group from the garage entrance. Lance

felt blood seep down the suit. It was soaked, and thought it was an odd sensation. His yellow costume was stained a dark red over most of his torso.

Rael walked around in front of Lance and stood looking at him. Rael felt a great amount of pain right now, but could tell that his friend was pushing himself just to stay upright. *He looks hurt pretty badly. His costume has cuts and tears all over it.* He said, "I'll take my healing without armor if this is the alternative. You need medical help."

The photographer came around and took photos of the group standing there.

Agent Carson said, "Nice work. Units are incoming to round them up, are you sure they are out?"

Rael glanced back toward the area of mutants lying around on the floor. Hellshock walked around the area, shocking each of the mutants in turn.

Rael said, "Let's go make sure, though I think that Hellshock is keeping them down. Spartan, you stay here." He waved his hand in Lance's face and repeated, "Stay here. Damn shades, can't see what he's looking at." He noted that the bright light coming from inside the goggles had faded as Anne and he approached Lance a minute ago.

Lance coughed and said, "I'll stay here and bleed." *I wonder if I should pull the blade out. It might be blocking me from bleeding out further though. It can stay there.*

Reporter Jessica Angel asked Lance a few questions; it was too hard to concentrate to understand her. He mumbled a few times in response, and then his vision went black as he toppled over backward. He bounced as he hit the floor; his armored body was as hard as the concrete it landed on.

Her reporter looked at her, glanced at the camera and back at Spartan. Jessica shook her head and knelt by the hero. She held back her hair and listened near Spartan's head. He still breathed slowly.

She said, "He's breathing, though we should get him an ambulance."

Agent Carson said, "Some are already on the way. I called them in figuring it'd be a big fight." He looked at Rael, "Black Tiger, you've got a lot of injuries as well, do you need to sit?"

Rael thought for a moment, and then shook his head. "No. It hurts, but I'm healing."

## Chapter 40 – Aftermath

### Rael's Viewpoint

More police and ambulance vehicles arrived at the warehouse. The EMTs attempted to lift Lance, but the massive weight of the brick was too much.

I asked, “How do you guys normally lift bricks into ambulances?”

The EMT answered, “We don’t. It’s very rare for a brick to be down for any length of time. At the very least, they can normally help us get them into the ambulance.”

Hellshock and I carefully lifted Lance onto a reinforced stretcher, and then moved him into the ambulance. I believe either of us could have done it fairly easily, but we were both on hand. The ambulance left for Metrocity General Hospital once they determined that they couldn’t do much to stabilize him here.

I stared after the ambulance for a moment. *I hope he’s going to be all right. He’s got a lot of stab wounds and deep cuts.*

My stomach rumbled. Even with the dwindling pain, I felt like I could eat a horse. It had to be the healing, using up energy reserves in my body.

Stephanie woke up just after the ambulance left. Officer Coyle had been holding her as she would a kitten. She was still six inches tall.

Stephanie flew over to me and asked in a squeaky little voice, “Hey, where’s Spartan?”

I replied, “He’s been taken to the hospital. What happened to you?”

“The female mutant was Shrinker. She shrank me when I tried flying her into a wall. I’m pretty sure she got away.”

I said, “I haven’t seen her since we first came in. Without her army of mutants, she shouldn’t be much of a problem anymore, though. Several of the people in a cage mentioned something about her building an army. With no army, she’d have to recruit other mutants, and most of those who were remaining wouldn’t be into her leather and chains type scene, I’m guessing. It’ll be harder for her to convince them to join her. Well, that and she’s a nut job.”

Agent Carson jumped in, “I agree, and she did get away. I shot at her several times outside, and she was injured, but I failed to stop her. We’ve stopped her from forcing the blood thirst on all of these

new mutants in the cages. We need to check on them before freeing the people.”

Stephanie squeaked, “Where did all the kidnapped normals go? Ah, never mind, thanks.” She’d seen the answer in several of the nearby officers’ minds.

Officer Coyle said, “Huh?”

Agent Carson answered her, “They’re outside. Several of them said that Spartan freed them while fighting Kralgon.”

He looked at me, “Do you need any medical assistance?”

Every minute that passed made me feel notably better. “No, I don’t feel many injuries anymore. Psystar?”

I saw how red her tiny white costume was, and it had me concerned.

“I’m getting better, except for the small size.”

Agent Carson nodded, and then left to guide the police force on moving the dangerous mutants.

I walked back into the warehouse to my makeshift staff and picked it back up. It barely had a dent in it, and had worked wonderfully. I turned around and surprised an officer cuffing a mutant. He shrieked and pulled his gun on me.

I pointed at him and said, “Seriously? Put the gun away or I’ll make you eat it. I don’t need any more shit after dealing with all these scumbags.”

Officer Coyle walked over and talked him down.

They didn’t take any chances with the big four armed guy. He had multiple arm bars and body bars that locked his entire body in place. Somehow, they already knew about his roaring power. They locked his jaw tightly as well. *Hehe, well, what there is of it anyway. Spartan really mauled him at the end there.* I wondered how they would move the massive guy into a super paddy wagon, until I saw the H.E.R.O. police officers that came with it. Both were bricks, and easily handled the giant mutant's body.

Agent Carson walked up to me, and said, “We already know what the circumstances were here. Anything special to add?”

I replied, “Not really. There’s one of them back by the far entrance to the building if you haven’t got him yet. Wait, make sure Officer Anne Coyle gets some kind of commendation or thanks, she helped me during the fight. Well, and Hellshock showed up around the same time she did.”

“Great. I’ll handle the paperwork for you, good work here. Why don’t you two go check on your friend?”

“Will do, thanks, Carson.”



I didn't see Stephanie, so I thought as loudly as I could.  
*Stephanie! Come on, it is time to go see Spartan.*

Her tiny form buzzed above my head in an arc before she slowed down. She flew over to me and landed on my shoulder, then walked over and grabbed my hair.

She said in her squeaky little voice, "Okay, ready to go. I don't think I can carry you now though."

I thought, *No need to, my car is a block away.*

Media vans were there already, interviewing people freed from the cages. A woman from the group of former kidnab victims ran toward us. *Great, she's going to lure the news people right to us.* I sped up my walk, but she ran at an angle and headed us off. She came right at me, flinging her arms out to hug me.

She clung tightly to me for a few seconds, mumbling, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." I patted her back lightly with my palm. My fingertips were still two inch wicked sharp claws.

*Well, this is awkward.* I said, "Lady, are you all right?" *Oh, man, I can smell the blood in her, her skin, her scent of prey.* I suddenly smelled something pleasant that distracted me from her smell. I glanced at little Stephanie and smiled.

The woman leaned back a little and looked up at my face. She jumped slightly when she saw my cat's eyes. She said, "Thank you for saving us. I was afraid I'd never see my daughter again." She looked around at the ground, "I smell flowers, where are they?"

"I'm glad we got there in time. You're getting blood all over your clothes, you know."

"It's all right. I thought we were all going to die horrible, nasty deaths. We were going to be eaten alive. Oh my god, you have claws too."

"Yes, I'm similar to the monsters inside. I shouldn't be so near you after that fight."

She backed up a few steps, wringing her hands as she did so. "You were very brave to rush into so many of them."

"It's kind of you to say so. I can't say as I was thinking too much about it at the time."

Her eyes focused on my shoulder, I glanced over and saw Stephanie smiling at her, still standing on my shoulder and holding a lock of hair.

"Thank you too, little girl." The woman waved as though to a child.

Stephanie laughed, "You're welcome, Mrs. Telholme. Give your

daughter a big hug for me tonight.”

I spotted a news crew walking this way. “Well, we’re off. I’d rather not talk with the press just yet. Good day, miss. I’m really glad we made it in time for you.” *Hold on tight Steph.* I sprinted around the nearest warehouse and ran to my car. Stephanie lost her footing and I felt her hanging onto me by my hair. I grabbed a blanket from the trunk and put it on my seat, and then climbed in and drove to the hospital.

We found Lance. They had given up on all attempts at surgery and simply washed and covered each stab wound. The doctors couldn’t remove the blade from him, his muscles held it in place too tightly. They administered anesthesia via breathing mask and moved him to a room to wait it out.

Stephanie’s tiny form lay in my hand when she suddenly enlarged to her normal size. She cheered at the good event. I scowled.

She asked, “What?”

“I was hoping to keep you as my pet.” I grinned at her.

She stuck her tongue out at me. “Too bad.”

A nurse stopped in to find out what the commotion was about. She asked, “Weren’t you tiny before?”

Stephanie nodded, “It just wore off.”

A moan came from the bed. Lance woke up, grimacing in pain. “What the heck is going on?”

Stephanie grabbed his shoulder, “Welcome back, big guy. How do you feel?”

“Ow, what is this?” He pulled the sheet to the side, showing the blade sticking out of his abdomen.

“They couldn’t get that out, it’s in too tight.”

He took a few deep breaths and put his hand on the blade remnant sticking out. The nurse’s eyes grew large and she dove at him. “No!”

He didn’t listen, and slowly pulled the blade out of his body. It made a nasty squishing sound as he pulled it through. His teeth were tightly clenched and he growled in pain, but he finished removing it. Blood freely ran down his abdomen. The nurse ran out of the room.

Lance sat up. “Ugh. That’s gonna leave a mark. Man, I hurt all over, except my big toe.”

I laughed, “I could stomp on it.”

“You would. I’m starving, too.” He looked at a wound under the bandages, and then looked up at us. “They couldn’t do anything, could they?”

“No, needles wouldn’t cut through to seal the wounds. They tried superglue, but even your breathing ripped it apart.”

He nodded. "No use for me to take up a bed then."

The nurse, along with a second nurse, re-entered the room with bandages, cloth and tape. They ordered him to stay put. Lance rolled his eyes, but complied, and they cleaned and bandaged off the wounds.

One of them said, "Not that you'll listen, but you need to keep those clean. Change the bandages if you bleed through any. Keep the wounds covered. Do you hear me?"

He nodded at her. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

It was obvious that they had dealt with supers before; they hadn't cut apart his costume.

I said, "Dude, you don't need to wear a costume top, you look like a mummy now." I threw his top to him to put back on, and we left the room. Lance stayed long enough to find out who had worked on him, and tracked each of them down to thank them. *He's a strange animal.*

## Chapter 41 – End of Day

### Third Person Perspective

Stephanie offered to fly Lance home, but he was too stubborn. Lance arrived home quite dirty. His injuries were bad enough to make jumping more difficult than normal and the landings very difficult. He was far too proud to admit to any embarrassing crashes, although the smudges and green leaf stains on his costume said volumes. Stephanie had to pull those from his thoughts.

Lance called Jessica Angel and gave her a phone interview to fulfill his promise. He was all too gracious in expounding upon everyone's work in the case. He offered to have the group meet her for a photo, but she said that she already had photos to use from the scene.

Stephanie and Rael made their way down to H.E.R.O. headquarters late in the afternoon to fill out the rest of their paperwork and become official members of the Homeland Extraordinary Response Organization. Rael was very pleased at being paid. Captain McCain asked them to keep an eye out for Shrinker, but declared her a minor evil without all of the mutants to do her bidding.

Stephanie fretted about class the next day, and her challenges with being around groups of people. The possibility of studying her own genetics and capabilities was an exciting prospect, however. Also, she believed she would be able to try some tests for Tina, though she had her doubts as to transmission of powers.

Lance was glad he had Mondays off at Score! He ate, and then rested for the evening. While still extremely battered and sore, his massive strength allowed him to move about the house fairly easily and with minimal muscle movement.

Rael reflected on the bloodlust. It was still there in him, the survivor woman showed that. Stephanie let him know that her pheromones worked to dull the hunger. She promised to help him get past it.

All of them recognized that this was a major turning point in their lives. No longer were they simply student, bouncer and carpenter. A new generation of supers had arrived. More heroes, and more villains would come out of this meteor shower, and Metrocity would need all the help it could get.

\*\*\*\*

## THE END

Of H.E.R.O. - Metamorphosis

Following are Chapters 1-5 of H.E.R.O. – New Markets

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Pictures and details on the characters in the H.E.R.O. world can also be found on the author's website.

Questions? Comments? Would you like to hear when the next novel has been released (either in this particular series or by me in general)? Feel free to email: [kevinrau10@yahoo.com](mailto:kevinrau10@yahoo.com)

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Thank you for reading H.E.R.O. – Metamorphosis.

-- Kevin Gerald Rau

# **H.E.R.O. - New Markets**

## **PREVIEW**

by Kevin Gerald Rau

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**PREVIEW ONLY FOLLOWS ...**  
**CHAPTERS 1-5 OF H.E.R.O. BOOK 2**

All characters are original and fictional. Any likeness to real people is purely incidental.

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Kimi Johnson  
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## Preview Chapter 1 – Night Call

### Stephanie's Viewpoint

Monstrous eyes loomed over me in the darkness. Slit down the center like cat eyes, they were green with slight amber and black streaks from the outer edges in toward the center. They filled my entire vision, and I awoke with a start.

My heart pounded as I jerked up into a sitting position. I didn't make it far, as my head slammed into Rael's face. He had been leaning directly over me. From nightmare to reality, the eyes of the dream manifested themselves on his face. As unusual as they were, they were far more frightening in the blackness of sleep than where they belonged on him. I put my hand on his cheek, as my head fell back onto the pillow.

He leaned back to sit next to me, as I rubbed my forehead. The mild pain already faded, my new regenerative abilities worked fast. He sat on top of the sheets, showing off his lithe, muscled torso. I said, "You know, if I wanted to be stared at in my sleep like that, I'd get a kitty."

He chuckled, with an almost sinister tone. He held up his hands, growled and stared at them, and the last segment of each finger grew and hardened into a two inch long blackish claw.

He wiggled his fingers at me as he said, "But you already have a big kitty ... me." He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and his demon claws shifted back into his normal fingertips. He rubbed his fingers together when done.

He sat on top of the covers. *Why wasn't he in bed?* We didn't have to relieve ourselves anymore, so there weren't many reasons to get up in the middle of night.

I asked, "Were you trying to wake me?"

"Yeah. I thought I'd try something different. The last two times I woke you up I mentally shouted your name while touching my head to yours. This time I thought I'd try a visual. Obviously it worked, but this time your heart rate shot up when you woke up as well."

"Duh. I'd rather not have giant cat eyes in the darkness chasing me, thank you. Please shout my name or something next time." I sat up on my elbows. "So, why did you wake me up, I need my beauty sleep."

"No you don't. Other than slightly tousled hair, I don't believe



you need any help along those lines at all. Besides, you're a heavy sleeper; I'd have to practically hit you to wake you up."

*At least he's telling the truth.* My new telepathy was always on. Right now, it showed me a visual of what he looked at, and both the visual and words of what he was thinking at the time. It looked much like a giant television screen to me, but unfortunately blocked much of my own vision. His visual amounted to me at the moment, so instead of me staring at him in the dark, a good portion of my vision stared at myself. I heard my heart beating rapidly through his mindview, the visual, audio and other sensory link I currently had into his mind. He saw me in the dark room as clearly as if it were daylight, a benefit of his cat eyes, I supposed. At that moment, they were rounded at the iris though, probably due to the lack of light in the room.

My pure gold hair was tousled from sleep; I looked into my own amethyst eyes. They still looked odd to me, compared to the old hazel iris color. My skin was tan. I wondered how long the tan would last, or if my new regeneration would eliminate that. I had a small nose and ears.

He smelled my pheromone enhanced fragrance acutely. My natural odor now affected most people greatly when they were close enough to touch me. If their face touched my hair or neck, it seemed like everyone wanted to kiss me to get more. For someone like Rael, who had an enhanced sense of smell I was almost a drug.

We mutated from normal humans to supers only two nights ago. Both nights he maneuvered to keep me with him overnight just to keep my body against him, and my hair under his nose. I was only now finding out how much he really cared for me, though we'd been the best of friends for most of our lives.

I motioned with my hand to shift the large image out of the way so I could look better at him. Fortunately, they were movable within my visual space. The problem was that I couldn't remove them entirely when people were near me.

He smirked at my motion. When I raised an eyebrow he said, "What was that gesture about?"

I asked, "What gesture?"

"You just moved your hand like this." He mimicked my hand swipe. I hadn't even noticed I made the motion with my hand.

"Oh, just moving your mindview. It was in the way, I couldn't see well."

His eyebrows rose up. "So that's what you've been doing these last few days. I've been trying to figure out your odd gestures since you changed."

I rolled my eyes and shrugged. "I can't help it. It's probably a

mental thing, trying to move things with my hands, even if they are just in my head.”

I looked him over. His black hair was slightly unkempt from sleep; it hung down just past his shoulders. He had gained additional muscle during the change from human to super. He was now well built, but not like a body builder. His frame was lithe. His cat eyes gave him a slightly sinister look in bright light when they weren't rounded. His mouth was closed, so I couldn't see his fang-like canines. His new alias, Black Tiger, fit him well.

I asked, “So other than wanting me to see you looking all sexy and shirtless, was there a reason you woke me up?”

He replied, “Oh, yeah - your H.E.R.O. phone rang. You didn't wake up, so I went to look at it.”

“I'm not marked 'on duty' right now, why would the phone ring?”

“There's an F.B.I. call specifically for you. A kidnapping, about one hundred miles from here.”

“Oh, jeez. I did tell Agent Carson that they could call me for those. I didn't think they'd call so soon on one, though.”

“Are you going to go?”

“Of course. Having a loved one kidnapped would be horrible. They wouldn't call if it wasn't important. A note should be in the system to only call if they've apprehended someone that might have information on the kidnapping, so it shouldn't take long. What time is it?”

“2:10 a.m. You've got classes in the morning too.”

“I know. I'll just have to deal with that.”

“You want me to go with you?”

“No, get your sleep. You got clawed up far worse than I did yesterday.”

“Yeah, but you got knocked out, I didn't. Plus, I healed all that damage shortly after taking it.”

I kissed him quickly, and then slid out the far side of the bed. “Thank you for waking me up.” I watched through his eyes as he watched me closely as I walked out of the room. That made me think for a moment, I could still see his mindview when I was in the bathroom. He had to be twenty or more feet from me. My powers were new, but it seemed like my range was usually about fifteen feet. He was still thinking about me. Interesting, I'd never seen a video of myself sleeping before, but he was replaying his memory of watching me a few minutes ago. *At least I hadn't been drooling.*

I picked up my new H.E.R.O cell phone; the task was on the

main screen. All agents of the Homeland Extraordinary Response Organization had a smartphone with applications to aid in response to emergencies. In this case the message was brief, though I noticed it was a private event directly to me. Most events were posted for all H.E.R.O. agents, so any available could respond. It wasn't a standard nine to five job for any heroes that I was aware of, though I was very new at it.

The event listed a kidnapping, the location, and a phone number to call. I called it.

A man's voice answered, "Agent Willman."

"Hi, this is Psystar. You put in a request for me in a kidnapping case?"

"I did. We're hoping to move quickly on this situation."

"You've already got one of the perps in custody? I'm a telepath; I need to be right by them to read their mind."

"We've got one boxed in. We're working on capturing him without shooting him or using knockout gas now."

*Does no one ever read instructions? I specifically only agreed to do these if they had someone on hand. Well, I already called him; I can't exactly not go now.*

"Okay, I'll fly to you then, hopefully your men can get him by the time I get there."

"We sent the location, you have it?"

"Yeah. It's about a hundred miles away; I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Very nice. Wait ... fifteen minutes? How are you getting here?"

"I'm flying in."

"You have a chopper on hand?"

"No, I fly myself."

"Oh, we'll see you soon then."

"Okay ... bye." I hung up. I grabbed my costume and put on the pieces. The entire costume was pure white, and made of a very thin, expanding material that reminded me of spandex. It fit me like a glove, or tighter, actually. The bottoms were short shorts, much like low cut biking shorts. The form fitting top went from the top of the shorts to cover most of my bust, and ran down my sides to hit the lower back. The front had three wide ovals cut out; the lowest centered on my belly button, the top just touched the bottom of my bust. The boots were mid-calf in height with a low heel, and the gloves mid-forearm. I had a mask that covered part of my face; it somehow clung to the skin without needing a band around my head. Last was a gold belt, the same color as my wavy golden hair. The costume was revealing, but I could hide it under a lot of different clothes. For that reason, I had forgone a full top or pants. Well, that and my

pheromones, which worked better with less material. I wanted to be able to wear skirts and halter tops over the costume, though, so I was pleased with it.

I ran a brush through my hair a few times. I looked at my amethyst eyes in the mirror, and 'heard' Rael's thoughts as he programmed in the address into his phone in case he needed it. I stopped back by his bedroom. "This will probably take an hour or two, don't wait up, okay?"

"I'd rather go with you, though I'm guessing they would be irritated by a tagalong."

"I'd think so, besides, you're a bit on the dark side. People like this will need reassurance, not a good scaring. Wish me luck." His thoughts came to me as if he spoke them aloud; he momentarily regretted choosing an all-black costume.

I double checked that I had the H.E.R.O. cell phone, my H.E.R.O. ID card and left Rael and Lance's house. I verified the direction I needed to fly via the cell phone's display, then stepped up on an imaginary stair step and pushed off. I floated up into the air, then jabbed my knee up and my body blasted up into the air as if shot out of a gun. I angled my upper body to lead my direction, and focused on pouring on the speed. It required me to mentally hype myself up, but when I finally felt the shiver down my spine, my speed cranked up past Mach 1. I angled my flight slightly upward and toward the location on my phone. It was a cloudy night; a storm might be coming into the region soon.

Being in the air was pleasantly quiet from multiple perspectives. Apart from being beyond Mach 1, and not hearing much of anything via my ears, I was too far from anyone to pick up the 'sound' of their thoughts, as well as being far from any mindviews. Those normally only appeared when people were within perhaps fifteen feet of me, while I could hear the 'sound' of thoughts from more like thirty feet.

It still amazed me, being able to fly. Just a few days ago I was a normal person, albeit one with a father who was a super. Now I could fly, read minds, give off a mind controlling pheromone, and was quite strong. At least I was compared to normal people. Rael could lift cars, and Lance found out he could lift half of a train locomotive. That's several hundred thousand pounds even when lifting the back end alone. I was tiny compared to Lance, though. He was 6'8" tall after the change, versus my 5'3", and his upper arms were as big around as my abdomen. Still, I was happy that I could lift hundreds of pounds without strain. *I need to test my limit soonish.*

The air felt cool as it blew past me. My hair blew back in the

wind, but something about the aura surrounding me kept it to a pleasant level. Otherwise, I'd imagine that my hair would have whipped back practically in a straight line. That aura also allowed me to carry others while lightly holding them instead of brute force lifting them as I would on the ground. Last, it meant that clothing didn't rip apart. That was a bonus when I wasn't just in my costume. Even miles in the air, the cold didn't bother me. I'd been told that the same oddities that made supers heal faster, not sweat or excrete waste, and otherwise have these wonderful powers made us less affected by heat and cold. Something internal to our bodies regulated things better. I wondered if it made us significantly less or more than normal *Homo sapiens* though.

I looked at the cell phone device to watch the coordinates. It was a really cool device the Homeland Extraordinary Response Organization, aka H.E.R.O., offered its operatives. In effect it was a smartphone with some complex apps for posting trouble situations for superheroes to help with, mark that we accepted one, completed one, needed medical or paddy wagon type assistance, etc. It also had GPS software, internet connectivity, mapping software, and worked as a secure cell phone. I hadn't tried texting from it yet.

I didn't have anyone other than Lance and Rael that I really wanted to know I was also the superheroine named Psystar, so I planned on keeping my normal cell phone as well. Everyone else knew me as Stephanie Quinn. Everyone except two professors at Metrocity University, that is. Possibly more soon, since I'd agreed to let Professor Gently start up a special study group to test my blood, DNA and such as long as I was in the group getting credit as well. My degree was in genetics, and I was a junior at Metrocity University. I was pretty excited about being able to do some real testing on a super, even if I were that super. I had some trepidation about being years behind the other students in that group, though. It sounded like most would be in their Doctorate program, and here I was without even my Bachelors yet.

I was pretty sure that Rael would quit his daytime carpentry job, although Lance might keep his bouncing job at Score! He liked the place a lot. He was also such an amicable guy that he stopped as many fights with gentle talk as muscle.

There was no way that I wouldn't complete my degree, though. I knew that some people would try to write me off as a ditz for having golden hair and a tight, skimpy costume. I wanted a solid degree backing me up. There was also something to be said for being a role model for people, even if I didn't work in my degree field.

Apart from the heavy cloud cover, the flight was pleasant. *When I have more time I'll have to fly through some clouds to feel what it's like.* Flight

didn't feel taxing to my system, and the actual angle I flew at didn't appear to impact comfort at all. I knew that flying at a downward angle, while over Mach 1 could potentially be dangerous though. I had no desire to cause some kind of shockwave that destroyed windows and otherwise damaged property or people.

I spotted suburbs in the distance. It didn't take long at Mach 1 to close on them. I watched on the H.E.R.O. phone's map as I approached. When my distance was minimal, I swung my shoulders back and pushed my left foot forward as though to take a step. My speed dropped hundreds of miles per hour in a few seconds. Fortunately, my flight power somehow kept me from having problems with g-force or whatever else might cause problems by doing that. *I suppose I'll have to read up on some of that, or people are going to ask me about how flight works and I'll be clueless.*

I closed in on the location at a more reasonable hundred miles per hour or so, and aimed at the front yard. It was a suburban area, with large homes and wide streets. Many had pools in the back yard.

It was obvious which house it was, for several extra vehicles were parked outside on an otherwise sparse street. They must have been detectives or F.B.I. agents, the vehicles weren't marked other than having government license plates.

I'd discovered that when I made a stepping down motion, as though onto a lower stair step, my speed slowed down and I floated downward. I hadn't decided yet if this flight power required any of these physical motions I used, or if my mind simply needed them as a crutch to take everyday actions and apply them to something unnatural ... like flying.

I floated down to the sidewalk, making the stepping-down motion with my feet a few times, to slow my descent. I lightly bumped onto the ground, and walked up to the front door.

I heard the thoughts of people nearby. There had to be four or five people inside, based on the mental chatter. *I'll have to practice so I can figure out the number of people by mental voices alone.* By the time I reached the door four mindviews appeared. I had a good look at the three men and one woman in the room from each of their viewpoints.

I knocked on the door, and then watched the four mindviews look at each other. One of the men motioned to the others to sit and said he would answer the door. I saw him place one hand on a gun at his side, and then he glanced out the peephole. He opened the door, and held his hand out toward me.

"Hello, I'm Agent Dunsworth of the F.B.I." I chuckled and shook his hand.

*Agent Willman was the one I spoke with earlier.* I wondered why it

was so easy to pick people's names out of their mindviews. *It must be kept in some easy-to-access place in memory, that I can just scoop the information from. Or I'm just that good, hab!*

I shook his hand, and said, "Nice to meet you, Agent Dunsworth. I'm Psystar. Agent Willman was the one I spoke with earlier, ah, hello." I waved at him across the room.

The two F.B.I. Agents were skeptical of bringing in a super to help with this, so I thought showing I knew things that weren't said yet might be helpful.

Agent Dunsworth asked, "Is something humorous?"

I looked back at him, "I laughed at your smooth transition from having your hand on your gun, to shaking my hand. You're quite good at it."

He made a "hmph" sound and walked back into the room. I closed the door behind me, walked over to Agent Willman and shook his hand. "Nice to meet you in person, Agent Willman."

The father, Chase Lieberman thought that I looked far too young to be helpful here; he didn't want a cheerleader delaying the saving of his daughter. Agent Willman mentally sized me up as we shook hands. He thought I belonged in a modeling shoot rather than in the midst of a kidnapping case.

Agent Willman said, "You as well, I hope. You're much younger than I would have expected."

"I could be much older than I look, sir. Supers visibly age slowly. But ... you are correct. I am young. What I do have are abilities that can help. Such as knowing that Mr. Lieberman thinks of me as a cheerleader."

I looked at Mr. Lieberman. "Mr. Lieberman, I wear a revealing costume to distract villains, and to fit it under normal clothing in case of emergencies." *Don't think I need to admit that I like workout clothes like this right now.... Well, or the pheromones, for that matter.*

I asked him, "When was the last time you saw your daughter? What was she wearing?"

I watched his mindview, as he thought of this morning as she grabbed a bagel and orange juice, kissed him on the cheek while he skimmed the paper, and ran to the door. He said, "I saw her this morning."

Her mother, Aimee, interrupted, "I have a picture here."

I held up my hand, "Thank you, ma'am, I won't need it. Your husband has a more current memory of her from this morning, wearing her orange short jacket and black skirt. I've got a very good visual of her now." I tapped my temple as I said that.

Mr. Lieberman said, "You ... you read my mind?"

I looked off to the side as I thought for a moment, and said, “I ... yeah, pretty much. It's why I'm here, to read the mind of the kidnapper you ought to have in custody, and find out where they are holding your daughter. Speaking of ... what's the status on capturing him, Agent Willman?”

He said, “We ought to have him here soon.” He actually thought that his men had the man trapped, but couldn't get to him because the man shot at the agents.

I sighed. “It doesn't help to lie to a telepath, Agent Willman. What's the address they have him trapped at? I'll go help; I can take being shot if I need to.” *Not that I **want** to get shot, but a few minutes of pain will be worth getting their daughter back sooner.*

He stared at me for a moment. He thought of the location and debated on telling me.

I said, “Thank you, call your men and tell them I'm coming to get this guy out. Zena doesn't deserve being in some creep's custody any longer than she has to.”

I was cranky from being woken in the middle of night, and just didn't feel like putting up with people who wanted to do things slowly, or lie about not doing them. I didn't understand why they wouldn't want to do everything to get Zena back as soon as humanly possible.

I walked to the door, opened it and said, “I'll be back soon.” Out on the lawn, I tapped in the address on my phone to get a distance and direction.

Agent Dunsworth walked out to me. “What the hell? You're going to just go over there and try to capture him yourself?”

I glanced up at him. “Pretty much. Why?”

“How do you plan on capturing him? You don't even have a gun.”

“I thought I'd bust in and rush him to take his gun away. Once I do, I'm pretty sure he'll be a pushover.”

“Jumping into another agency's investigation, and trying to just take over won't win you any friends, you know.”

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “You called me, Agent Dunsworth, and a note is in my file to not call unless someone has already been captured to mind read. Your team already failed to follow directions, and at this point it may take who knows how long to get the guy out. That assumes he doesn't shoot himself in the head, or something. I'm tired, and I want to get their daughter, Zena, back as soon as possible. So I'm not taking anything over, I'm just expediting, okay? It's your bust, I just want a girl home safe, and to go get some sleep. I have a horrible day to look forward to tomorrow, err, today.”

“Why is that, can you see the future too?”



"No. Power apparently comes with a price. Mine is having problems around large groups ... like at college. I can't even sit in classrooms anymore."

"What? Wait, are you a new super?"

"Yes I am; why do you ask?" He immediately worried about my chances of finding out what they needed to know. I waited for him to put the question into words. I felt pretty sure I'd already pushed their limits.

"Are you sure you can find out the information we need?" He looked skeptical.

"I've done this several times already. I can go in and pull out memories that I want. It's stressful at times, and makes me hungry, but it helped my team save over a dozen people yesterday. I need to go help with this guy, I'll be back soon."

I stepped on my imaginary air step and pushed, which caused me to begin floating upward. I consulted the cell phone's mapping software, and then jabbed my knee up and shot into the air. Leaves rustled in the yard from the small vacuum I created. I flew over the suburbs to an office complex; apparently, they had the kidnapper trapped in a four-story office building. The area outside had a group of police and F.B.I. vehicles in the street. I flew down and landed just inside the tape barrier the police had strung up.

Costumes must make a difference, the officers watching the tape borders didn't even ask me who I was or challenge me. I walked to the cluster of men standing next to some kind of F.B.I. command van. There were six men standing together. I noticed that almost none of the mindviews looked at my face. They almost completely covered my normal vision; that was an annoyance.

I said, "Hi guys. Which room is the perp in?"

I watched their mindviews, as they wondered who I was, why I was there and who called in a super, until I found the tactical leader. He flashed a memory of the building map, and the route his men would take. The man had taken refuge on the third floor in a room at the end of a hallway. The room had a door with a window, which helped provide him cover to shoot at the agents attempting to get to him. Since they were under strict orders not to injure or knock out the man, it had eliminated most of their tactics.

Several of them began speaking at once. I debated just flying up there, but even as grouchy as I felt, my better judgment told me to at least speak with them first.

One of the F.B.I. Agents spoke over the rest, "Who are you and why are you here?"

I answered, "I'm Psystar. I was called in to interrogate the man

you were supposed to have captured already.” *Okay, I couldn’t help but rub that in a little.*

That line visibly irritated several of them. *Yeah, well, welcome to the party.* One of the tactical men thought in no uncertain terms that as a young woman, costume or not, I didn’t belong there. Another thought that I would screw up their tactical operation. *That kind of thinking doesn’t help a person in a grumpy mood, you jerks.*

The tactical leader said, “We’ve got the man boxed in. If you are here for the interrogation, we’ll notify you once he’s been apprehended.”

An F.B.I. agent jumped in, “Wait, she’s a super; it might work best to have her go in.”

The tactical leader replied, “I’ve already got men in there. We’ll handle this, without her getting my men injured.”

I said, “No. You’ve delayed long enough. I’ll go in myself, where is he located?” *Not like I didn’t already know, but they might feel better sharing....*

He replied, “You haven’t been briefed with my men, we’ll handle the extraction.”

“Bruce, is it? You’ve had at least twenty minutes to do that already. If you guys want to be difficult, then fine. Call your men and tell them not to shoot me. I’m flying in through the window and getting this guy now. Stop worrying about whose sandbox we’re playing in, and just help get the guy, okay?” *I know I’m being cranky, but I just can’t shake being annoyed at these guys for waking me up when they damn well know to have the suspect before calling me. They are far too interested in who gets the credit for capturing this guy as well. Why does credit matter?*

I step-pushed several times to take flight quickly. Then I flew alongside the third floor until I heard the mass of mental speech that went with the officers or agents down the hallway from the man. That allowed me to locate the room with the perpetrator easily enough, and I kicked up some speed to fly around the building to a window on the far side.

*This will be easy enough. Fly in fast ... but not **too** fast, smash through the window, quick slow down, then grab the guy’s gun and manhandle him to the ground. Call in the tactical boys to tie him up and we’re good to go.*

I aimed for a window in the far room, put my right arm and shoulder forward to take the blow, and slammed into the window. The glass didn’t give as easily as I expected it to, and slowed me down a lot. The impact alone really hurt, and shards of glass cut into my face and shoulder as I burst through the window. Glass fragments exploded into the room. *On! Real glass is a **lot** harder than it looks in the movies.*

A mindview appeared, and a spray of bullets struck me in my

right arm, right shoulder, breast, and along my abdomen. That hurt ... a lot. I cried out from the pain and surprise of being shot multiple times so quickly. *So much for easy....*

I spun my left foot forward to slow down and flew into the man. I aimed for his right hand, but missed and grabbed his right shoulder with my left hand. He let loose another burst from his submachine pistol directly into my abdomen. I grunted as the bullets tore into my stomach and bent me over. The pain was intense.

My momentum forced him backwards, he screamed something, and I grabbed for his gun hand. I forced his arm down, but couldn't get a hold of his arm. He squeezed the trigger one more time, causing several bullets to spray into my left thigh before I finally had his right wrist in hand. I cried out as my body was wracked with pain.

I slammed his hand with the gun into the wall, hard. Another burst of bullets sprayed out as his hand struck the drywall, ricocheting off the walls and ceiling. The bones in his hand and wrist shattered from the impact with the wall and the man screamed in pain. He punched me in the jaw with his good hand. I was still airborne; the punch caused me to float backwards slowly. Large black spots clouded my vision.

Pain from all the bullet wounds kept me doubled over in the air. I coughed up blood. I needed to get him out of the fight, but it was so hard to focus. Another burst rang out from the gun, and I spun about from another hit to my right arm while floating. I slowly spun in the air as I coughed out blood from the chest wounds.

The pain was extreme, and I wished Rael were there.

My vision went dark, and the last thing I saw were several mindviews appear, and then disappear as I lost consciousness.

## Preview Chapter 2 – Brash Youth

### Stephanie's Viewpoint

I awoke moaning in pain. Two people hovered over me. Their mindviews quickly appeared and showed them putting bandages on the many gunshot wounds. My body ached all over, and I had some kind of mask over my mouth. I sat up, and one of them attempted to push on my left shoulder to force me to stay down. He wasn't strong enough, and he gave up after a moment. It felt like a child pushing at me.

I looked down at myself. They pulled up the shirt to cover only my breasts, and bandages covered my abdomen, leg and arm. I pulled off what I assumed was an oxygen mask.

The paramedic said, "You need to lie down, you've been shot quite a few times." He was an extremely tall man, with medium blue eyes and short wavy, sandy brown hair. He had to be in his thirties.

It felt like I'd been shot many times. I grimaced and moaned slightly from the pain in my left leg, abdomen, chest, shoulder and right arm. I wondered what he hadn't hit.

He said, "I gave you a shot of morphine, it should help with the pain."

It certainly didn't feel like I'd been given any pain killer, my body hurt all over. Between clenched teeth I said, "Either it's not working, or I'm in a ton of pain."

"You might be resistant to it; I've heard that some supers are."

"Wonderful, I didn't know that."

A tactical officer who wore black body armor and carried a rifle slung over his shoulder knelt next to us. "That was a pretty dumb thing to do, kid."

I grimaced again and tears ran down my face. "Gee, thanks. Ow. Did we get him awake?"

"Yeah, we did. He ran out of bullets on you and couldn't reload one-handed in time."

"Oh, is that what I'm feeling?"

"Why did you do that if you aren't an armored super?"

"I was irritated about the wait."

He laughed sarcastically. "Nice, so you jumped into the line of fire?"

"Flew, uhh, actually." I coughed, blood came out. I made a mental note not to fly into submachine gun fire in the future. "Uhh, this hurts."

"No shit. That's why we wear protective vests and try to avoid getting shot."

"I, ah, thought my body would kick out bullets in a few minutes."

"You got shot about ten times. Maybe it takes longer with that many. Any of us would be dead by now."

"Good, then maybe I, ow, kept one of you from getting shot."  
*Damn, this hurts. Next time I'm bringing the boys to do this type of dirty work.*

I felt something wiggling in my right bicep, and a bullet worked its way out. The bandage pushed it painfully against the tender spot, so I tore off the bandage. The wound closed and became just an angry red welt on my arm.

The officer looked at the paramedic and said, "Damn, man, didn't you give her a painkiller?"

The paramedic said, "Of course I did. She's apparently not being affected by it. I doubt it's safe to just keep upping the dosage in the hopes it'll work."

I lay back down and over the next ten minutes felt several more bullets push their way out of my body. I quietly grimaced and cried from the pain. The paramedic kept me company, while I laid there and writhed.

While still painful, the pain receded enough after a while to let me think, and I asked, "Where is the perp?"

"I believe he's being held outside for now. I'm not sure though."

I looked around. Blood was splattered all over the room from the many gunshots I had kept from hitting the room. One area had quite a bit of blood on the floor; I must have been lying there after being shot. My body was wet and sticky all over. *I think I'd make a good prop or extra in a horror flick right about now. Lying here's not going to get Zena back any sooner, girl, suck it up!*

I clenched my teeth and said, "I have work to do." I slowly sat up; the movement exacerbated the wounds in my abdomen, and caused me to cry out in pain again. Baracco, the paramedic, per his mindview, put his arm around my back to help me stay in that position. Through his eyes, I looked like a mess. Blood covered my mouth, chin and most of my torso. My legs both had a lot of blood on them, although only the left had been shot. The right had a strange pattern of blood trails that wound around it from left to right.

I asked, "Why is my right leg so bloody?"

He replied, "They said you were slowly spinning in the air when

they came in. You were unconscious and bleeding. That made the blood run all over you.” He made whirling motions in the air to describe my spinning motion.

I nodded, “I didn’t fall down after being knocked out?”

“No, the officers were talking about you floating unconscious.”

“Interesting.” *Damn, my costume is all blood soaked. Great, that’ll flag me as a resounding failure. I need to get it cleaned off.*

“Kind of cool, if you ask me.”

“Help me up, please.”

“You should stay lying down.”

“My body’s already healing; it’ll heal while I’m standing.” I ignored the pain spots in my body and stood up. It caused me to grimace and grab at my abdomen as I did so.

He helped me, obviously against his better judgment. I took a deep breath; it caused me to cough violently for a moment. That in turn overused my abdominal muscles, flared up a bout of sharp pains and dropped me to my knees.

I said, “Uh, I’m so not getting in front of guns again.”

“That sounds like a wise idea.”

I carefully stood up again. I felt light-headed. I asked, “Where is the nearest bathroom?”

“I think I saw one down the hall here.” He gestured ahead of us.

One of the tactical officers came in, and stopped when he saw me walking with the help of the paramedic. He mentally gave me points for being stubborn and being up and walking already.

I said, “Hi, I’m Psystar.” I looked like a sexy zombie in his eyes, what with all the blood on me, and my shirt up around my bust.

He shook my hand and asked, “I’m Lewis von Klinger. How are you feeling?” Lewis was a thin, young man with green eyes and wavy brown hair.

“Like shit. Almost like I got shot a bunch of times.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I imagine that hurts. You’re a tough chick, though.”

“Thanks, I think. Help me to the bathroom, please.”

He debated asking Baracco if they should force me to lie down, and then realized a paramedic would have already attempted that.

“Sure thing.” He took my other arm. Between the two of them, walking was much easier. We shortly arrived at the women’s restroom.

“Let me wash up, and then I’ll be down to interrogate the kidnapper.”

“Okay.”

I walked into the restroom and went to the sink area. I felt more than a little drunk. I looked even more of a mess than their mindviews showed me. At least their mindviews were skewed from a male's viewpoint. Blood soaked my shorts and shirt due to the wonders of spin-bleeding while floating.

I glanced back toward the door. Per the mindviews, the two guys were content to wait for me outside, so I slid off my shorts and washed them in the sink until most of the blood was gone. I had to wash and squeeze them multiple times to get most of the blood out. I put them under another faucet and left it running hot water on them, and then stripped off the top to wash it. I placed that under another running faucet to rinse as well. Fortunately, my panties weren't bad.

I very much didn't want to look quite so bloody when talking with the F.B.I. agents and tactical leader downstairs. It would vindicate their desire to have held me back. I tore off the bandages and washed off my bloody skin when a new mindview showed someone walk up to the door and enter.

I had momentary heart failure while I jerked my face out of the sink and looked up. A woman officer stood in the entrance a moment with the two men standing behind her gawking at me. She recovered from her surprise quickly and shut the door in the men's faces.

She thought, *So this is what a nude super looks like.* I looked like a deer caught in headlights in her mindview while she looked my bloody form up and down. Then she glanced at the sinks where water ran on my two costume pieces. The fast motion of standing upright caused me to be even more lightheaded and I noticed that I swayed a little in her eyes.

She walked over to me and asked, "Are you okay? Do you need any help?"

I stammered, "I, uh, I'm cleaning the blood off." *Why is it perfectly fine to be naked in a gym locker room, yet feel so embarrassed when caught that way unexpectedly?*

"I can see that. I'm Katherine." Katherine was about 5'6" tall, with dark brown eyes and long ash blonde hair. She had darkly tanned skin, and spoke very precisely.

Just then, I felt another bullet work its way out and fall. It rang as it bounced on the bathroom tiles. She bent down and picked up the bullet. "What the? Did this just come out of you?"

I nodded and quickly regret the movement, "Yeah. They said I got shot about ten times. I'm Ste ... Psystar."

She glanced up at me. Her thoughts rolled the beginning of my name around in her mind. *Stella? Stephanie?* "You're going to have a lot of scars. Arm, arm, shoulder, chest, a bunch in the abdomen, and

three in the left thigh?”

“I guess. I’ve only been shot twice before this.”

One of the men called out, “You two okay in there?” He mentally hoped we’d ask for a hand.

Katherine’s voice dripped with sarcasm as she said, “We’re just fine, thank you. And no, we don’t need any assistance.”

That made me think of the blood, and I returned to washing off with paper towels, soap and water. She stepped over to the sink and changed the water to cold, and proceeded to work the blood out of my top. Then she changed the other sink to run cold water instead of hot.

The mindviews of the men outside stayed on the memory of me standing there nude. They even began to quietly discuss my body out in the hallway.

She said, “You should use cold water to wash out blood.”

“Oh. Thanks.” The pain lessened as the minutes went by.

“You’re in great shape, do you work out?”

“I used to. I don’t know if I need to or not now. I’ve been told that we don’t need to.”

“Are you a new meta?”

“Yeah.” I looked at my face in the mirror. I put my hand on the counter as another moment of dizziness swept over me. It appeared that my face was clean, but there was no way I’d get the blood out of my hair in here. I sighed as I held a length of my hair out.

The officer looked at my hair. “That’s not coming clean without a shower.”

“I know. Ah well, at least I can be mostly clean going down there. I don’t want to be ridiculed for getting shot so much.”

“Oh, most of the guys will probably think you pretty brave, being as you are now walking around. They might get on your case for getting knocked out during the fight, though.”

“Damn, you’re right.” Another bullet wiggled its way out and rang as it bounced on the floor.

I continued, “Well, this will have to do.”

She handed me the top, and worked at washing the bottoms while I slid the top up my legs. *Pulling it down over my head would just re-bloody it on my hair.* Good thing the material stretched so much. It was actually amazingly small when not being worn, much like spandex. She squeezed the water out of the bottoms and handed them to me. I slid them on next.

I felt motion in my abdomen, lifted my top and another bullet came out. Yet another wound that looked much like an angry welt. I picked up the two bullets.

She asked, “Does that hurt?” She visualized watching a bullet



come out.

“Yes, it does. Oh, you mean when they push their way out. Not too much for that, it’s an odd wiggling sensation. The welts and wounds with bullets still in them hurt though. Shall we go visit the kidnapper? Thanks for helping me, by the way.”

“Glad to help. Better than one of those guys trying to come in and help.” She stared at my chest for a moment. “Wait a second. You got shot right here.” She pointed near the inner part of my right breast.

“Yeah.”

“Your costume doesn’t have a hole in it.”

“Oh yeah, very cool. She said it was self-repairing.” *Dr. Turnquist rocks. I wonder how much she would charge me for just a new top and bottom for my costume.*

“Wow, that’s neat.”

“Now, if only it self cleaned.” Most of the blood had come out, but some of the costume was more pink than white. The costumes we had custom made by Dr. Turnquist were a special fabric, one that would mend itself so long as it still had the fabric. A sort of DNA, the Doctor had said, which remembered the way it ought to be. It was stronger than normal spandex as well, so our costumes wouldn’t be torn up by minor fights or tears.

“So, ah, did you change much when you went meta?” She was thinking physically, and wondered about my hair and body shape.

“Yeah, my hair all fell out and re-grew this metallic gold color. My eyes changed. I added muscle all over, though I wasn’t skinny before, just toned. Now it looks like I do more weight lifting, though I can lift hundreds of pounds pretty easily. I don’t seem to need support any more. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know, I’ve just never had the chance to actually talk to a meta. Stumbling across one, ah, nude was unexpected.”

“Great, so I’m just a ‘meta’ to you? Plus, I had undies, boots and facemask on.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, right, that’s fully dressed then, is it? But no, I guess you aren’t ‘just’ a meta to me. Sorry. I suppose if I met a sports star or actress I’d ask questions too. I don’t mean to sound snoopy.”

*I like that comparison.* I grinned at her. “You do realize that I still have a ‘real life’ so to speak? I go to college, have friends, eat, date, etc. We ‘metas’ live our lives, too.” I looked at myself in the mirror. *Wow. I’m a super. Dad told me I’d become one someday, but to look at myself, standing here in a costume....*

*Wait, did I just say date? I’m feeling a little delirious, probably from the*

*blood loss. Hmm, are Rael and I dating now? Sheesh, how could I date a normal guy now? I'd know everything he was thinking, and could beat him in arm wrestling to boot. Not a good way to start off a relationship.*

I shook my head, and walked to the door. The mindviews of the two men showed me that they were still discussing my ... attributes. I opened the door, and all audible discussion stopped, but their gazes started at my chest this time. If I weren't feeling a little light-headed I might have gotten on their case about it, instead I decided to have fun with them.

I hooked each of my arms in one of theirs, and walked toward the stairs. Both of them smiled, and I mentioned, "Guys, has anyone mentioned to you why I'm here?"

Baracco said, "I was called in because you were shot down, so no idea."

Officer Klinger said, "The guys downstairs were mentioning that you butted in here, and weren't supposed to help until we nabbed the guy. So I'm not sure either."

I smiled, "I'm a telepath, a mind reader."

My smile grew into a grin and I looked at each of their faces while the thought sank in. When they both wondered if I'd heard what they had been thinking I continued, "Yeah, I heard and saw everything you two were just thinking about me..."

Both of them flushed bright red, which kept my grin wide. "Don't worry; I'm used to being stared at, just not, ah, nude."

They both stammered out apologies. I said, "Oh, stop worrying, I'm not mad at you." I stopped for a moment and rubbed my face with one hand. I felt almost drunk, very giddy. Either having bled so much, or perhaps my body healing was really affecting me oddly. "Do either of you have anything to eat? I'm feeling kind of lightheaded."

Baracco said, "I have some energy bars in the ambulance. Would you like them? You're probably feeling the blood loss, but I don't know what to do in the case of a super."

I smiled at him and said, "You're sweet, thank you."

We arrived at the elevator and the four of us went down. The guys turned us around once we entered it, but Katherine stopped and simply stared me in the eye while we went down. I smiled at her. She wondered what would cause my eyes to be amethyst, and have a very slight back glow to the sclera. *Are my eyes even more backlit now than in the bathroom? No, it must just be darker in here.*

She looked perplexed for a moment, then said, "What ... what is that smell? She stepped closer to me and sniffed." She hadn't gotten close enough in the bathroom to have my normal scent affect her much. She stepped almost nose to nose and sniffed again. "Oh, wow,

that's you! Damn you smell good!"

Both of the guys gave her a strange look, and then they leaned closer to me and sniffed. I closed my eyes and sensed through their mindviews. Having three people very close while smelling my new pheromone enhanced fragrance was almost as good as having Rael's super olfactory sense do the same. Possibly even more, since all three of them enjoyed it, and I felt three waves of enjoyment coming at me.

Perhaps being lightheaded added to it, but I let my head roll to the side slightly and sighed, enjoying the sensation.

Baracco asked, "Do you have perfume on?"

Katherine answered for me, "She just washed herself completely off, she can't have perfume on." She had been inches away when I sighed; she smelled the pleasant fragrance from my mouth where it was even stronger. *I still wonder how I can have the smell from my mouth, but the pheromones must work from my saliva as well. Hey, Rael and I can test that one.*

The elevator dinged, and the door opened just before Katherine kissed me, saving her from the embarrassment. That would have felt better than the mild pain I still felt from the bunch of welts on my body. That gave me the idea, and I leaned forward and kissed her instead. We stood there a moment, my arms entwined with the two men, and Katherine and I kissing until we heard a cough from outside the elevator.

Katherine jumped and quickly shifted off to the side. I could feel her embarrassment from her mindview. The new person's mindview focused on me, with my eyes closed and mouth still slightly open. I had been right, the enjoyment Katherine and I both had from the kiss doubled up on me and helped tune out much of the pain.

The thoughts of the new person immediately wondered if I were a lesbian, and I giggled, then grinned. I opened my eyes. "No, I'm not a lesbian. I hoped the kiss would help offset some of the pain from the bullet wounds."

It was an F.B.I. agent. Agent Dostal, per the tag on his chest. Not that I needed a name tag to pull someone's name where I had their mindview so handy. Agent Dostal was a massive, hairy man. He had light blue eyes and light brown hair, and was impeccably dressed.

He nodded slowly at me in an obvious show of disbelief.

Officer Lewis von Klinger coughed, and said, "Shall we get you out to the perp?"

I leaned my head back and looked him in the eye. "I believe so."

We walked outside. Baracco went to his vehicle for the energy bars, I hoped.

The F.B.I. agents had taken over the scene outside now that the

tactical situation had been resolved. I squeezed the arm of Officer Klinger, slid my arm out of his and walked over to the group in charge.

They watched me approach them. Unfortunately, I wasn't walking the straightest path. I tried to walk a straight line, but my legs didn't cooperate.

John, the police tactical leader's voice practically dripped with venom, "Thanks for not getting any of my people hurt with your rash leap into the scene."

I replied, "Was that sarcasm?" He thought it was indeed. "Listen, I'm the only one who got injured, barring the kidnapper. So can you step off a little?"

"This time I will. Next time you might get others injured or killed."

"So noted. Listen, we've got a kid being held, can we try to work together here?"

"You're going to try to get him to talk? Hoping he'll tell you where the kid is or something?"

I squeezed my fist. "No, I'm going to rip the information out of his mind, unless he cooperates nicely. I doubt he will."

"You're a psychic super? I've never heard of one who is a melee combatant."

"You mean my rush at him up there? No, I'm obviously not a good hand to hand fighter. I'm just tired and grumpy. My partners specialize in combat."

"Oh yeah? Who are they?"

I rubbed my eyes and face. I was tired, lightheaded, and still in pain. "Spartan and Black Tiger. We're based in Metrocity."

The F.B.I. Agent in command, Tim Danst said, "Hmm, I read something about Spartan in the paper yesterday. He put an entire derailed train back on the tracks?"

"Yeah, I wasn't with him when he did."

"The article mentioned he was a brick, unbelievably strong. He would have been useful upstairs."

"Yeah, don't remind me. I'm the one who got shot, remember?"

One of the tactical men standing behind me thought *'Bet Spartan doesn't have an ass like yours though, lady.'* I looked back at him and smiled. "Thanks. He's got a great butt for a guy in that spandex suit though, or whatever this stuff is."

Everyone turned to look at the poor guy. He looked surprised and embarrassed at being outed.

I said, "Guys, while I enjoy picking on you for thinking naughty thoughts, I'd really like to interrogate the kidnapper...."

Agent Danst said, "We've got him being looked at over at the

ambulance. Shall we, miss?"

"Psystar. Yep."

Baracco stopped me on the way to the second ambulance and handed me the energy bars. I gave him a quick hug and thanked him, then proceeded to open the package and scarf down the bar. Agent Danst found it interesting that I was so hungry.

Baracco noticed his look and said, "She lost a **lot** of blood. Some sugar in the system will help, I hope." Both of them watched me very closely, almost as if I weren't human, and they were attempting to figure out what the alien liked.

I had the second energy bar down before we reached the ambulance. The kidnapper lay on a stretcher, handcuffed to the rails on each side. His right hand was wrapped in bandages.

He looked up at us and spit, then said, "My rights are bein' violated, pigs. I get med help before having to put up with your shit. I'm in a lot of pain, too. Where are the painkillers?"

The line reminded me of my interrogation of the mutant in Metrocity Jail yesterday. I ended up having a mental fight in his mind, and threw him into his own emotional fear center. The last we'd seen of him he screamed and screamed in terror until he passed out. *Hmm, I could do that to this guy, I suppose. Teach him what pain and fear are all about.*

He stared at me, and wondered how in the world I was back on my feet after being shot so many times. Only twenty minutes before I had been bleeding profusely and unconscious.

I smiled grimly and said, "You should have shot someone who would stay hurt. Now you've just made me mad." *And lightheaded. Won, now would be a great time to go drinking if I were legal, I'd be all happy and dancing on tables and stuff.*

I stretched my neck by twisting my head from side to side. I walked around behind his head and knelt down.

He said, "What the hell? Screw this, get away from me! I demand a lawyer!"

I leaned my head down close to his. His mindview became huge to me as I almost touched my forehead to his. He was afraid of what I was going to do to him, and yet so angry at not being able to capture me. *Yes, fear will do.* I focused on spreading fear. I wanted him to cower before me. He could learn the hard way not to shoot me.

The almost familiar tingling sensation spread across my skin as I focused on making him fear me. The tingling continued much longer than normal, and a rush went down my spine. Someone nearby screamed and ran away from me. The kidnapper's mindview had changed my appearance to be backlit. My skin somehow darkened and glowed from behind, giving me an otherworldly look. My golden hair

floated in the air, glowing from that aura. My eyes had a strange, frightening look to them. They were backlit golden, with the amethyst iris appearing dark and unnatural.

*Yeah, I like this.* I concentrated on pouring this sense outward. I wasn't in the mood for a mental fight, softening him up seemed like a better idea. Nearby mental voices sounded very afraid, and disappeared as they moved out of my mental range. The kidnapper was paralyzed with fear as he stared up at my frightening visage.

My lip curled into a wicked smile. I debated asking him where the child was at, but wouldn't believe him anyway. I pulled myself through his mindview, summoning up my nebulous pack of golden tentacles I'd used in other people's minds. I looked around at them for a moment. They simply formed out of a golden light around me, rather than out of my body.

His visual image was lost to the view of my horror-film visage, along with my new pets. I waved my hand and tentacles reached out to grab his mental self and lift him over to me. I smiled wickedly and said, "You're in **my** world now, scumbag. No bullets reach me here."

I looked around his mental center. It was a large room, the mindview floated in the air behind me, showing his visual of my horrifying visage. I said, "Nice." I looked around at the doors in the room. Only one appeared locked down, from the strange look to it I guessed that it was his subconscious. The one to the left of that felt a slow current of fear on the air. This interested me. I felt the fear much like I would smell something upwind from me. Not that I was afraid, but it was an odd sense of it – like a smell, perhaps. *Ah, your emotional center. Let's go visit, shall we?*

Held in my tentacles, his mental view of himself looked afraid, but somewhat angry as well. He spat at me and swore to shoot me down for good next time.

I glared at him and walked to the open door, my tentacles dragging him alongside. Similar to that seen in other people whose minds I'd entered; there were pools of emotions spread around the room. I followed the scent of fear back to a large pool. I asked of him, "Would you really like to feel fear?"

"No, no!"

The desire for vengeance made even my mental voice sound venomous. My voice rose as I spoke, and then yelled at him, "Yeah, I think so. You dared to shoot me ten times. You kidnapped an innocent girl. You want to be a big criminal? Let's give you something to remember the experience by."

I directed the tentacles to throw him deep into the pond. The sensation of fear even near the pool was unpleasant while I stood near

it. Being immersed had to be really bad. He shrieked in horror as he surfaced in the pool. I left him to swim in the stuff, and listened to him scream and shriek as I walked away.

A darker side of me felt vindicated teaching him a lesson. Part of me wondered if it was the right thing to do, being cruel even to a criminal. It wasn't like I needed a trial to determine if he'd actually shot me, though. I was there; he did it, guilty by action.

Regardless, it was done; I would ponder that thought later. I walked to his largest door, what always seemed to be a person's memory center. Upon entering, I found I'd chosen correctly. I wondered for a moment why the memory door was always wide open, yet the subconscious door always closed. Perhaps I could get a special Psych study made where we could study that fact.

Images, sounds and what appeared to be floating videos floated all over the room. The nearest were of the combat upstairs with me. I marveled at being able to rewind and pause the memories with a flick of my wrist. I yawned, I was definitely tired. *I suppose I should get this done quickly, it's been a late night already.*

I glanced around the nearby memories until I found one of him looking out from a van, pointing at the same girl I saw earlier in the father's memory. I beckoned and that memory floated over to me. His screaming in the background annoyed me. Perhaps using someone's emotional center to hold them wasn't such a great idea, it was distracting at the least.

I watched the memory play through; two men had leapt out of the van and grabbed her. She shoved one with strength far greater than a teen ought to have – the man flew back ten feet and landed on his backside. The other sprayed her in the face with a canister. She slumped quickly, and then they threw her in the back of the van. They jumped back in the van and tied her up with ropes, stuffed a rag in her mouth and tied a rope around her head. I sped the memory ahead as the van traveled through the city.

Suddenly the entire room shook, and I felt myself yanked out of the memory room and back up through his mindview entrance. It felt like a door slammed on my face and a shockwave blast me backward. I screamed, and then passed out.

## **Preview Chapter 3 – It comes as a Shock**

### **Stephanie's Viewpoint**

I awoke to a splitting headache. Something constantly zapped my forehead, causing me a lot of pain, and made clear thought difficult. I attempted to move my hands to my head, but they were strapped down. I thrashed in place for a minute in an attempt to stop the pain, but it didn't stop.

I saw through two mindviews, even with my eyes closed. One obviously stood in a hospital corridor. He simply stood there. The other sat in the room with me and watched me thrash on the bed. I wore a hospital gown, my hands were shackled with heavy bands to a metal bed frame, and there was a band around my head. It had wires attached to it.

He stood up and walked over to me, looking down at me. From his mindview I pulled his name, it was Agent Harrison Dimmer from the F.B.I. He enjoyed watching me squirm and twist in pain. The shocking pain grew for a moment, and then receded to the previous irritating and painful level.

I gasped a few times from the increased pain, then opened my eyes and looked at him. "Uh, why am I here, and locked up?"

He replied, "You attacked a group of police officers and F.B.I. Agents. Obviously you're a rogue super."

"What? The last thing that occurred was me interrogating the kidnapper, and then something happened."

"Yes, that's when you attacked everyone. You did some kind of telepathic scream attack that gave everyone in the area a headache, and gave a bunch of us bloody noses. Officers were fleeing the area to get away from you."

I was about to say I didn't do that, but he was there, and his memory showed it to be true. Then he replayed the part he hadn't mentioned, Agent Dimmer had yanked me off the kidnapper while I was in his mind. The kidnapper had been screaming in terror while my eyes had this backlit golden glow as I leaned over him. My mental scream occurred when he pulled me out of mindview range.

"Ow. Why is this thing shocking me?" My face contorted from the pain.

"It will only activate when you are using your telepathy. What are you attempting to do to me now?"



"I'm not doing anything to you. I'm not even using my telepathy."

His voice rose with his anger. "Well, lady, that's a lie or you wouldn't be getting shocked." He stabbed his finger in the air at me as he spoke.

"I'm telling you, I'm not using my telepathy."

"I don't believe you. You supers think you're so special. You think you can break laws, torture people, and turn on legitimate members of law enforcement. I don't think so. We've got you on a rap now for attacking a good number of law enforcement. It should be enough to bring you down. Well, you've delayed our case enough, and put lives in danger. I'm needed back on the kidnapping case. I'm sure I'll see you again soon for the official arrest. Enjoy your headache, bitch."

He left the room, and the pain diminished. I looked, and it appeared that there were a series of wires running up above my head to a machine. The pain was tolerable at this level, though annoying. It felt much like a headache that wouldn't go away. I didn't understand why the machine would be shocking me if it were only supposed to while I used my telepathy.

A nurse came in after an hour or so. Her mindview showed that she was there to check on all the welt wounds from the bullets. The shocking pain increased back to the levels of when Agent Dimmer was in the room. It was rather embarrassing, having her pull the hospital gown down, then up to examine me. Her mindview showed no wounds left on my body, the skin was smooth and unbroken everywhere.

She watched the display on the shock machine for a few seconds and said, "The F.B.I. said that you will only get shocked when you attempt to use your powers on someone. What are you trying to do?"

In between grimacing and twisting on the bed I replied, "I'm not using any powers; it just got worse when you came in here. I'm not injured anymore; I don't need your help, apart from letting me go."

"Yes, obviously you **are** using your powers." She stomped out of the room in a huff. The pain lessened once she left the room.

Another hour filled with pain passed slowly. I heard the mental voices of people nearby, but out of mindview range. Finally, the door opened and Agent Willman from the kidnapped child's house walked in. I couldn't help but squirm as he walked in and the pain increased again.

He walked over to the bed and said, "Hello again, Psystar. I'm Agent Willman, if you recall."

"I, uhh, would chat, but getting constantly shocked for hours on

end isn't making me overly chatty, Agent Willman."

"You shouldn't be getting shocked. This only works when a telepath uses their powers."

"Duh. It's shocking me now. I'm not using any powers."

He looked at the machine behind me; it showed activity in various readouts. He stepped back, took out his cell phone and made a call. "Agent Willman here. I'm in the telepath's room in the hospital. She says she's being shocked constantly, and the machine is showing activity. Is that normal?"

His mindview allowed me to hear the other side of the conversation. "No, there's a specific brainwave activity that happens when a telepath uses their power. It won't shock if it's not being used."

"Well, she's squirming around in quite a bit of pain, and claims it has been shocking her for hours. Is there something that will show me how long it's been shocking her?"

Another agent entered the room to join Agent Willman. The shocking at my temples leaped up in intensity, and I cried out in pain. I thrashed and yanked at the bonds holding my wrists to the bars on the bed. A nurse heard my cry and came in to check on us. Upon reaching us the pain leapt to new heights and I screamed in pain.

It felt like holes were being bored into my skull. I saw the four mindviews in my vision, but couldn't focus on any of them due to the shockwaves entering my head. I barely heard the nurse call for a doctor.

Another nurse and a doctor came running into the room. The pain hit an unbelievable level and my back arched with the pain. I let out a piercing scream, even louder and longer this time. I dimly heard the mental voices of those within perhaps forty feet of me react to the scream. Nurses began running everywhere. Many of the mindviews felt a piercing headache and reacted to wiping blood from their noses.

My back bowed from the massive pain entering my head. I barely breathed apart from sucking in enough air to scream again. Passing out again was a blessing.

I awoke yet again, still bound in the hospital bed. Thankfully no shocks struck. Three mindviews appeared. I recognized Agent Willman and the F.B.I. security that had been standing at the door. The other I didn't, although her thoughts sounded like a nurse's.

I cautiously opened my eyes and looked around, then sighed out of relief as no pain struck. I unclenched my hands; I hadn't even noticed that I'd tightened them into fists in anticipation of new pain.

Nurse Katie asked, "How do you feel, honey?"

I licked my lips and looked around. *Still no new pain.* I said,

"Better, the shocking is gone."

Agent Willman thought to test me, and flicked the switch on a piece of equipment. Immediately shocks jarred into my head, and I cried out and thrashed on the bed. He flicked the switch back off.

He said, "Sorry about that."

My face contorted with pain, hands gripped tightly into fists. I asked through clenched teeth, "Why are you torturing me?"

"We aren't, this machine only activates when you are trying to use your telepathy on us. What were you just trying to do?"

"I wasn't **doing** anything."

Agent Willman put his hand on my cheek and said, "Hey, if I keep this off, do I have your word that you won't do something to us?"

I replied, "I don't know what you think I did, or plan to do, but I didn't attack those other agents, and no, I'm not going to attack you. Honest." I really wanted him to believe me. It was the truth, and that shocking was painful.

He nodded. I slumped back onto the bed and closed my eyes. He took a deep breath and smiled.

I said, "Oh, thank you. Damn, that hurt."

"That machine is set to only shock if you are trying something. Since your brain only activates in a certain spot when your telepathy is active, you're trying something. Come on now, don't lie to me."

"I haven't used my telepathy since I've been at the scene with the kidnapper. Your machine isn't working right."

"Come on, we've tested it on several telepaths, and the results are very consistent, per the techs."

Nurse Katie said, "Psystar, we can see the brainwave activity on the monitor right now. You're doing something."

I caught Agent Dimmer's thoughts as he approached from out in the hall. I mumbled, "Oh, great, Dimmer's coming in. He's an a-hole." Just then the door opened and he walked in.

Nurse Katie said, "How did you know he was coming in?"

"I saw his thoughts as he approached in the hall."

"Wait a moment, is that automatic?"

"Yeah."

Agent Willman said, "Hold on, you hear our thoughts now without trying to read our minds?"

"Duh ... yeah. I hear everyone's thoughts when they get close enough. Just like you hear noise that is close enough."

Agent Dimmer frowned, "Why isn't the machine on, she's using telepathy on us?" He walked over toward it to turn it on.

A look of horror crossed my face. *Nothing like seeing your own fearful face from other people's eyes at the same time.*

Agent Willman grabbed his arm. “Hold on, I turned it off, and it is staying off for now.”

Agent Dimmer angrily said, “What? Why? You’ll be lucky if she doesn’t screw with you like she did that poor guy, or scream in all our heads and give us bloody noses and ears again. She knocked one guy out.”

Nurse Katie said, “Actually, having the machine on caused her to scream and make a fair number of people bleed just a little while ago. Obviously it doesn’t stop her from using her power.”

Agent Willman held up his hand, palm out at her, “I’m the agent in charge here. Dimmer - out of the room if you aren’t going to be helpful.”

“Whatever. This is bullshit.” He stormed out of the room. He wanted to turn the machine back on, even if the only effect was to hurt me.

I blew out my breath. I must have been holding it in anticipation of being shocked.

Agent Willman said, “Where was I? Ah, you were saying that you just hear people thinking when they get close to you?”

“Yeah. Don’t all telepaths?”

“No. Those tested all, um, turn it on. Something like pulling a trigger on a gun to read someone’s thoughts.”

“Not for me. Being around too many people is a real pain in the ass for me. I get a ton of mindviews all blocking my vision, and can’t hear because so many people are talking in their head.”

“Then you **were** using your telepathy?”

“Huh?”

Nurse Katie jumped in, “That makes sense, actually. She just has an always-on type of telepathy. Almost an extra ear for her.”

I nodded. “I haven’t spoken with any other telepaths, Psycom was supposed to call me, but I haven’t heard from him yet.”

Agent Willman said, “He was a test subject for us. His works on the on/off type usage.”

I rolled my eyes. “Great, I’m a freak among freaks.”

“You mentioned a ‘mindview,’ I’ve never heard of that, what is it?”

“It’s a visual of what you guys are seeing or thinking. It reminds me of a T.V. in my visual field.”

“You said ‘a ton of mindviews.’ You see many of these?”

“One for every person close to me. Wait, your machine hurt more every time more people came in the room. I wonder if my mindview link registered as more telepathic activity?”

“Beats me, I’m not a scientist. Sounds reasonable, I suppose.

Jesus, you actually see what both of us are thinking right now?"

"You two and Mr. Firre out in the hall. Oh, and someone cleaning the room above or below us as well. Sometimes someone else's appears when they walk by in the hallway or enter the room above or below this one."

"So, ah, T.V. screens keep appearing and disappearing in your head?"

"Right. Although 'in my head' isn't very accurate. They appear out where I'm looking. As in, they get in the way of my eyesight if my eyes are open."

"Huh. That's, ah, interesting." He actually thought it was disturbing, peering into every person's thoughts.

"I also hear what you think, Agent Willman. I'm sorry it's disturbing to you. I'm hoping to get used to it enough that I can **not** react to what other people think."

He nodded. "Now that that is cleared up, I'd like to hear in your words what occurred at the scene with the kidnapper."

"Do you mean my capturing of the kidnapper, or my mind reading of him, or when I was so rudely interrupted and apparently screamed at everyone and hurt them all?"

"Give me a rough overview until the interruption."

"I was already grumpy, I think you knew that. When I showed up at the scene they still hadn't caught the guy. I located him, flew through a window and tried to capture him. He shot me about ten times while I tried to subdue him, and he knocked me out. The police tactical squad came in right at that point and must have subdued him. One of them later said the guy had run out of bullets shooting at me. When I woke up, I went downstairs, made nice with Agent Danst, and then proceeded to enter the kidnapper's mind to dig out where they held the girl."

I continued, "I almost had it, I was reviewing his memory of their capture of the girl and driving to their hideout when I somehow got jerked out of his mind. I've never had that happen before. All I know at that point is that I blacked out."

He asked, "Why was the man screaming in terror?"

I bit my lip. "I was causing him to be afraid. He'd already shot me ten times, I wanted him to learn to be afraid so he'd give up the information easier.... Oh."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Doh. I did throw his mental self into what I call his 'fear pool.' There's a place in everyone's mind that has their various emotions. I tossed him into the place where he feels fear. It, ah, kind of gives the person a massive dose of fear. That might be why Agent

Dimmer saw the guy scream as bad as he did."

Nurse Katie asked, "Why would you do that to a person? That's a horrible thing to do."

I sheepishly answered, "He already kidnapped a young girl today, and then when I went to capture him he shot me about ten times. Have you ever been shot ten times? It hurt like hell."

Agent Willman said, "So why did you attack everyone again?"

"I didn't attack anyone, except maybe the kidnapper in his mind."

"But everyone said they heard a mental scream, in their words. You actually caused bloody noses and ears in some people, like Agent Dimmer mentioned."

Nurse Katie said, "Actually, she did that here as well, when you had that machine on."

"I did?"

"Yes, you did."

"I wonder if I did that before passing out. It was quite a shock having my mental link to the kidnapper broken. Perhaps it occurred when he dragged me far enough away from the guy. Call Baracco, the paramedic. He should have been watching. I bet he could tell you if I screamed when I was right by the guy, or when I was dragged something like fifteen feet away from him."

"I'll do that." He walked out of the room, opening his cell phone as he left. His mindview showed he planned on making the call now.

Nurse Katie patted my arm and said, "Even if they are the bad guys, I would think you shouldn't do that to them. It's cruel."

I sighed and looked away from her, "I suppose you're right. I was just so mad about the F.B.I. failing to follow a simple protocol before calling me in, and then finding out that someone's daughter was kidnapped, then being shot until I passed out. You're probably right though."

Agent Willman left mindview range, but I still heard his mental voice as he made a call, obtained the cell number for Baracco, then called him up and discovered that my theory was correct. He next called up the regional H.E.R.O. headquarters in Metrocity and asked what the general policy was when a hero reacts to what might be an attack on them, and accidentally harms officers and other law enforcement personnel.

While we waited the nurse helped me drink some water and get more comfortable in the bed. I thanked her.

She asked, "Where did you get your hair dyed a metallic gold?" She ran her fingers through my soft hair.

"I didn't. My hair all fell out when I changed, and immediately this grew out."

"Hmm, a natural gold. Well, I've got other patients to check on, honey." She patted my shoulder and left the room. I was left alone with my thoughts ... and the mindview of Mr. Firre, and the mental voices of about a dozen people within thirty or forty feet.

Agent Willman walked back in about thirty minutes later and unlocked my hands, and then pulled off the head apparatus.

He said, "I'm releasing you and won't have any charges pressed. No one mentioned that you lashed out after being dragged away from the guy. Personally, I could give a rat's ass if he was screaming in terror if you were getting the information to save the girl."

"Thank you. Is my costume here?"

"I saw it somewhere ... ah, yeah, over here." He picked it up off a side table and brought it to me.

I rubbed my wrists, although they almost instantly healed the chafing caused by the heavy restraints. Then I sat up and stretched. I slid on the bottoms while I still wore the hospital gown, and pulled off the top to slide on my own. He watched me until I started pulling on the top, and then looked away. I grinned at his discomfort, for some reason being flirty put me back in my comfort zone.

I tapped his arm to get him to look at me again, and ran my hand through my hair while staring at him. Like most people, he was distracted by the motion I made, which worked wonderfully as a mirror. My hair had been washed.

I said, "Thanks for that."

"For what?"

"Acting as my mirror. I see what you see. I'm a telepath, remember?"

"I wonder if all the telepaths can see through the eyes of others. For that matter, I wonder how many other telepaths are out there with always-on telepathy. You **were** using your power constantly."

"No, I don't do anything to activate that."

"Yes, but your power is still active. That must register on the machine as activity. Maybe if you'd come in for testing they could calibrate the machine so it only shocks when you actively use your power."

"Yeah, that's a great sales pitch. Come on in so we can learn how and when to shock you better, Psystar. Not." I slid on my boots as I spoke. The headache had mostly faded by this point. It was pleasant not to be in constant pain.

I continued, "Onto another topic, did you get any further on the kidnapping case?"

"No. The prisoner fell unconscious after screaming for five minutes, and you've been out of it, so we didn't know if you had gotten anything useful. Then Dimmer mentioned that you tried attacking him here. I decided I had to find out for myself, which is why I came in. We've lost valuable time."

"I agree. You know, I'm pretty sure I have federal official status. Dimmer pulling me off the guy might constitute an attack on me, not the other way around." I put on my belt and gloves as we spoke.

"You might be right, though to be honest we really don't need any inter-agency squabbling right now. Dimmer doesn't like supers. As a group you tend to be hot headed, and are glory hounds in it for the bonus money. You, Miss Psystar, definitely fit into the hot headed case earlier."

"I'm sorry about that. Really, I am. I **did** give clear instructions to only have me called after a kidnapper had been apprehended though. You guys kind of blew that one." I held up my hands. "I'm not finger pointing though, I just want you to understand one of several reasons I was grumpy. The rest I'm not sure you'd understand unless you were a telepath like I am."

"Fine. Fair enough. The man is still unconscious, can you mind read him while he's out? If so, can you do it without causing him such terror?"

"I can try."

"Great. We'll check you out, and then let's go give that a try. Find out if we can get any closer to saving the Lieberman's daughter without hamstringing each other."

I stuck the mask onto my face, and we left the room.



## Preview Chapter 4 – Grumpy Kitty

### Rael's Viewpoint

The morning didn't go well. I woke up perhaps three quarters of an hour after Stephanie left for the kidnapping case. I had this dream, or nightmare, where she was in pain and calling my name. It didn't happen again, so I wrote it off as paranoia, but didn't get much sleep after that.

I called into work sick early in the morning. Something just felt wrong to me. I showered and ate breakfast. Lance joined me by 7:00 a.m.

Lance studied me for a moment and said, "You look upset ... claws out. What's going on?"

I answered, "Stephanie got a kidnapping call around 2 a.m. last night. I haven't heard from her since, and I tried calling her H.E.R.O. cell phone an hour ago. No response."

"So call her personal cell phone."

"I did that too, it's in her purse here."

"Oh. Maybe she's in the middle of something."

"For an hour? What takes an hour? She should have been done with reading a perp's mind by three or four in the morning. It only takes her a few minutes to do it."

"Yeah, but she's fallen unconscious after every time, right?"

I nodded, "Hmm ... true. But she also wakes back up in a minute or a few."

His eyes narrowed as he thought about it, "Good point. Something's up."

*Great, just talking about it is getting me even more riled up.* I paced back and forth. My arms felt odd, and the small fin-like spikes pushed through each forearm.

Lance watched me. "Dude, it won't help wiggling out here."

I growled, "It just pisses me off. I think she would have called me back. I didn't mention the nightmare I had where I heard her scream. It happened only once, but maybe something happened to her."

Lance pounded his fist on the table and said, "You heard her scream? That clinches it; we need to find out where she's at." The table split from the massive strength in his fist, even from a light blow to the table. One leg broke off; he barely caught the table before it fell

to the floor.

He muttered, "Crap. I'm breaking everything. Car, cell phone, doors, and now the table these last few days. This is going to get expensive." My enhanced hearing caught his muttering as though he spoke normally.

An odd thought came to me, "Hey, have you had to go to the bathroom since Saturday night?"

He said, "Of course ... wait. No. I've taken showers. No, I haven't had to go in what, two and a half days. Great, my super muscles are blocking me up."

I blinked at his statement ... and then I laughed so hard I doubled over. After I recovered I said, "Oh man, a case of super constipation. That's awesome. But, no they aren't. Stephanie and I noticed the same thing. Our bodies are consuming everything."

He snorted, "Well, at least I won't have to take a break from a super fight to go visit the restroom, that's a bonus."

I said, "It'd be a humorous sight, you in your tights at a urinal."

He thought for a moment and said, "Huh. Well, that's one good thing against my breaking of everything."

"At least you don't feel like biting people any time they are right in front of you."

"I'm with you there. I'll try to keep an eye on you in a crowded area to keep you from doing it."

I noticed that my arms had smoothed out again. "Thanks ... hey, nice distraction; my temporary spikes went away."

"I noticed. I just didn't want to draw your attention to it."

"Okay, back to Steph. I know where she went; I put the address in my H.E.R.O. phone before she took off."

"Did you take down any contact info on the task? I'm assuming it came through as a task just for her on her phone?"

"Right. Damn, I didn't get that. We could head to the address."

"Sounds good, let's suit up and head there. Not much use hitting the gym, everything feels too light." He couldn't hide the bitterness from his expression.

We both went to our rooms and suited up in our costumes. He came back out in his bright yellow and red costume. Unlike Steph's revealing costume, his covered everything but his neck and head. There was a tall red diamond shape on the outside of the elbows and knee area, meeting on the inside of the leg and elbow. The boots and gloves were black, so he could wear them with normal clothing and not look out of place. A red V shape went from each shoulder down to meet at a point in the center of his chest and back. He also wore a yellow tactical belt to hold his H.E.R.O. cell phone, card and such, and he

wore a pair of goggle like glasses that were red.

My costume was simpler. I wore all black, though the pants, chest and partial gloves were the same material as his. My gloves didn't cover the fingers, since my claws grow out of my fingertips and would rip them up every time. The shirt was only a t-shirt in shape, leaving part of my biceps and lower arms bare. I had a gray and white tiger paw on the chest. I wore a black partial face mask to try and hide my identity. Kim, a nurse at Iron Cross Hospital thought it looked too dark. People wouldn't know I was a hero on sight.

I stared at Lance for a moment. "Dude, you know that putting on those shades won't make people not recognize you out of costume. You're six foot eight, and make many pro wrestlers look small."

"Well, duh. Of course they will. Even a tux or business suit wouldn't hide my size. I'm wearing them to be cool. Plus, they keep out dust and debris. It was annoying when the building collapsed on me and dust got in my eyes."

"Okay, just so long as you understand that. The day I see you pull off a normal shirt to reveal your costume, put on your glasses and expect everyone to see a different guy I'm going to laugh at you."

"I would expect no less from you, Rael. What they will recognize is that there is a hero in their midst to help them."

"Hmm. I'll give you that one. Or maybe a clown."

"Yeah, thanks. So, where's the place Steph went to?"

"Down in Rikesville. About a hundred miles away."

"Jeez. That's going to take an hour and a half to get there."

"Let's get going then. How about I drive? By the way, after we're done with this I'm going to get a cycle for my superheroing."

"Good idea, though I prefer the jumping myself. It's pretty cool flying over buildings."

"Yeah, well, not so cool when I have to hang onto you."

"I'll agree with that. Though, if you have a cycle Steph might not want to fly you around with her..."

"Hmm. Good point. I'd hate to deprive her of clinging to my manly body."

Lance laughed, "Nice. I'm sure it was **her** clinging that you were thinking of."

*As much as I love the clinging, I doubt he realizes it's her scent that is so awesome.*

We left the house and hopped in my car. Not the most august form of travel for a pair of superheroes, but it was better than hanging onto Lance's back for an hour and a half. He didn't slow down on the descent, so my claws tended to pop out and cut into him.

I again received the feeling that Stephanie screamed while I drove us to Rikesville. A shiver ran down my spine, and my fingertips elongated into claws. I noticed that Lance fidgeted oddly at that moment, so I asked, "Did you just get the sense of Steph screaming?"

"I ... think so. I figured I must just be worried about her."

"I don't believe so; I just had the same feeling. Something's up, I don't like it."

"Step on it, Rael."

"Dude, the car's a beater. It's only going to go just so fast."

It made for a tense drive, thinking that your friend is in enough danger to scream. *I didn't know her range was this far, either. I thought she said she could only hear thoughts from a few dozen feet away, and links into our other senses from about fifteen feet out.*

I gave Lance the address so he could pull it up on his H.E.R.O. device and handle the navigation. I didn't want to touch my device too much when my claws were out, and I was too worried to get them to change back to normal. The claws were razor sharp on the tips, and hard enough to easily gouge through concrete. I feared that my smartphone wouldn't survive a lot of scratches from them.

I noticed that Lance grimaced, and occasionally rubbed his gut and leg.

I asked, "You okay?"

He replied, "Yeah, I'm still healing from the huge fight with Kralgon. He did a lot of damage to me."

"Wow, that was yesterday afternoon. I'm surprised you haven't healed yet."

"I heal a lot slower than you do, apparently."

"Good thing it takes a lot more to hurt you, then."

"Yeah."

The thick clouds seemed to portend a bad day. A storm would likely hit sometime late today or tomorrow.

As I drove I asked Lance, "Any idea if our status as H.E.R.O. agents makes us local, or federal officials?"

"Federal. Didn't you read the stuff I downloaded off their website a while back?"

I shrugged at him. "I glanced at it. I was more interested in the idea of action than rules. We've got the ability to step into another investigation and involve ourselves, or even take over?"

"I don't think we could take one over, although if it involves supervillains then we have official jurisdiction. Similar to how U.S. Marshals are the prime agency for apprehending foreign fugitives, we're the agency for supervillains. In fact, I read that originally they considered making heroes part of the U.S. Marshal Tactical Operations

Division, but since we also deal so much with rescue operations they decided to keep us separate.”

“Okay, my key point is that if we show up at this kidnapping, we have enough official status to butt in, even if we aren’t taking over?”

“We can step in; they’d have to call a H.E.R.O. HQ to get us off their backs. Ideally we don’t want to butt in too much though. Remember, you catch more flies with honey than, uh, butter? Wait, what the heck else do you try to catch flies with?”

I laughed, “Nice. I think it’s vinegar, but I get the point.”

“But yeah, it happens at Score! all the time – it’s really not that hard to talk people down from fighting if you try. Better than jumping right in and getting physical, anyway.”

“Heh, I think I’d just jump in.”

“Hmm, no bouncer reference for you, Rael.”

We drove into the ritzy subdivision by mid-morning. The houses were large, the few cars visible in garages were elegant, and the lawns well cared for. The mapping software led us to the house in question. Several government vehicles were parked outside, as well as a few private vehicles.

I parked in the street. I noticed the car leaned quite a bit to Lance’s side as he got out. “Spartan, we really need to get you weighed. You’ve got to weigh a lot more than you used to.”

“Why would my weight matter?”

“If you get a motorcycle it’ll matter as far as size. Also, if others have to pick you up for some reason. Even for buying furniture.”

“Fine, fine, worry about it later.”

We walked up the drive to the front door, and I knocked. I thought it was properly imposing having my claws out. I stared at them for a moment. It was interesting that they weren’t a long fingernail, instead the fleshy end of each finger changed into this very hard (and sharp) substance. The sound of someone walking to the front door interrupted my thoughts. Heavy footsteps, it had to be a man, although nowhere near as heavy as Lance.

A guy in a suit answered the door. He looked like a Fed to me. He glanced quickly up and down at me, then at the giant behind me. His hand was still on the sidearm in the holster at his side.

He said, “I’m Agent Dunsworth of the F.B.I., can I help you with something?”

I said, “I’m Black Tiger, this is Spartan, we’re, ah, H.E.R.O. agents. We’re wondering why Psystar dropped off our radar, when this was her last location.” I breathed in deeply through my nose. I could smell Stephanie’s scent, but she definitely wasn’t here right now.

"Well, she's not here."

"I know, I'd be able to smell her if she were."

He raised an eyebrow, "She's at the hospital, last I heard."

My eyes narrowed. I heard his heart rate speed up, and could smell something. Some part of me told me it was the scent of fear.

"You're concealing something, Agent Dunsworth. Which hospital is she at?"

"Mercy Hospital, it's downtown."

"We'll trust that you're telling the truth then. There shouldn't be a reason to conceal anything, right? Even if she got shot, she'd heal it in a few minutes, so I know that something's up. But hey, I'll just believe you for the moment."

I very much wanted to grab this guy and slam him against the wall, then claw the information out of him, federal officer or not. I felt Lance's hand on my shoulder. He squeezed slightly with that massive strength. It felt a lot like some kind of vice had closed on me rather than just a hand.

Lance said, "Let's go check the hospital. Good seeing you, Agent Dunsworth." He released my shoulder as he turned and headed back to the car. *At least he didn't break my shoulder this time.*

I glanced back one more time at Agent Dunsworth, and then followed Lance out to the car. Once I sat down I did a map search for the hospital on the H.E.R.O. device to get a route. It was annoying having to use my knuckle to tap on the display, but at least it worked.

I debated for a moment, and then tried calling Stephanie's H.E.R.O. phone again. It went immediately to voicemail. Either her phone was off, or she had it on a do-not-disturb setting. In about fifteen minutes we arrived at the hospital.

As we walked up to the lobby Lance said, "You must be pretty irate. Your claws have been out since the drive to Rikesville."

"Yeah, I could smell sweat, or fear or something on that agent. He wasn't telling the truth, but if I attack him for the info outright it'll start a big fight or something that we don't need. But he was definitely feeding us a line."

"I agree. Good job on keeping it non-hostile."

"We haven't found her yet."

"We will."

We quickly entered the hospital and approached the front desk. Lance held me back by my shoulder, stepped ahead of me and asked, "Hi. May I ask which room the superheroine named Psystar is staying in?" He held out his H.E.R.O. card to display that we were official H.E.R.O. agents.

"I'm sorry, she checked out."

That ticked me off. I made a tight fist, and accidentally shoved my finger claws through my palm. "Gah, damn it." I pulled them out and licked the glove until the wound sealed over. My eyes shifted back and forth when I noticed that both Lance and the receptionist were watching me. "What? You try having giant claws on your fingers."

Lance shook his head and looked back at the receptionist. "What time did she check out?"

The receptionist looked back at her computer and said, "9:32 a.m. So you just missed her."

I growled, "I can't fucking believe this."

Lance said, "She would be pretty obvious, wearing an all white costume that leaves the shoulders bare. Long gold hair. Did she leave with anyone else?"

"She did, with an F.B.I. agent. She was here under security, so he had to release her."

I asked, "What does that mean, 'under security?'"

"She was being held for something. Anyone the police or F.B.I. bring in that needs medical attention but is officially in custody is handled like that."

I growled again. I called her one more time, and again the call went directly to voice mail. "Back to the house, and that guy better have an answer this time."

Lance nodded, "I agree. Thank you, miss. You have a great day."

She smiled at him, "You too."

We went back to the car, and drove back to the kidnap victim's house again. Even Lance was becoming irate; he kept gripping his legs during the trip. I found it interesting that his muscles felt like steel and barely moved when I pressed on them, but when he did it they moved more like normal. Normal for a body builder, at least.

After a while Lance said, "Perhaps I should do the talking back at the house."

"Why?"

"You're on edge. You're fidgeting as you drive, making little clawing motions on occasion. You're also growling. I have a feeling that if things don't go well you'll attack someone, and we don't need that."

I growled. *He's right, though I don't have to like it.* "All right, fine. They better cough up some answers, though."

We arrived back at the kidnap victim's house. *Hmm, kidnappers. Once we find Steph, we can help take them out.* We walked back up to the house, Agent Dunsworth came outside to meet us before we reached

the doorway. He looked worried.

Lance said, "We meet again, Agent Dunsworth. I hope this time you'll be a little more forthcoming."

Agent Dunsworth adjusted his tie and said, "Listen, Psystar still isn't here."

"We're aware of that. Which agent checked her out of the hospital, and what is his phone number?"

"What? I didn't even know that she was out."

"Why was she brought there? You know more than you are saying."

"Let me make a call, see if I can get an answer."

"You're running out of time, Dunsworth. Black Tiger's already pacing his cage; this whole situation looks rather dubious. Luring a H.E.R.O. agent down here. Doing something to her; hospitalizing her with F.B.I. lockdown on release. Lying or concealing information from other federal agents looking into her missing whereabouts. Whatever you're involved in, it needs to get cleared up pretty darn soon. Make your call, but get an answer on where she's at."

Agent Dunsworth opened his mouth, closed it, turned and walked away. He pulled out his cell phone and made a call as he walked away. Lance turned and looked at me. He was about to say something, but I held up my hand to stop him. I cocked my head slightly and listened to Dunsworth's phone ring. Enhanced hearing had its uses.

A man picked up on the other end, "Willman."

"Joseph, it's Roger. I've got a couple of metas here looking for Psystar. They know she was in the hospital. How did she get out?"

"I released her. Dimmer caused her to do that psychic scream when he dragged her away from the perp. We're still at the hospital, the hero's doing her mind thing on the perp now."

"So what's the status on the meta then?"

"She's back to helping us again."

"What do you want me to tell these two metas? They're getting pissed off at me. One of them looks like he'd like to tear my heart out or something. Man, he's got these evil looking cat eyes. I just sent them to the hospital, they just got back here after finding out that you'd checked Psystar out."

"Put one of them on the phone, I'll talk to them."

"Sounds good." He walked over to us and held out the phone.

"Agent Willman's on the phone, he's in charge of the kidnapping investigation."

Lance began reaching for the phone, I reached faster. I'd noticed I was far faster than Lance when I wanted to be. I said, "Black Tiger here. I'm the one with the evil cat eyes." I smiled at Dunsworth,



making sure my fangs showed.

"Agent Willman here. Black Tiger, I'm with Psystar now at the hospital. We're currently with one of the kidnappers."

"Put her on."

"One moment." I heard him in the background saying, "Psystar. Hey, Psystar, come out of it. Black Tiger's on the phone. Shit."

"Black Tiger, she's not responding. She's doing her mind thing. Right now she's just staring off into space and her eyes are glowing. I tried shaking her shoulder, but she's not responding."

"That normally only takes her a few minutes."

"She only started a minute or so ago."

"Assuming she's doing that, and comes out of it in a minute or so. She'll either be fine, or fall unconscious for a few more minutes, roughly. I've only seen her do it once to someone, she was out for only a few minutes that time."

"All right. Should I have her call you back when she snaps out of it?"

"If she's awake, have her call me within fifteen minutes, otherwise you call me in that time frame. If not I'll assume this is another ruse, and that Dunsworth here is involved in it."

He huffed on the other side of the phone. "Christ. Listen, I just finished talking with her about this. Let's not start up any interagency squabbling, all right? It won't help either side, and I'm assuming that we're both trying to accomplish the same thing."

"I'll assume that everything is as you say it is. Just call back in fifteen." I gave my H.E.R.O. phone number to Agent Willman and handed the cell phone back to Agent Dunsworth. He checked for a signal and closed the phone.

"Satisfied, Black Tiger?"

"Not yet. I'll assume everything is the way it should be. What's the latest on the kidnapping case? We're here; we can handle the raid on the kidnappers for you once Psystar gets the details. We won't have to worry about getting hurt."

"Psystar made the same type of comment before she went to apprehend the kidnapper she's with. I heard she got shot up pretty badly. Besides, it's not so much **you** getting hurt that's the problem. It's the victims getting injured during a fight."

That shocked me. "That's odd, she's not a fighter."

He shrugged. "I don't know much more than that. I wasn't at the scene. I take it you guys are combatants?"

"Pretty much. One would think the claws, and Spartan's giant size would make that obvious. I'm not concerned about being shot too much. Spartan here could probably laugh off a machine gun, perhaps

even a sniper rifle or rocket launcher. Hey, Spartan, we need to test that on you."

"One can't be sure of anything with a meta you're meeting for the first time, I've heard that even some small women like Psystar could be armored."

I nodded my agreement at that. Even among mutants there was a great variety in strength, speed, and potential off abilities. Like that Shrinker mutant that was still on the loose. At first glance you would think she was a normal mutant, but she could also reduce a person down to action figure size. Stephanie was shrunk down the last time our groups met. *I should check on that metal super lady that changed the other day.*

Spartan said, "Not sure where we'd be able to buy that stuff. Too bad we don't have any military contacts; I could give them a moving target to practice on. In return I'd get to see what live fire feels like."

I replied, "Actually, the Metrocity S.W.A.T. team probably has all but the rocket launcher, they might be willing to try it."

"Good idea. You going to be out on the range with me?"

I laughed, "Yeah, right. Hell no."

"Hmm, the more I think about it, the more I like the idea. The S.W.A.T. team goes into a lot of dangerous situations. I could see us getting involved with them many times in the future. I'd like to be on good terms with them."

Agent Dunsworth said, "You guys always jump into other agencies busts for an extra payday?"

Spartan cocked his head to the side as he said, "Do you honestly believe that's why I do this?" His expression was harder than normal to read without being able to clearly see the eyes and eyebrows.

"You get a commission for each bust, right? Plus an awful lot of news time."

"True, we do get a commission, but I'd help with the kidnapping thing without getting one. My motivation is to save people, and prevent others from getting injured."

"I have difficulty believing that. I've seen enough heroes to see how they act."

"It might be how they were brought up. Most supers seem to be randomly selected for being 'activated' with powers. Take any random Joe on the street, and check out his personality profile. I was raised with the idea of being a hero."

"How could you be raised in the hopes of something extremely rare happening to you? That sounds suspicious."

I said, "Our parents were supers. I'm pretty sure one of them

knew a long time ago it would happen, got us together as children, and put us under the care of the two parents that had a hero mindset the most. Psystar's father made sure we were at the right place to be transformed."

Spartan looked at me. "You think he's a psychic too?"

"I'm positive. In fact, now that I think about it, you notice how he always sent Ste ... Psystar over to your mom's with extra things that she just happened to need later on? I mean, there were times I didn't have stuff with me when I hung out at your place, but Psystar never had that happen."

Spartan looked thoughtful; he scratched his chin as he seemed to go through memories. "Dang. You're right. I can't think of a single time he hadn't sent her over with everything that she needed."

Agent Dunsworth said, "So ... you guys both have parents that are supers too?"

I said, "Right."

"Wow. What was that like? Were they H.E.R.O. agents too?"

"My father was. I have no idea what Psystar's father did, but he was gone a lot. I mean, almost weekly he'd be gone for days. My father was gone a lot too, but mostly in the evening or at night, not for days. Needless to say, I found I couldn't pull much over on the old man. Now I know that he had enhanced vision, hearing, possibly smell, taste and touch as well, like I do."

Spartan said, "My mom's great, she's a brick as well, but not a hero. Well, not an agent at least. I know she's saved a few construction workers before that got into situations on the site."

Agent Dunsworth asked, "She ever spank you?"

Spartan laughed, "Heck no. She'd probably have broken my bones if she did. She's one of the calmest people I know."

I said, "My dad didn't need to hit me. He had this ... aura about him. When he got mad, I knew he was mad. Just seeing him look at me while angry was enough to put fear into me."

Agent Dunsworth said, "I can't imagine having you as a father. I mean, who needs a monster under the bed? You look pretty intimidating all on your own."

"Actually, since a kid would grow up seeing me this way, they ought to be used to it. It'd be the norm for them. If anything, what would any child of mine have to fear from a monster under the bed? Dad could whoop it up on the monster."

Dunsworth laughed. "You're right, I guess."

My phone rang. I answered, "Black Tiger."

The voice said, "Hey, Tiger. It's me." I let out a breath, and felt

my shoulders relax just hearing her voice. I couldn't believe how glad I was just to hear Stephanie's voice. Dunsworth's eyes flicking toward my fingers made me realize my claws had receded.

"I'm glad to hear from you. Everything okay?"

"It is now. I've got a location, and some names that Agent Willman will look into. We can handle the grunt work while they handle the intel activities."

"Kick ass. We're at the kidnap victim's house, want to meet us here?"

"Sure, I'll be there in a minute or two." I heard her ask someone else, "Are you headed back to the house, or to your office?"

I heard Agent Willman answer Stephanie in the background. "My office is in Metrocity. I'll make some calls here, and then head over to the location you found with some other agents."

"Sounds good. You there, Tiger? I'll be there in a few."

"Yeah, still here. See you when you get here."

"Okay, see you soon." She hung up.

*Hmph, the agents didn't lie after all. Which means I was being an asshole to this guy, I suppose.* I decided to suck up my pride and make good with the agent. "Agent Dunsworth?"

Agent Dunsworth looked eager for any news. "Yeah?"

"I, uhh, I'm sorry for getting on your case earlier. Psystar's on her way here, Agent Willman's going to meet us at the kidnappers location."

He looked surprised. "Well ... sure thing. It could have gone better, I suppose."

I asked, "Do they have a photograph of the victim here?"

"Yeah, come in." He led the way into the house. Once inside, he introduced us to Mr. and Mrs. Lieberman. He explained to them, "Spartan and Black Tiger will be working with us on the extraction of your daughter." We shook hands with them. Mr. Lieberman appeared very impressed by Lance's size.

I caught movement outside the window, and saw Stephanie standing up from a crouched position on the lawn. *I see you, babe!*

She glanced quickly at the window and grinned at me, and then walked to the front door.

I slapped Spartan's chest with the back of my hand. "She's here. Let's go kick some kidnapper ass." We met her outside.

She hugged me and said, "What an awful morning so far."

*I wonder what the feds avoided telling us?*

She held up her hand. "I'll tell you later. It'll just make you mad."

She stepped back after the hug, and I noticed that her costume

had traces of red mixed in with it. There was a faint smell of blood around her, almost overwhelmed by her natural fragrance.

She put a hand on my chest and said, "Later. Not now. Here's the address they brought Zena to." She held out her H.E.R.O. phone with the address displayed. Lance and I entered it into our phones to display a map of the location. *I wonder if these have any games on them....*

Lance said, "I'll meet you guys there." He turned, scanned the street and leaped away.

I watched after him and joked, "Ribbit!"

Stephanie grinned again as she slid her arm around my waist. She winked at me as she gave me a squeeze. I followed suit on her, and then watched her leg as she appeared to step up onto some kind of invisible step and pushed off. We floated up into the air. We coasted upwards slowly for a minute while she looked at her H.E.R.O. phone for the direction to fly.

We flew over a suburban business district for a few minutes before hovering over a building near a defunct oil change business.

She pointed, "That's where they're at. As soon as Spartan shows we can hit it."

I asked, "How many kidnappers are there?"

"There ought to be four in there. The other guy was supposed to pick up some food and such before they left for Metrocity. He had the van."

"Metrocity? This wasn't a kidnapping for money from the parents?"

"I don't know. The guy I mind read wasn't the leader. He just knew they were heading back to Metrocity."

*Why would they want to go back to Metrocity? They had to have had other plans for the girl in that case. She's only thirteen or so, not old enough to be considered for some kind of bride for sale. Maybe some kind of sick organ thieves?*

Stephanie looked quickly up at my face. *Oops, sorry. Was just thinking to myself, forgot about your overhearing thing.*

She squeezed my arm and said, "No need. It's not your fault to think about the possibilities, nor that I can hear them. You wouldn't believe the thoughts – or looks – I see from some people."

I spotted a flash of color in the sky and pointed Lance out to her. She flew us down toward a large building top to meet him.

## Preview Chapter 5 – Rescue

### Third Person Perspective

Lance landed a short distance from Stephanie and Rael. He straightened from his leap landing crouch, and walked over to them. They walked to the edge of the building top to look over the target building.

He said, “So what’s the plan? I go in the front, you two go in the back?”

Rael shrugged, “Works for me.”

Stephanie nodded, “They might have automatic weapons; the guy I nabbed earlier had a fully automatic submachine gun. They all had some type of rifles from the guy's memories.”

Rael said, “Let me lead the way in, then. I’d rather not see you get shot.”

“Yeah, me either. Last time sucked.”

Rael looked at Lance, “You okay doing this with your injuries?”

The huge hero nodded. “Doesn’t much matter, we’ve got a girl that needs rescuing. I’m doing it hurt or not.”

Stephanie pursed her lips for a few seconds and her eyes glowed more than normal. She asked, “Are you certain, Lance?”

“Yeah. This is what heroes do.”

She shrugged, “Okay then. I don’t think a submachine gun will get through your body armor anyway, so you should be good.”

Lance rubbed his palms together and said, “Got it. Machine weapons. Good practice for me. Let’s do it.”

Stephanie grabbed Rael around the waist and flew to the back of the building. Lance waited until they were over the rear of the building and leaped directly to the front of the garage.

As soon as Lance’s feet hit the ground he ran to the smaller service entrance and slammed his fists into the sides of the door. The metal door blew off the frame and flew into the room. It bounced off the floor and smashed into an old service desk. He barely had time to step into the doorway before a bola struck his left leg, wrapping around it and banging the other leg. The smell of ozone spread as it released a massive electrical charge. Lance’s leg tingled from the charge, but otherwise he barely noticed the effect. He grinned and surveyed the room.

Rael heard the smash from Lance's assault on the opposite door,

and kicked in the rear service door. It flung open and he rushed in, trying to survey the room as he moved. A person mostly concealed behind a counter caught his eye. The man shot a bola at Rael as he moved toward the man.

Rael's eyes tracked the bola as it rotated through the air and with a slight jolt through his body found himself suddenly on the other side of it, about ten feet closer to the assailant.

Stephanie moved in behind Rael, but her reactions weren't in his league. When Rael somehow appeared on the other side of the bola, she became the next item in its path. It struck her around the chest, wrapped around her and the weights banged against her body as the massive electrical charge was released. She barely had time to think before her entire musculature seized up and she crumpled to the ground.

Rael saw Lance rush at a man near the front of the garage. Rael moved much faster than Lance did, and leapt over the counter at his target. His claws extended, he reached for the man as the kidnapper fell backward in an attempt to avoid the claws. Rael grabbed the man's shoulders as the man pulled the trigger on a small needler pistol. A burst of darts scored Rael's stomach as his body continued moving over the man. Rael flipped in the air, landing on his feet, and used his claws to dig into the man's shoulders. His own momentum allowed him to yank the man up above him and he threw the man over his own head. The man flew over thirty feet across the garage and slammed into the far wall with a loud thud.

Lance's opponent shot the hero with his needler pistol. The burst of darts were accurate, but failed to pierce the skin of Lance's torso. He felt his skin poked at in a series, and grinned at the thought of his body armor. He almost reached his opponent when he saw the man Rael threw fly past off to his right.

Lance yelled, "No killing!"

Rael smelled burnt flesh, and heard Stephanie fall. He knew that she was out of the fight at this point. He glanced back at her as he heard Lance's yell, and flashed his fangs in a snarl as he saw Stephanie collapsed on the floor. He noticed movement to the side, and sprang toward the motion.

Lance's foe lifted a canister toward him just as he arrived. Lance backhanded the man's hand, and the canister flew across the room and exploded against the wall. A cloud of purple gas expanded from the area. The kidnapper looked up with a surprised expression on his face as Lance lightly punched him in the jaw. Even the weak punch held a ton of force, and the jaw shattered as the man collapsed to the ground.

Rael noticed the room blurring in his vision and felt sluggish as

he moved. A third man had been leveling a large rifle toward Rael when he reached the criminal. Rael grabbed the gun with his left claw, and the man's shoulder with his right. The explosion of the canister masked the sound of a bola going off further to his right, and as it struck both Rael and the kidnapper a massive charge surged through the both of them.

The man immediately went limp, followed by Rael a few moments later. His muscles tightened up, causing his claws to crush into the man's shoulder with great force.

The remaining kidnapper saw everyone down but Lance, and fled toward the exit behind Stephanie's still form. Lance narrowed his eyes and grabbed the nearest medium sized object - a tool chest. His massive fingers dug into the metal, and he flung the entire unit ahead of the man.

The unit smashed into the wall and exploded in a mass of metal parts and tools. The man dodged back from the thrown object, and was caught in the debris. He fell to the ground in an attempt to avoid injury.

Lance sprinted across the room as the man scrambled to his feet. He lightly dove at the man, tackling him as he would in football. They smashed against the outer wall, although Lance locked his arm to prevent the man from taking the majority of the impact or from being crushed by him.

The impact stunned the man. Lance grabbed the man's wrists with one of his huge hands and lifted him off his feet. He looked around for something to tie the man up with, and then noticed that the man had huge disposable tie cuffs on his belt. Obviously the man had expected to capture others.

Lance tied one of them around the man's wrists, another around his neck and through the tie on the wrists. He ran over to check Stephanie's pulse, and found it strong. A quick check on Rael found the same. He checked on the man with Rael's claws still embedded in the shoulder. The man was dead. He looked at the blood loss from the shoulder, it was minor. The man's heart had to have stopped from the electrical shock to keep from bleeding profusely.

Lance remembered that Stephanie was the one who had gotten a call on this task, so he slid her phone off her belt and marked the task closed. He also pushed the button to request medical attention for three people. Then he used the extra ties on the remaining two kidnapper's wrists and ankles. Lance lined them up together to more easily keep an eye on as he looked around.

He quickly walked through the small office area. The business had to have been closed for a while, no office supplies, computers, or



other equipment was to be found. He found one door that had additional deadbolts installed on the outside of the door. All were engaged.

Lance ripped off the deadbolts and opened the door to find a teenage girl lying on the floor, bound and gagged. She was unconscious. He couldn't fit his fingers into the tight wrist ties to untie her, so he carefully picked her up and carried her out to the others. She appeared to be more muscular than he'd have expected. She was much prettier than the pictures her parents had of her. Her arm muscles looked like she worked out quite a bit, that was odd in itself.

One of the men had a knife on his boot, so Lance took the knife and cut the girl free. He gently laid her next to Stephanie. He thought of calling the F.B.I. agents, though he'd forgotten to obtain their cell number while with them. *Details, Lance, details! Start carrying a small knife in the belt, too. Your mega-sized fingers can't get into these small places. Well, they could, but you'd have to crush the person's wrist to do it, and that'd be dumb.*

He stood guard over everyone while he waited. He looked at his muscles, corded under the skin in his forearms and biceps as he held them crossed. Then he studied Stephanie's form. After she metamorphosed into a super, her body had become more tightly muscled as well. The same applied to Rael, although with Rael and Lance a fair amount of new muscle had grown and enlarged. Not much of that had occurred with Stephanie. He knelt down and gently felt Stephanie's biceps and forearms. He couldn't tell if her muscles were hard or not, he was too strong. Everything felt soft or crushable to him now.

The smell of the gas canister released on the other side of the garage extended far enough to become a concern to Lance. He didn't know what it would do, so he opened the large garage doors on both sides of the building to let the air clear. He was glad the wind blew from the side with the people toward the other side with the doors open.

As he walked back to the injured friends and foes, he heard vehicles pull up to the building. Several black vehicles pulled up to the garage. The F.B.I. agents from the house exited the vehicles.

One of the agents walked near the remnant of the gas cloud, stumbled and fell to the ground. Everyone else ran back away from it quickly. Lance held his breath as he jogged forward, grabbed the man around his torso and moved him out of the cloud to the vehicles.

He glanced back at the criminals to ensure they weren't moving. An agent he didn't recognize stepped forward. Several other agents ran over to the downed agent.

"I'm Agent Willman, head of this operation."

Lance stepped forward and held out his hand, "Good to meet you, sir, I'm Spartan." He pointed at the downed agent and said, "Sorry about that, I opened the doors to clear out the gas."

Agent Willman shook his hand, glanced at Lance's huge hand and raised an eyebrow, and then said, "What's the status here?" He'd noticed that the hero didn't close his grip, and the fingers felt more like solid rock than skin and flesh, barring the feel of the skin itself.

"Everyone's unconscious or dead. The kidnapped girl has been freed, she's out right now too. They're back here." Lance motioned, and then walked toward the far side of the garage. He gave the corner with the gas cloud a wide berth.

"Do you have armored gloves on, Spartan?"

Lance grinned, he knew that the man was wondering about his hands. "No, my musculature is just that hard. Sorry about not shaking your hand like normal, I don't close the grip out of safety."

"No, no, I'm fine with that. It's just, well, interesting I guess. I saw a news clip of you moving that locomotive up in Metrocity. That's unbelievable."

"You caught that? Cool." Lance grinned at the thought.

"You've got some kind of blasting power too?"

"Huh? Why would you think that?"

"You glowed on the footage. I figured you must be able to blast out energy or something."

"That'd rock if I did. As far as I can tell my, uh, energy glow is more like a type of adrenaline than energy that is blasted out."

"Energy as adrenaline?"

Lance shrugged. "It seems like it. I've not had any chemical testing or anything like it done though. But then my entire metabolism has changed from what it was pre-super."

"I suppose so." He studied the hero standing next to him. The costume was tight fitting, and showed the massive muscles on the hero clearly. He felt like he stood next to a giant.

They arrived at the bodies of the injured. Agent Willman yelled, "We need ambulances here!"

Lance said, "I already called in for medical attention for three. I'm sure that Psystar and Black Tiger will shake off their damage shortly, and the girl appears uninjured. One of the men is dead. I left him where he died, and wanted to point out a few things to you."

They were joined by Agent Dunsworth. Agent Willman asked, "How did he die?"

Lance replied, "Black Tiger had grabbed the man's shoulder when they were both hit by one of these bolas. They put out a massive shock, like a super taser. I can tell his heart stopped bleeding before

Tiger's claws dug in much because there isn't much blood on the ground. A pumping heart would have forced much more out."

"I agree. Is that how they took out Psystar as well? They shocked her?"

"I believe so, though I didn't see it from where I was. Her arms were burned where the cord wound around her though. I see that's almost gone now."

Agent Dunsworth asked, "What about these darts?" He slipped on a rubber glove, leaned over and carefully pulled out one of the darts embedded in Rael's abdomen.

Lance replied, "Huh, I missed those. They shot me with one of those needle guns, but none pierced me. Maybe those took him down."

Agent Dunsworth collected the various weapons and set them on the counter. "Boss, these aren't normal weapons. Bola rifles with custom electrical charges? Needler pistols? This guy has a paintball gun, want to bet these have something strong enough to drop a horse ... or a super?"

Agent Willman studied the tiny dart in his hand and nodded. He looked at Lance, "They were expecting one or more supers."

Dunsworth set one of the canisters down on the counter. "Want to bet this is a spray form of chloroform? High potency?"

Willman nodded again. "That must be what was in that cloud over there. I noticed one of those canisters back on the other side. We've also got cameras attached on the poles in here, and they don't look like something left behind. Tom! Get a short ladder in here and get those down!"

Lance looked around at the poles. He spotted six small cameras with a battery pack and a small antenna extruding from them. They were focused at the entrances. He said, "I don't think those were there for internal security. Someone else wanted to see what occurred here."

Willman said, "I agree. I don't think this is the end of what is happening here."

They heard groaning from off to the side, and saw Stephanie slowly sit up. She winced and began stretching out her limbs. Lance stepped over to her and knelt down. "Hey, how you doing?"

She looked up at him. "A bit tight, but generally okay." She looked around, taking in the sights of Rael, the downed kidnappers, and the F.B.I. agents searching the building. Then she noticed Zena and smiled. She began stretching her arms and legs.

She said, "We got her?"

Lance nodded, "Yeah, I found her in a back room, it had extra locks on it."

She looked at Agent Willman, "So we're done here?"

“We need statements from each of you, but the important thing is that Zena is safe, and we can get her checked out and back to her parents. There’s more to this than just Zena, I’m thinking I’d like you to help us interrogate a few more of these kidnappers.”

“With Zena safe, is there a rush? Can it be done mid or late afternoon?”

“Well, I suppose so. Several of them need a doctor’s assistance before we’d do anything anyway.”

Stephanie looked at Lance. “Good. Spartan, will you handle any debriefing for me for now? I’ll come down and see Zena later on when I can, and seek you out, Agent Willman. Can I get your cell number, please?”

“Sure, here’s my card.” He pulled out a business card and handed it to her. “What’s the rush?”

“I’ve already missed a class, I can make the other one if I haul butt.” She stepped up onto her air step and kissed Lance on the cheek, and then floated back down to the floor. “Thanks for covering for me, and for finishing this.”

“Sure thing, St ... Psystar.”

“I’ll call you later on, Agent Willman, I promise. I just can’t afford to miss a lot.”

“We’re fine, we’ve got the details from Spartan here, give me a call when you get a chance.”

She quickly stepped out the garage door, and stepped off into the air, then quickly shot up and disappeared from sight. They heard a boom a moment later.

Lance looked at Agent Willman and shrugged. “Okay then.”

Agent Willman asked, “Was that a sonic boom?”

“I think so.”

“Wow, I wonder how she breathes at that speed.”

“The magic of superpowers. I know that she can do it with a passenger being carried along, so it must be a field around her.”

“Hmph. To be able to fly, read minds, and heal so fast. That certainly would be useful.”

“There’s always a downside, Willman. Look at my strength, yet that same strength causes me to damage things all the time. Being a brick is getting expensive.”

“Hmm. I suppose so. She mentioned that she always hears what people think. That could be annoying.”

“Yeah, she said a lot of people check her out continuously. She joked the other day that she was glad she’s a little narcissistic. She kept looking at herself whether she wanted to or not.”

“Now that would be annoying.”

"Sometimes. At other times I think I'd appreciate the fact that so many people are either interested or like what they see that they keep looking at me."

"Is that why you wear the costume like that?"

"You mean the skin tight, colorful costume? It's what super heroes do, isn't it? Since that's my goal, I want to look the part. I want everyone who sees me to know that if they need help, I'm here."

"Hmm, interesting viewpoint."

"What does your uniform say about you, Agent Willman?"

"It's a business suit."

"Right. You don't seek to stand out, except perhaps from the average person. You want to look sharp, yet not proclaim what you do for people. No one will look at you and cry for aid because it's more a type of camouflage. That's not a bad thing, but it sends a different signal to people."

"True. I wouldn't have realized a brick thought about things like that."

Lance grinned, "I hope I'm full of surprises."

Ambulances arrived and took away the injured kidnappers. A paramedic performed a brief check on Zena and stated, "At a glance she appears to be doing well, though she's been drugged or sedated. A doctor should do a full exam."

Agent Willman said, "Bring her to the hospital, I'll notify her parents and meet them there. Dunsworth, stay with her."

"Sure thing, boss."

A man walked up to us, clearly heading for Lance. He said, "I'm Agent Pierce of H.E.R.O. Psystar called in a complete on a task?"

Lance held his hand out and shook Agent Pierce's hand. He said, "I pushed complete on the task for her, she was late for a prior meeting, I told her I'd fill in her part."

Agent Pierce pushed a few buttons on his own H.E.R.O. phone and looked at Agent Willman. "Was Psystar able to help with the kidnapping investigation?"

Agent Willman replied, "Yeah, not only with the interrogation, she captured and interrogated the perp that gave us the information, and then came here with Spartan and Black Tiger after the kidnappers and rescued the girl. The ambulance is loading the girl up now." He pointed outside the building at the ambulance.

"Was her participation in both captures core to them?"

Agent Willman looked thoughtful a moment, then said, "I'd say so. Our tactical guys were in a standoff with the first kidnapper. He had an automatic weapon, and we couldn't chance hurting him or even

incapacitating him for fear that we'd be unable to question him. She took him out, got injured pretty badly during the fight, too. Could have worked a little better with our teams though."

"How did she help here, if she were badly injured?"

Lance said, "She heals extremely fast."

Agent Willman said, "That also occurred around 3 a.m."

Agent Pierce said, "So all three heroes apprehended the kidnappers here?"

Lance held up his hand. "Agent Pierce, I want to make sure that any news attributes the F.B.I. with the rescue. It was just the three of us that assaulted the building, but we agreed that we weren't here to steal their headlines."

"That's fine, Spartan. We normally don't release much to the press, pretty much just your involvement if asked. We don't give details." He looked around at the old vehicle garage, so obviously unused for some time. He spotted the weapons on the counter and walked over to them.

He said, "Hmm, did they use these on you?"

Lance said, "Yeah. One of them killed their own partner when he took down Black Tiger with that bola, it lets out a massive shock."

"Silverlash disappeared this morning when she responded to a call at the scene of a new super – a brick with metal skin. Witnesses mentioned an odd device shooting a weighted cable that hit her when she dropped. The perps kidnapped her."

"Whoa! They kidnapped a H.E.R.O. agent?"

"Yes. We've recovered her phone, it looks like they threw it out at the scene. I believe this tells us that there is an organization involved. One that is obtaining weapons designed to take down heroes, and using agents likely with a military background."

"That really sucks, she's a cool hero. Can we be tagged as being notified of any news? We'd like to help, and with Black Tiger's senses he might be able to track someone. Or Psystar might be able to interrogate someone with telepathy."

"Excellent, I'll tag you on her file. Agent Willman, is there anything else to add as far as the hero involvement goes?"

Agent Willman looked deep in thought for a few moments, and then slowly shook his head. "No, we appreciate the help. Psystar agreed to contact me later on to assist further with the case to see if we need to follow any leads deeper."

"That's great news. I'm glad to hear of some heroes working well with the F.B.I., we could use more of that."

Agent Willman and Lance looked at each other a moment, then back at Agent Pierce. Lance said, "Well, I hope we can do it more

often."

Agent Pierce nodded and left the scene.

Lance looked back at Agent Willman. "I mean that. I'm hoping we can turn a, ah, rough start into something positive."

Agent Willman nodded, "I'm willing to try."

"Listen, if you ever get a situation where you are worried about the safety of your men, you're welcome to call me for help. If I can get there fast I'll come. If Psystar's around the chances are I'll be able to. You keep any busts in your name, I don't care much. Well, I do, I'd rather get news, too. However, it's more important to me to keep your guys safe."

"I'd like to avoid deaths in our busts, though. You three ended up with a dead perp here."

"Yeah, that makes me mad, too. None of us did the killing though, one of their own did that. The other two injured guys might be injured, but they'll live."

"Good point." He held his hand out to Lance, who carefully shook it.

From across the garage Agent Dimmer watched them through narrowed eyes. Agent Willman's dealings with these mutant freaks was getting out of hand....

Lance looked at Rael – he was still unconscious. He asked one of the paramedics if he was all right. After a confirmation that Rael was unconscious, but otherwise appeared uninjured, he decided to take Rael with him. He sighed, picked up his friend, and began to leap back to Rael's car for the long drive home.

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## THE END OF H.E.R.O. – NEW MARKETS PREVIEW

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If you enjoyed this novel, please look into the other novels in the H.E.R.O. series at the author's website: <http://www.kevinrau.com>

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Wondering what the characters look like in detail?  
<http://www.kevinrau.com> has images of many of the heroes.

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-- Kevin Gerald Rau