Capers:
Would you rather we wear spandex?
ABSTRACT

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by Caitlin Rosberg

Capers is a fiction exploration of the word heroism, intending to make the reader confront and grapple with their preconceived notions of what it means to be and live like a hero. In particular, the story fixates on two “professional” heroes in their daily lives, one fitting the stereotype of the campy, over the top, patriotic superhero for the masses, the other a living embodiment of the anti-hero, dark and brooding and far more attractive to angst ridden teens. By focusing on the social networks and emotions behind the hero business, readers come to confront their own heroism, and that in others, learning more about what human nature is capable of, rather than accepting the lowest common denominator.
Thank you to my father, who taught me words like pontificate and the importance of having a place to do so, but rarely told me out to spell anything.

Thank you to my mother, who taught me that Crayolas work just as well as pontificating and can be a whole lot prettier.

And thank you to Whiskey Jack and Little Fire, but mostly Jack. Because he’s Jack.

I owe a major debt of gratitude to Josh Graham, a dear friend who gave painful, awkward birth to Richard Boyd and General Justice. I couldn’t have done this without him and countless hours of “But Josh, what would he do if she…?” He is a rock and a true talent, and I hope to continue to collaborate with him.

I also want to take the time to thank the Honors and Scholars Program for this opportunity, and my advisor Diana Royer for putting up with my constant deadline avoidance. I appreciate and could not have lived without, the support of the staff members at H&S, and will truly miss them.
Of late, the world has become rather obsessed with comic books. This is far from a complaint, because it gives me an opportunity to be elitist and enjoy an increasingly more mainstream hobby. But over the past seventy odd years of comic book writing, our idea of heroes, and heroism, have been changed, fifty pages of glossy paper at a time.

I became intrigued with this change at the beginning of high school, when I realized that even Superman had become an anti-hero, which previously had been the purview of his antithesis, Batman. How had this happened, and what did it mean?

I decided to face the problem, instead of with research, with a fiction exploration of my own. At the outset, I had far more planned for this, but unfortunately ran out of time and energy before I ran out of plot.

This is far from the end of Delia and Rick’s story. To be honest, I knew I could not do the two of them any kind of credit with the time I had left.

The other two stories that were supposed to accompany this one fell to the wayside as the two superheroes took over my nights and weekends with their incessant need to be recorded, and for that, I’m sorry, but they are still waiting for me, and I plan to continue my exploration of heroism, both with, and without, the Generalissimo and the Kraken.

I hope you enjoy the small part of this story I could tell in the time I had, and that I provided a glimpse into a world that many people do not consider terribly often.
**he-ro** [heer-oh] – noun, plural -roes

1. a man of distinguished courage or ability, admired for his brave deeds and noble qualities.

2. a person who, in the opinion of others, has heroic qualities or has performed a heroic act and is regarded as a model or ideal: He was a local hero when he saved the drowning child.

3. the principal male character in a story, play, film, etc.

   1. a being of godlike prowess and beneficence who often came to be honored as a divinity.
   2. (in the Homeric period) a warrior-chieftain of special strength, courage, or ability.
   3. (in later antiquity) an immortal being; demigod.

5. hero sandwich.

6. the bread or roll used in making a hero sandwich.

Washington D.C., until Detroit began take the honor on and off, was literally the most dangerous place in the country. Whether you believe that the sudden drop in crime was due to the psychics hired by G-men to redirect negative energy or not, the irony of the fact that the seat of our country’s government was not safe is indisputable. Those agencies that were not fixated on the possibilities of psychic knowledge approached the problem from perhaps a more pragmatic standpoint. They, without a doubt, were surprised by the results.

“…General Justice is the kind of man that little boys play at being, with all of the requisite laser sound effects and towel capes, and grown men still wish they were. He has apparently adopted Washington D.C. as his hometown, and fits in with the city just as well as his counterparts all over the country do in theirs. It’s safe to say that many of us hope that the “Hulk-Smasher”, as he’s fondly called, is a homegrown boy done good, now serving his city in the most selfless way possible. Add that to a patriotic streak a mile wide, intelligent charm, and a jaw line that could cut steak, it becomes easy to see why GJ fangirls burst eardrums every time they see him. And, just to let you know, ladies: even if you ask for his number as part of an interview, you’ll only get a laugh and that infamous grin. But, GJ, if you’re reading this, know that buried deep in the cool, calm reporter that is Kathryn Zylinski, there is a fangirl squealing louder than the rest of them put together.”

Delia, who was the furthest thing from a fangirl that you could get and still be in the same galaxy, shoved the paper back into her bag with what was clearly a look of disgust. In fact, she’d made that same face when she discovered that the milk in her fridge was expired—by taking a swig from the carton. A young man whose face was a battleground for pimples and freckles (it was unclear who was winning) caught her look and chuckled softly.

“Another day in the cult of superheroes?” His voice reminded her of squirrels, not because it was high pitched or fearful, but rather it was filled with hyperactive energy
and moderately ludicrous bravery. A camera emerged in her hands, on with a monstrously large flash, and as his be-speckled fingers popped a tiny tent of orange and a strip of carefully measured black and white as she pressed a button. Artificial lighting struck, freezing all with an instant of white, and the camera beeped cheerily in the darkness, utterly displaced by the somber mood.

“Another perfect day in the cult of General Justice, the campy wonder.” Delia rolled her eyes and nudged the skinny young man with her booted toe. “Get your hand out of the frame, Spector.” A chittery laugh that did nothing to rid her of the impression of squirrels fell from his thin lips, and the man, apparently Spector, moved his fingers away like spider legs. One hand remained in-shot, cold and waxy, clenched around a cane. Knuckles like walnuts looked largely out of place on a body that young, but you could never tell with joint diseases when they would strike. Or may be it was a case of too much plastic surgery and not enough graceful aging.

“But?” Spector’s high-octane voice shocked her back, and with a small adjustment of the massive lens, lightening, contrary to scientific evidence, struck twice.

“Drugged. The family seems a little too concerned about getting her personal possessions back when we’re done with them.” She was right: a twittering daughter-in-law was swooping between her children, who were crying melodramatically while her husband and his unmarried brother spoke to a uniformed officer. They looked just a little too much like the strong, inwardly distraught offspring that they were supposed to be.

“I say stroke from the cocaine.” Spector chuckled again, quieter, hiding the fact that he was picking at calluses on his hands by shoving them in the pockets of his navy blue coat, stretching the stark white letters ME across the back. He turned as the uni walked over with the elder of the sons. Introductions were made, though handshakes were avoided, given the number of latex gloves that were in the bunch. Elder son and officer asked all the right questions: when they could collect the body, where personal effects would be stored, how to make arrangements once the autopsy was completed. Elder son had a cool, sharp voice, like a martini that wasn’t quite stirred all the way, and he smelled expensive. Delia would have felt ungainly, if she’d been anyone but herself. When, however, she saw that Spector was twitching in his dark windbreaker, she made all the appropriate excuses so that they could get back to work. Jotting down a note with a pencil barely long enough to be called that, she glanced at her still nervous coworker.

“You know, if you learned how to properly use this thing, you’d have a reason to avoid the NOKs.” Every profession had its jargon, and every team more specialized language, still.

“But if I managed to take a picture worth shit, you’d never have to come out in the field again, and you know how lonely I would be.” Spector shook his head, grinning; he was the kind of man that you expected the motion to be accompanied by the noise of rattling rocks. “Besides I don’t mind the next of kin so much, it’s the suspects that get to me. Creepy bastards.” A shudder walked from the top of his skull to his feet.

“Stop picking.” Spector grunted at her half-hearted order and they both stepped aside for the investigators to allow the rat-like collection of any evidence, plus more picture taking. By the time the body was ready for transport, all of Delia’s equipment was packed, and two sets of hands gently lifted Norma Farwell’s body into the second to last car right she would ever take.

The black van only had windows on the driver and passenger doors, and without a
conventional rearview mirror Delia found herself completely incapable, so Spector usually drove. The van smelt faintly of death, but it was usually covered by the acrid, nostril burning scent of bleach cleaners. For some reason, Delia was bothered by it that night. Perhaps it was the person in the back—she didn’t like cases that looked like murders that would go unsolved. She refused to believe it was the glowing smile on the man pictured on the front of her discarded newspaper, red-white-and-blue spandex and all.

She was not, how ever, especially adept at lying to herself when she didn’t have anything to keep herself busy, so she kept Spector chatting at her the entire drive back, paying an inordinate amount of attention to his rambling description of the videogame that he’d just conquered, asking pointed, guiding questions that would do a prosecutor proud.

The shiny white newness of the computer she had just been given at work was marred only by her fingerprints: a newer locking door ensured that. She had been tasked with creating an electronic database for the crime scene staff, mostly because the rest of the employees couldn’t manage to turn on a computer without doing a whole lot of damage. It was a matter of fifteen minutes to load all of her photos from the scene onto the rocket-fast piece of electronic art-as-function and patch them into a virtual room. This is where she had really become an asset to the office, though this particular case didn’t entirely warrant it—her rather obsessive compulsive attention to detail and her ability to digitally rebuild the entire crime for everyone else’s eyes made her all but indispensable. Solve rates had leapt since her arrival almost immediately, and it was part of the reason why, after only three months, the ubiquitous Buddha-bellied medical examiner wouldn’t let her move back to New Orleans, and kept giving her raises and computers to use.

She had just completed the south wall of the horrendously over decorated room when her pocket began to buzz. This wasn’t necessarily an uncommon occurrence, but something about the night, and now that she’d been occupied for a while she could ignore the existence of a certain superhero, had left her jumpy. And so, Delia’s ass was rudely introduced to the floor as a result of the vibrating technology. It was probably Spector, telling her to come and look at something gross he found on, or worse in, the body.

When Delia slid to her feet, brushing imaginary dust from her jeans, her brows slid up too, as she recognized the striking face on the caller ID and became instantly curious.

“Hey Isabella. What’s going on?” Her surprise dripped from her voice, though it certainly wasn’t cold.

“Just wanted to suggest you avoid the Mall” something in the way she said it indicated a capital M “when you go home. The caped cuckold is in the middle of defending freedom, apple pie, and mom at the Capitol.” Isabella’s words always sounded dry and almost stale, for all that laughter was constantly wriggling just below the surface.

“Thanks for the warning. I’ll see you on Tuesday, right?” Delia was ensconced in her chair again, moving a picture to the left a pixel or two.

“Would not miss it.” Delia smiled, hearing more than just what Isabella had said, and hung up the phone. Yellow-brown eyes glanced at the time on the computer, then darted to the completed digital crime scene. A muttered profanity and two minutes later, and the room was locked and abandoned, her keys slapping against her thigh loudly.
There were only a few people left to wave at her on her way out: the night crew wasn’t any smaller than the day crew, but they were mostly out at the moment on calls. Besides which, Spector and Delia themselves were the floaters on the staff, and they were in for most of the night, Spector covering for Margie, who was out on maternity leave.

The room where they cut open the dead bodies, a room which Delia never really wanted to know the name for, wasn’t exactly on the way out of the building for her, but Spector needed to be reminded that he should eat. The emaciated man didn’t need a whole lot of help staying skinny, but he did need help remembering that his body, unlike those of his clients’, still needed food. She found him bent over Mrs. Farwell’s body, his hand inside her body almost up to his elbow, and she immediately turned her back to the metal and tile room, crossing her arms over her chest and ignoring the urge to fidget with the strap to her bag, just barely.

“Tuesday night. You in?” There was a grunt from behind her and a sickeningly gooey noise that came from only about a foot below the grunt. “I’ll buy you enough gnat piss to keep you happily buzzed if you’ll put up with the music choice.”

“Just because you have to strain your beer through your teeth to drink it doesn’t invalidate my alcohol choices.” His grumbling was punctuated with a slurping noise, and Delia winced like she’d gotten pinched in a particularly sensitive spot.

“Whatever, pansy.” Pulling out her cell phone again as it vibrated, she chuckled softly at the text message that she’d just gotten. Their friend Charlie was on his way over from the Thai place two blocks away with a bag of food for her and Spector. The fact that he had begun to call at noon every day to see if Delia wanted him to bring it was only slightly diminished by the fact that it was his job to deliver the spicy, tofu-dominated food. He’d just gotten into the habit of sending her a text message when he was three minutes, or about half a block, away from the building so that she could come grab the food. The best part of establishing that kind of loving, supportive relationship with the food service closest to your work was that you had the luxury of a tab to run up. Provided that either Delia or Spector—if they were truly lucky and she’d done a good job, Delia’s deity boss—paid the bills once every month or two, nobody seemed to mind. “I’ll leave Charlie’s offering for you in the break room. I’m going home.”

“Oh, come on, don’t you want to help me do the chemical spread on her liver?” Spector usually offered, and Delia had never accepted it. His idea of a classy date involved eating cheap take out on the surgical steel examining tables, accompanied by cheaper wine in paper cups. Not exactly Delia’s style.

“I’ll see you tomorrow when the unis come in to ask all the same questions that they asked tonight. Just…remember to eat something, alright? And go home to take a shower.” That last part hadn’t been a request. He always came out of the back of the building smelling like rot and preserving liquids. On Isabella, the ash and bones scent worked. On Spector, the reek of death was unattractive, and in combination with his rather pockmarked face and the abrasive attitude it didn’t do much to endear him to people.

“You mean tomorrow, Tuesday? Which starts in…oh…forty five minutes?” With the echo of Spector’s laughter chasing her out of the building, Delia made her way slowly to her car, pausing just long enough to walk Charlie and his heavy package to the break room refrigerator, which was full of three other such bags, all half-eaten, that they threw into a can on their way out. Her turquoise beater, which was some sort of sedan
under several different parts of several different cars with no identifying body work whatsoever, was waiting for her at the far end of the parking lot, which in just a few hours would be full to overflowing. Washington D.C. was not great for public transportation, and the office was just far out enough that it was not convenient enough for people to do anything besides drive to work. It irked Delia beyond belief, if she was honest with herself, because she’d been spoiled enough to walk to work everyday in New Orleans, but when she thought about it, she’d had to drive everywhere when she lived further west.

The car may not have looked like much, but it ran like a dream. She’d been sinking money and elbow grease into the thing since she was thirteen years old, and it had driven from New Mexico to South Dakota to New Orleans to Washington D.C. without needing anything but gas, oil, and tires, plus the obligatory skinned knuckles and sore biceps. She had little doubt that it would last her even longer than that if it had to, even though the odometer was broken, though she was moderately skeptical given the winter that was being predicted for the city. The clean snows and long straight roads of the Badlands were very different things than the salt and grime of a major metropolitan area. With just a bit of a hiccup when her hand slipped against the key, the engine started flawlessly and just purred for a moment before she shifted into drive and took off towards home, or what passed for home at the moment. She all but had to drive past the Mall, where the red brick Smithsonian Castle rose, and even given Isabella’s warning about the proximity of a certain protector of the city, her curiosity got the best of her and she decided not to avoid the long stretch of green, especially since traffic would be light at this time of night. And so it was, a turquoise car and a woman with yellow eyes making their way to the center of the country’s legislature, a big white building that had seen more horses’ asses than all of the Kentucky Derbies combined. That, at least, was her personal opinion. Not that most other people didn’t agree with her, they just weren’t quite as vehement or as vocal about it.

She got redirected away from the building just about a block away, by cops who weren’t really paying much attention to her at all. They were far too busy staring back over their shoulders at the flashing cameras and small, but cheering, crowd that had gathered along with the news crews. And there he was, in the middle of it all, feeding on the attention and all but wriggling with glee in the glory of their adoration. About six and a half feet of man and costume, with his hands on his hips and his chin in the air, looking like a cheap Captain America knock off. He had the blue spandex, the red and white stripes vertical around the middle of his torso, red boots, gloves, and belt. Really, the only difference was that this asshole had three stars on his chest instead of one, and a small mask to cover his eyes rather than a full hood. At least he didn’t carry a shield: that would have pushed the whole thing over the top a bit. More than a bit, if she was going to be honest with herself. As the live CD of her favorite Scots-Irish-Australian band came up on shuffle through the one luxury she’d allowed herself while still living in New Orleans, an MP3 player, she turned up the volume and let the traffic carry her homeward, not sparing the big hunk of genetically modified muscle and contrived patriotism bother her too much. Too much being the operative phrase. At this point, there was little chance that he was going to exit her mind entirely, and she might as well just accept that. The one thing she had to be thankful for was the fact that he wasn’t there as a source of lust; if anything, she really felt sorry for him. That was no kind of life to live, jumping
when any one of a number of government goons said the word, and smiling at the cameras all the while. It was like being a circus dog, living from day to day and hoping someone would remember to feed you. That was no kind of life to live.

Tuesday was the evening that the bar nearest Delia’s shitty apartment had all you can eat fish—real fish that were beer battered and served with lemon and horseradish sauce—and chips, so there was rarely a week that she couldn’t be found there at precisely quarter to five in the PM, waiting for Spector and Isabella, if they weren’t already with her. After that, if there wasn’t a good band playing or the place got too crowded, they’d wander around until they found something worth listening to, or something that Isabella could dance along with. The girl had feet that wouldn’t stop moving, once she let them start, but neither Delia nor Spector was complaining about being able to sit back and appreciate.

Five found them all eating, dark-haired Delia and red-headed Spector bent over their plates like someone was going to snatch the fish out from under their noses. Isabella, for her part, was eating at a far slower rate than the other two, her long hair pulled back into a neat bun as she used fork and knife to cut up the massive slabs of perch into delicate looking pieces that fit with room to spare in her mouth. The other two were covered in grease and lemon, though Delia was forgoing horseradish in favor of a really good pint of beer.

“So what do you figure this guy’s deal is, hm?” Spector muttered around a chunk of fish that should have really been half that size to feasibly be eaten at one time, as a college kid wandered in with his friends wearing a massive General Justice t-shirt.

“Adrenaline freak gone bad or something?”

“I doubt that very much. He’d not put so much effort into it if he was just out for the rush.” Isabella’s voice was far softer than Spector’s, and infinitely less jarring on the ears, not to mention that it had some truth in it, this time around. Delia tried to ignore the television, which was a taped interview from early that morning when the big GJ was busy saving the Capitol from a group of protestors that hadn’t been capable of much more than stopping traffic less than he had, as far as she was concerned.

“He’s a g-man. What else do you need to know? They made him, they keep him like a dog, and he does what they want him to do: stop the “terrorists” and smile when the cameras are rolling.” She polished off her beer and shook her head when the waitress asked if she wanted another, though she did need another lemon for her dinner, and asked for one. “Besides, it’s not like we need to talk about the guy every-”

She was cut off as the bartender gasped, an odd noise coming from a two hundred and fifty pound man that could barely fit behind his own bar, and turned up the volume on the TV. The interview had been replaced with live action news, and Delia only saw two minutes of footage of the massive man facing down a troop of real terrorists, the kinds with bombs strapped to their chests and automatic weapons, before she excused herself to the bathroom. She was sweating as she shimmied out of the tiny window, her boot lace getting caught and leaving her rather stranded upside down until she jerked it loose, resulting in her, red faced and fuming when she took off at a run towards the
Lincoln Memorial. Not an easy jog, to be sure, but she began to speed up after about a block, her body blurring to the point that it was impossible to see more than the impression of a body running past out of the corner of the eye. Not that anyone was noticing her to begin with, a slow, deep breath and a moment of concentration had ensured that much. It took her all of fifteen minutes to get to the behemoth of Colorado marble, which was far from a record with guys like the Flash running around, but it was pretty damn good for her. The sun hadn’t quite set, and by the time she rounded the final corner it was perfect lighting for a photo op, as she quickly found out. There he was, in all his spandex glory, his arm around the shoulders of a young girl who had obviously—if the school girl get up was any indicator—been there on a class trip of some kind when the terrorists showed up. Red, white, and blue and created just to piss her off. No one noticed a skinny woman in black with the cacophony surrounding General Justice, so she shimmied up the steps through the crowd and just waited for a while, listening to him spout patriotic, propaganda rhetoric, and the reporters ate it up. At some point, somebody handed him a flag. One of the uniformed officers that were edging the perimeter of the media clusterfuck recognized her and sidled over. Spotting his badge number, she realized he was one of the cops she’d hauled out of a burning squad car the week before.

“Hey Kraken. Wasn’t expecting to see you here.” He was a young guy, not old enough yet to be jaded with the job like his partner, who was twenty feet away and glaring at the back of GJ’s head like that alone would make it explode. Sandy blonde hair was still a bit singed at the tips, but he was no worse for wear from his brush with death. She thought his name was Davis.

“You know, duty calls and all that.” She flashed him a grin that’d no doubt get his heart rate going a bit faster, given what Delia’s alter ego was wearing, or at least appeared to be wearing, at the moment. The sweater and jeans she’d had on in the bar were gone, replaced by a ripped up black shirt, the skin tight kind that athletes wore as much to show off their bodies as to wick away moisture and keep muscles warm. The rips left little to the imagination, and she could see Davis’s eyes straying from her marked, and thusly masked, face down to the particular hole in the cloth that displayed a little cleavage. Ah, the joys of being the Kraken in your “spare” time. Davis, squinting in the bright lights of the cameras and trying to avoid looking like an ass on film, slid those standard issue reflective sunglasses that all cops got onto his narrow nose, and Delia glanced at the Kraken’s reflection for a moment, staring at the dark whorls and patterns that traced out what most people would think of as the silhouette of the infamous sea monster. It was odd, to see that on her face still, after all these years.

Turning her attention back to the feeding frenzy, she shook her head, the heel of one steel-toed boot smacking heavily against the marble below her. Davis’s partner, whose name she could not remember until she saw the little badge, wandered over as the crowd started to disperse, chatting her up a little, seeing if she knew anything about the attack that the two of them hadn’t already gleaned from other officers or the squealing media whores. Wisniewski shook his head slowly at the crowd, which was wandering off with that dazed look that most mere mortals have when they meet a celebrity for the first time.

“I keep wondering when they’re going to figure out that the guy doesn’t shit gold.” His voice was harder, lower than his young partner’s, and filled with the venom of over a decade on the force. He reminded her of Lenny Brisco on old school Law &
Order episodes, in terms of attitude: the guy had been married at least twice, judging by the pictures he’d shown her in his wallet when they’d dropped Davis off at the hospital, and at the moment he didn’t have a ring on his finger. The skin there was pale enough to still show the shadow, however, and he sounded like an angry divorced man, as much as Delia would have liked to not use that kind of stereotype.

“I don’t think they ever will, man.” Wisniewski and the Kraken got along really well, mostly because they were both far more cynical than most people, and it showed in the way the man smiled at her. “After all, group of more than a hundred people, they’re bound to act like morons. Herd mentality.” The older man laughed, one hand on the beer belly that had grown by a little since they’d last seen each other:

“Oh, come on, guys. He’s really not all that bad. I mean, he makes our jobs easier.” Davis’s enthusiasm might have been infectious anywhere else, but as it was, he got shot two glances that could have leveled a lesser, or at least less oblivious, man.

“He makes our lives more difficult, let alone our jobs, Davis.” Wisniewski nodded his agreement as Delia spat the words out, vehement in her hatred for the patriotic superhero. The blonde man looked confused, and a little hurt. She backpedaled a little by flashing him one of those crooked, welcoming grins, and continued. “Think about it: yes, D.C. may have been a target of terrorist attacks no matter what happened, after 9-11. But how many more groups have targeted the city since he was introduced as the resident superhero? People take his presence as a challenge, and they also know their group will get more press coverage than if they attack a place like New Orleans, where all they have to deal with is a few ghosts and me.” Understanding came like dawn to the young officer’s eyes, slow and almost painful to watch. “Besides, how many cops do you know that just stop doing their jobs when he’s on patrol? Just because he’s around doesn’t mean the world can exist without guys in uniforms like you, ya know?” Davis nodded slowly, though he didn’t entirely understand just why his partner and the pretty superhero were so upset. Mostly, he just wanted them to stop talking, and Delia could tell. So, mostly because she didn’t want to fight this battle for the umpteen millionth time, she did. She was sure that Wisniewski and the rest of the locker room back at the house would get through to him a lot faster than she ever could. That was kind of their job.

The mountain of man was moving off now, with the reporters turning back to their cars with stars in their eyes. It was damned convenient…half the network news vans had already been there, reporting about the early morning’s events live for the six o’clock broadcast, when the terrorists, and General Asshole there had shown up. There had always been part of her that had suspected that more than half of his work was staged by the government itself, and every day that passed like this one had her convinced. She felt a buzz in her pocket and glanced down at her phone to see a text message from Isabella, just a simple question mark and the assurance that she’d handled Spector for the time being. Shoving the phone back into her baggy black pants, the kind with millions of straps that emo kids bought at Hot Topic with their parent’s credit cards while complaining they were unloved, she took off at a jog over to the big GJ, who was handing the flag back over to an officer with a laugh, tossing his head back. God he was annoying…over-actor, too. Subtlety did not appear to be a word that the black-haired superhero knew.

“Hey. Big guy.” Staring down the last few steps at her…well, she supposed he was supposed to be her role model, right? Delia all but skidded to a stop on the marble,
shoving her hands in her pockets defensively and hating herself for doing it. “Nice work. Not often I get to watch you.” She pitched her voice low, and in her own ears it sounded different, honey and thunder, hard liquor and harder sex. Perfect. That was bound to get her all sorts of attention from the machismo giant that she did not want.

“All in a day’s work, citizen.” He flashed her a smile that was good enough only his mother (and Delia, but that’s just because she was that good) could see through. “My apologies, miss, but duty calls. I’m fairly sure I can rescue a few kittens while I have time.” He bowed his head a little to her, and she could tell, even with the white “eyes” of his mask, that he was looking her over from the bottom of her steel toed boots, all the way up her black and gray Kevlar and leather and sportswear uniform, to the top of her short, choppy black hair and the masquerade job on her face. Then he stepped back and took off down the street, lengthening his stride. He was moving like he was hurting just a little, and it made her brows twitch, along with the thin brackets of annoyance around her mouth.

“See, it’s things like calling me a citizen that get on my nerves and you very well know it.” The two of them had met, sort of, on the streets when their paths crossed, at photo ops that she desperately tried to escape, and at that one meeting the feds had called last year. She kept pace with him easily, long legs stretching as she stalked beside him like a sentient shadow, her hands fidgeting in her pockets. She was very aware of the fact that it would have been easier to identify him out of costume than her, just given his sheer size, but there were still distinguishing marks, and the first time they’d met, she’d been in civilian clothing. Now, her face was marked six ways to Sunday that day, which marked her as the infamous Kraken, who was called far worse things behind her back, but that big notch in her right ear where her brother had ripped out an earring was pretty distinctive, and he didn’t survive the business this long by being completely addle-brained. Besides, she was, as Spector put it, hotter than she had any right to be, and people tended to notice that kind of thing. But that was beside the point. Where the hell was he going in such a hurry? “You’re in an awful rush. Makes a girl wonder.” A lazy, crooked grin curled the left side of her lips slowly and she flashed him a white, toothy, feral smile.

“Look, I’ve got some things I need to do, the last of which is to baby-sit a wanna-be superhero and the first of which is go get home and see if—” He was staring at her hotly through the white film on his mask that shielded his eyes from the sunlight, or camera flashes, as was the case, when they both heard an explosion from the direction they’d just walked from. He half hit the deck, covering his head, but she just whipped around and took off like a shot. She thought she heard him mutter something foul and yell after her, but, to be honest, she didn’t really care. Her grin just twisted into something darker, hungry, as she neared two men standing right at the edge of the steps, one with an Uzi and the other with a big chunk of C4 strapped to his chest, both screaming something in a language she didn’t understand.

A steel toed boot introduced itself to the mustachioed man’s head, and she closed her eyes, concentrating for a moment. Both of them dropped to the ground an instant later, twitching with their eyes rolled back in their heads. No effort, and the only two that she could see were dealt with, zip ties in her fingers to bind them up more securely until the cops managed to get their asses in gear. So they were both drooling and hogtied on the ground, where she nudged the bomb with her toe, only to see that it was really just
gray clay and a cheap alarm clock. These guys were getting sloppy. She looked away, disappointed that they hadn’t been more of a challenge.

And her yellow eyes came up just in time to see the campy wonder grabbing the fender of an ugly looking van and swinging it up into the air like it was a pillow, the man inside it screaming his bloody head off about God and something or other in Arabic. He was getting absolutely ignored.

“Looks like your getaway has been delayed, boys!” Shaking the van a little, General Justice popped two guys out of it, one right on top of the other. The latter couldn’t have been older than fifteen. Shaking her head, one brow inching slowly up, she crossed her arms over her chest and just watched. So much melodrama, so much overacting for something that should have been relatively simple. Her two were still immobilized, and Davis and Wisniewski were checking vitals and standing behind her to watch as other uniforms came over to collect her charges. Davis was still glowing a little around the edges, getting to watch his hero work, but Wisniewski looked just as displeased as she was. Delia did notice, however, that they’d both actually drawn their weapons in an effort to get to the scene before her and the big spandex ass. She’d just beaten them there. Good.

Watching General Justice seize the two that had plopped out of the van and hand them over to sheepish looking officers, she made a face and turned to go. But she caught sight of movement out of the corner of her eye that she had a feeling had to do with her, and Wisniewski stopped her with a beefy hand on her shoulder.

“Well I’ll be damned.” Turning to follow his gaze back to the superhero, her brows shot straight up as she watched him beckon her. That was the only word for it: he was crooking his finger and beckoning her over. She’d been summoned. Casting an incredulous look at the two officers on either side of her, she took a stumbling step forward and suddenly found herself approaching a crowd as she joined him. She was almost a natural shadow next to the radioactively glowing presence that was the Generalissimo. She tried not to roll her eyes too much, just stand there with him and not make a noise, which was hard enough to begin with, until she heard him say something rather astounding, and she discovered she couldn’t speak at all for a moment.

“Actually, Tom, Kraken here was on the scene first. She realized that I hadn’t managed to get all of the terrorists and came back to save the day. I was just back up this time, guys. If you’ve got any questions or kudos, they should go to her.” She stared up at him, feeling the odd pressure of a massive arm around her shoulders, and just stood there, dumbfounded, as lights and reporters were turned loose on her for the first time since she’d arrived in DC. She caught the end of a sarcastic grin and shook her head, shocked.

“No thanks necessary…Tom was it? It’s my job, that’s all. Glad I could help out.” She was wildly uncomfortable with cameras pointed at her, and it showed. “I was always told each person had to do everything within their power to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves. General Justice and I were merely doing just that. Helping in every way we can.” With an almost painful wince at the sound of her own voice, she stepped back just a little, and nodded to him, by far the superior politician and poster child of the two of them. She beat people up for a living. He also sold himself. She liked being a shadow.

She watched, appalled, as he was slammed by a barrage of idiotic questions, not
the least of which was “Is she your romantic interest?” That from a woman in a horrific pink suit. After that came inquiries about possible partnerships, and one quiet young man who actually had the brains to ask if they thought there would be any more terrorist attacks, and what might have motivated these four men in the first place.

Delia was about to open her mouth and tell off the pink-suit wearing harpy, and then give the rest of them a peace of her mind about the current administration’s policies in the Middle East, and how a history of imperialistic, vain behavior had gotten them to this point, when she felt a massive hand squeeze her shoulder just a little too tight.

The General fielded all of the questions with grace and a sense of humor that she hadn’t known he was capable of, ignoring the inquisition imitation that was going on around their personal lives. She gaped at him a little, which he caught, and rolled his eyes at her, just enough so that she could tell, but not so much that the reporters only three feet away could.

“Alright folks. I’ve got to get going, and I know the Kraken has better things to do than stand around and be insulted by getting associated with me romantically.” There was a soft, nervous collective chuckle from the reporters, and he stuck his hand out to her, turning to face her once again. “Photo op…just put up with it.” This was muttered to her under his breath, and she nodded, shaking his hand and schooling her features into something other than utter shock or a scowl, but not quite managing a smile before bulbs started flashing. This was no kind of life to live.

It took all of three hours for her life to utterly fall apart, after that. Two weeks later, and her coworkers were still talking about the incident, though they didn’t know that the infamous ‘Mystery Hero’ on the General’s arm was her. There were copies of the story from every major newspaper in DC, two in New York, and one in Chicago, not to mention countless national tabloids and not a few website printouts, posted all over the ME’s office building. Hell, there was one in the ladies room, until she took it down, and her rotund boss was still reading the article in the Post, word by aching word, when he had a spare five minutes that he wasn’t dedicating to his wife. She’d even been on the 11 o’clock new that night, not to mention the five am the next morning, and the radio for at least three days. She was starting to be very glad she masked her voice in public as Kraken. She’d even been smart enough to expect the tabloids to be scandalous in their assumptions about what she and the black-haired superhero were doing in their spare time. One had Photoshopped a picture of each of their heads onto bodies that were so obviously not theirs that it was comical. Besides, the leather leotard and chains her picture had been stuck in didn’t look too comfortable.

But the worst was Kathryn Zylinski. She’d begun a full on media war with the Kraken, daring the female hero to come out and face her, blasting her to anyone that would listen, and generally making a nuisance of herself. Delia had not been aware that the big man in the red, white, and blue suit could summon up that kind of loyalty, or even lust, that the reporter was demonstrating. The vehemence of Zylinski’s hatred for the punky antihero that was her alter ego was what really shocked Delia. And she’d had just about enough of it when Spector came in at seven to relieve her from her shift, laughing
with Charlie about the new story on the front of the Post, with Zylinski’s name on the byline.

“Hey Dee, did you see what the lunatic woman has written today? She actually challenged the Kraken to—”

“Spector, shut it.” He sputtered to a stop, pale eyes fixated on her feral face. She could feel her lips curl back in a snarl that she couldn’t quite help, her teeth flashing in the brightly lit room. That was one of her pet peeves: watching TV, most people would get the impression that the ME’s office is a dimly lit, atmospheric place with plenty of brand new technology and lightning fast results on every test ever run. In reality, the building was flash-flooded with fluorescent light, most of the computers were at least a year out of date, and tests took weeks, not minutes. And the fact that Spector was sauntering in five minutes late, as much as it was an irrational anger, really just pissed her off even further. “I don’t want to hear another word out of your mouth about the great savior of DC, or I’ll rip your tongue out and use it as a lens cap, do you get my meaning?”

“Whoa…what crawled up your ass this mo rning, Red?” This from Charlie, who insisted on calling her Red, despite the fact that there was nothing in her complexion or hair that lent itself to that color, except for maybe the shade her enraged eyes were spitting at the moment. Spector was Blue, for similar reasons. It was the color that Charlie, who was from Chile and hadn’t yet learned English when he met them, had first seen them in. Needless to say, his English had improved, but the guy still couldn’t tell you what color the sky was, and Spector was Blue all the time. Fit his generally morose and fatalistic personality in ways that usually amused Delia far more than it was right now.

“Nothing. I’m just sick and goddamned tired of hearing about two people that have nothing to do with my life, and how obsessive everyone is about them. It’s like frigging Brangelina in here and I just can’t stand it any more.” She shoved her arms into her coat like her hands were terriers going to ground after a fox and yanked her bag onto her shoulder, fuming now that they hadn’t stopped her from talking. “People are still dying, even with those two out there, and we have a fucking job to do. And guess what? It’s not watching the two of them waiting for them to pop out a perfect, genetically superior baby. Get the hell over it and move on with your damned life.”

Two pairs of eyes followed her down the hall, heads poked out of the door and brows etched with incredulity. What the hell was wrong with her that she blew up like that? Delia had a temper under normal circumstances, there was no question about that, but she rarely took somebody’s head off with her words and shoved it someplace the sun doesn’t shine. Her patience was too great for that, and her sense of humor was too. Usually took all of four minutes for her to calm down and laugh about whatever had gotten her raging just heartbeats before. Spector and Charlie looked at one another, almost comical in the height difference between them, about fifteen inches.

“Alright…so dressing up as the General for Halloween would be a bad idea, si?” Spector nodded seriously at his companion, though the mental image of the tiny man in a General costume was just about enough to make him laugh out loud. “Adios. See you tomorrow, Blue.”

Delia, for her part, beat Charlie out of the building by only a few moments and slipped into her beater, making a beeline for her studio. It too far longer than it should
have, because of another war protest staged near the Capitol, and she pinched at the headache that was rapidly forming behind her eyes. Yeah, the war. It was wretched, it was stupid and she hated it, but seriously. She had moved to DC in the spring of 2006 for one thing and one thing only: to save her city from becoming a ghetto itself. New Orleans was struggling without her, but she’d gotten some help for the place that had taken her in so lovingly and made her feel at home for the first time since she’d left New Mexico. And how much work had she gotten done on that front? Working four or five ten or twelve hour shifts a week was eating up what little life she had outside of being the infamous Kraken, and a girl did need some kind of social life, right? And the entire country was fixated on a civil war that was being waged thousands of miles across an ocean, while an entire coast still foundered and people still starved.

She knew that she wasn’t in the greatest of moods that day, and she’d taken it out on Spector, which hadn’t been necessary, she thought, climbing the creaky stairs to her second story one-room that was in a quiet, if not too safe, part of the town. Dumping her bag on the floor next to the kitchen table, she took a slow look around. Big bed pushed into the corner, really no more than two king mattresses piled on top of one another. Couch shoved under the big wall of windows, facing a big TV with too many video game consoles that had cost a small fortune and was the only furniture that moved every time she did. There was a full kitchen opposite the bed, with an actual dishwasher that looked like hell, but worked, and corner for the bathroom that still had the massive claw-foot tub that revealed just how old the building was. She’d rigged up a few Japanese paper screens and a curtain to section off that particular pat of the apartment, even though there was one complete wall and a door, but the rest of it had an open, airy feel that you just couldn’t get any other way. Her only real gripe about the entire place was the color of the walls. She’d managed to wrangle all wood or black furniture, even the appliances were in various shades of dark gray, but the walls were this light, vomit-inducing gray color that she’d only ever seen before in restaurant kitchens and hospitals. She wasn’t fond of it, but she hadn’t had any time to paint yet.

Falling to her knees in front of the chest-cum-coffee table, she ran her hands over the worn, notched wood and opened it almost reverently, starting a ritual that she knew would take the seething rage that was knotting her belly and put it to something far colder, far more constructive. First came the uncomfortably tight sports bra, just under a Kevlar vest that was just thick enough to do some good, but not so thick it would really impede movement. Now, if she got hit by a bullet, it would still get down to flesh, but slow enough to avoid doing major damage, and she didn’t fancy looking like a marshmallow on legs as she tried to fight crime. Over that was the ripped shirt that her male fans seemed just a bit too glad about. Under the big baggy goth pants that she wore was really a pair of tighter yoga pants that helped keep circulation going and made sure she didn’t freeze her ass off in the advancing winter weather. Boots, and last but not least, she pulled her hair back from her face, which was quickly transformed into the twisting, nonsensical limbs of a creature that had never existed, piercings glinting along her lip and eyebrow, dancing in a row down her left ear. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she touched her black hair lightly and shook her head, unable to recognize the woman that was staring back at her. When had it come to this, saving the world from murderers in the background all day and on the streets all night? Why couldn’t she have been a nice, mild-mannered reporter?
She took a graceful step out of the window onto the fire escape on the back of her building and glanced around slowly, trying to make sure that no one was watching before she trotted down the rusty metal steps and leapt heavily to the ground, grunting softly. Before she really set off, she checked a few hidden items on her person and satisfied, moved towards the center of the city, watching the shadows as night marched steadily towards day and making sure that none of them were going to come back out and bite her in the ass later.

Three hours or so had passed by the time she’d made a full sweep of that night’s territory, and she hadn’t seen one cop. Not one, in a city this violent, had she passed, just getting a cup of coffee or talking to one of the local kids about his skateboard. Jesus, did they really expect her and the blind oaf in the flag suit to take care of the entire city all the time? Scaling a building right across from the Jefferson Memorial with a grunt, happy to have reached on of her favorite spots to stop and think, she blinked when she discovered that the helpful little ledge looking up at the former president was already occupied. Licking her lips hastily, she settled a cigarette between them and lit it, her fingers tapping on her thigh as she made a decision.

“Go home.” She was a bit surprised by the huskiness of her own voice, quiet for all that time, and thick as honey once more. “You look like shit.” She was right. Even with the mask, there were bags under his eyes, and his shoulders, until the moment she’d spoken, had been so far down that it was hard to tell where torso began and knees ended. He looked like toothless, rabid wolverines were trying to chew their way out of his skull. “You’ll be of no use to anyone in this state. I’ll stick around until dawn is in bed.” She blew smoke through her nostrils like a cartoon bull and cracked her neck, hoping that the stupid man wouldn’t argue with her and knowing he probably would. Well, she wasn’t good for much but fighting battles, this was just a different kind than normal. “A hot shower and some sleep and I’ll let you patrol again, but I’ll take your out if I have to.” Her voice sounded hard, even in her ears, but she could feel herself grinning crookedly at him in the dim light splashed up from the river.

“Considering that the only place where I can get free rent is a government building, you can’t exactly go back early. I stay here until they call me back in, which could be anywhere from two minutes to two days.” Odd thing was, he knew she was right. He felt like crap, and all he wanted to do was curl up and take a nap. Watching him shrug and lean back against the edge of an air conditioner, she thought, not for the first time, about how surprised she always was to hear his voice. She’d heard it in her head as deeper, richer somehow. Maybe it just didn’t echo around that big head of his as much as she expected it to. He shot her a queer look and turned back to look at the memorial, perplexed as to why she would care that much.

“Then go crash at my place.” She dangled her keys in front of his nose like you would a baby or a dog, sidling up until she was right beside him without making more than the hushed whisper of cloth against cloth as she moved. She refused to back off at this point. In for a penny, as the saying went. “You need sleep. You’re not a machine, ya fucktard. You need rest, and a shower, and food. You’re gonna be useless if you keep this up.” She knew she was repeating herself, and that she was playing up the light accent she’d acquired in Louisiana. It usually comforted people, made them think she was caring and laid back, and that she was showing them something no one else knew about. Why, she’d never understand, but it worked, and so she used it. She settled down
beside him on the roof, her shoulder barely brushing against his, the dark material of her
costume absorbing what little light hit her. All that was really visible was the skin around
the dark whorls and designs of the masking marks on her face and the dull, golden coins
of her eyes. She, herself, wasn’t sure why she was being so pushy about it.

“The cops are out in force, and that means I’m free to do as I want, but it’s
symbolic for me to still be out here.” He waved down at a “street-hooligan” that shouted
up to them and made suggestive gestures with his hips and hands. Delia laughed, though
the massive hulk of man beside her didn’t, his eyes narrowing.

“Oh, get over it, Generalissimo. Just a bit of fun. Which is besides the point,
since I haven’t seen a cop car more than two miles from the Lawn in three days. They’re
all fixated on the chance to work with you, and assume that you’ll just handle everything
else. They all want to wave at mom on TV.” She shook her head and stubbed out the
cigarette, pocketing the butt after a moment’s wondering what he would do if she flicked
it over the edge of the building. She decided not to chance it.

“Let’s put it this way, Slim. I could go by the idle thought that you might come
with me to your place.” He turned to look at her, and she couldn’t help it. Her mouth
dropped open and her brows shot up as she just…stared at him. It was unnerving, to be
looked at like that from behind the eerie white film that covered his eyes, not being able
to read his face, which was perfectly still. Had he just propositioned her?

“Better’n nothing.” She allowed herself a dark chuckle and shook her head,
slipping to her feet and padding silently, somehow, in her steel toed boots to the fire
escape she’d come up. Tucking an errant strand of raven’s wing hair back behind her ear,
from where it promptly fell back into her face again, blocking part of her yellow eye.
She didn’t bother to look back and see if he was following, just started easily down the
ladder.

Glancing down when she heard a graceful thump on the concrete below, she
spotted him straightening his knees and brushing off his thighs absently. Grumbling
something about showboating superhero assholes and showing off, she took the last ten
feet in a jump and managed to stay on her feet, glaring up by almost a foot to shoot him
an angry look.

“Sure, I can leap off buildings in a single bound. I’d just as soon not test going
up, though.” She rolled her eyes at his little quip and just started walking, her legs
moving at a quick, but lazy-looking pace. Her legs were long enough that even when she
stalked slowly down the street like that, she was eating up pavement. Glancing at her
companion as he shadowed her right side, she shook her head absently, appalled at the
sheer height difference between them. She was no small, delicate flower to be easily
intimidated by a large man, but he was probably over a full foot taller than she was
anyway. Grumbling again, this time about behemoth, Xerxes wanna-bes, she kept her
eyes on the darkness around them, always warily watching her surroundings as though
they would jump out and bite her in the ass. Which, sometimes, they did. She had the
scars to prove it. He, on the other hand, seemed utterly unconcerned, though it was hard
to tell with that white film masking his eyes. She absently wondered what color they
were, and shook the thought from her head as the rounded the corner onto her street. She
wasn't much of a talker, only muttering softly when they got honked at, but it was only a
few blocks to her place, and there wasn't anything to say, as far as she could tell. A
dealer took off at a run, moving away from them, and she decided to pick him up later,
given how hard it would be to carry a man the size of the General to her place if he passed out from exhaustion on the street.

She didn't live in exactly the best part of the city, and it showed. But there was a reason she'd picked this neighborhood. It was far away enough from the main drags that she wasn't dealing with lost tourists all the time, parking was manageable, if not easy, and it was exactly her style to be able to take care of a dealer or a B&E on her way to work every day. She was nothing if not a monster for efficiency. Nearing her building, a three story brownstone looking thing that had seen better days but was starting to perk up with a little love, she hopped a fence to access the backyard and looked up at the fire escape. Without warning, she launched herself up at the ladder and caught it with both hands, scrambling gracefully up onto the platform and looking down at him.

"If you want to use the front door, you're welcome to, but the hot dog vendor across the street fancies himself a paparazzi, and my landlady has eighteen pairs of eyes." She was crouching on the metal grating like a gargoyle staring down at him, her yellow eyes expectant. There was something feral in her face, that made her look angry and dangerous, beyond just the thick black mask of whorls and loops on her caramel colored skin.

"I'll see you on the other side, then." The look in her eyes made him hesitate just a little, but, mostly just to prove to himself that he could, he carefully peeling his mask from his face, which looked more painful than it really was, and pushing a button on his big belt. With a bit of a mechanical noise and a flicker, he was suddenly in civilian clothes again, covering his suit. Just a plain long-sleeved tee, blue jeans, and a pair of worn sneakers, but he was still hard to lose, given his sheer size. Tucking his gloves under the shirt so they wouldn't be seen, he saluted lazily, hardly the normal crisp motion she'd seen on TV, and strode off around the corner of her building with a pained look on her face. His headache had been steadily building since they'd started walking, and it was starting to seriously grate on her nerves, leaving her feeling raw and exposed. It didn't help that he looked like a kicked puppy, with that black hair and those big green eyes. So green, huh?

He was waiting on the top floor landing for her after she'd hauled herself up the fire escape steps and shimmied through her window to the door. How he'd known she'd be on the third floor, she didn't know, but he was good at guessing, apparently. She ushered him into the dark loft, always welcoming her with open arms, and she flicked on a few lights, mostly around the kitchen end of the long room. She made a beeline straight for a cabinet above the sink, pulling out a jar of migraine pills.

“I gotta admit, I like you better out of the Generalissimo costume.” She nodded slowly and leaned into the kitchen counter, a glass of water offered along with the pain meds. His green eyes stuck to her as she moved, watching the water hesitantly before taking it into his large hand and downing four pills. A muscle in her jaw was starting to tick like a clock. His pain and discomfort were distracting her too much for her to be happy, especially because she didn’t even like the guy, and it showed. Just a little, since she looked pretty surly most of the time. “Sorry about the trek. But I’m sure you understand why I like to avoid the press coverage that you usually get.”

“Thanks. The meds they’ve been giving me are a bit on the strong side, and one of the worst aftereffects is a headache to end all skulls.” He rubbed absently at his chest again and grinned at her a little. He wasn’t bad looking, without the campy get up.
“Tell you the truth, it was more for me than for you.” She left it at that, mostly because she was still uncomfortable revealing what, exactly, her powers entailed, without at least moderate duress. “I’ll be right back.” It was the matter of just a few silent moments behind the screens for the “bathroom” to reappear in an ancient t-shirt and a faded pair of jeans, where black leather and Kevlar had been just moments before. The markings on her face were gone, too, revealing a rather sweet, easy grin and high, delicate cheekbones, as well as a nose that had been broken more than once. The bright yellow eyes hadn’t changed, and she made a face at him, obviously uncomfortable. “So, I’ve never done this before. Am I supposed to call you General Justice still, or is there something less of a mouthful?” The same guy that made her stomach roil when he was in costume left her with butterflies out of it, smiling at her in her kitchen. Rolling her eyes inwardly, she kicked herself for being so infatuated with the moment, wondering if she was feeding off of any emotion he was feeling. Latching onto that reasoning, she accepted it as the truth and decided the guy just wanted to fuck her. It was neater than really dealing with any of it.

“Call me Rick. Jesus…I’m still wearing the suit. Gimme a second?” He shifted awkwardly and gave her a sparkling grin that was just as different as a campy GJ smile as his voice was. This was a different man than had been in front of her with the mask on just a few minutes ago. Without cameras rolling and villains attacking, he seemed to be a human being. And that enough was enough to rock Delia back on her heels. She waved at the screened in area of the apartment and he scooted behind the rice paper and bamboo constructions, leaving her to wonder if a man that size was capable of scooting. He returned a few minutes later, folding the suit neatly and placing it on the counter, looking far more comfortable, though he was watching her a little warily. Understandable, given that he didn’t know nearly as much about her as the other way around.

“I’m Delia,” she offered when he returned, pointing a finger at her fridge. “You want a beer?” Beer was one of the only things consistently in her apartment, and to be honest it was either that or water. He was rubbing his chest again, and it had obviously not been an easy thing to get out of that spandex wonder on his own. With a shake of her head and an irked sigh, she retrieved two bottles of beer and put one in his hand, pushing him towards the couch. “Shirt off, sit down.” Not one to put up with any bullshit, our Delia.

“Woah, woah, alright. Christ.” Flicking his thumbnail against the metal cap, he pushed it off and opened the beer, trading Delia for the unopened one and repeating the process. Getting his shirt off without spilling anything was a little ungainly, but he managed, and settled on the black couch, sagging into the cushions with a happy sigh. Oh, bliss. Sitting down felt too good. “If you really wanted me naked, there’s easier ways to proposition a man.” The spark of absent arousal shocked down his spine and he startled a little, shrugging. She was attractive, and he was a guy. But why did he get the feeling it was more? He felt her eyes rake over the CIA project tattoo on his upper arm, and his brows rose in surprise. If she’d spent two minutes on the internet, she would have known what had made him.

“Glad you decided to cooperate. Would’ve cut if off, if need be.” She ignored his second statement and set her beer down, kneeling between his legs as if it was the most normal thing in the world to have arguably the hottest woman in DC between your thighs. “What are these from?” She didn’t do a whole lot of research, when she could...
avoid it, and she’d decided a year ago not to like this guy. Besides, she wasn’t a fan of
the infinite tortures that human beings could come up for one another. Long, callused
fingers touched three plastic rings in the middle of his chest, softly, trying to make sure
she wouldn’t hurt him. Why do I even care what those are? Oh, right, it’s because
they’re itching like the bajeezus and I can’t manage to ignore it. Right. Because I can’t
ignore anything from somebody I like. Gah, Delia, cut it out.

“Medication,” he sighed, biting back the curses that always came along with that
thought. Slumping into the couch, he let her inspect for as long as she wanted, intrigued
by the thought that someone who didn’t appear to like him very much would spend this
much energy on his health and comfort. “I volunteered for a project, and they overdid it
just a little. It was a long time ago, they don’t bother me as much as they used to.”

“Let’s see what we can do about that, shall we?” She made a small harrumphing
sound in the back of her throat and closed her eyes, settling on her knees like she was
staking a claim to stay there. Which was fine with him, if he was going to be honest.
She was gorgeous, in a dark sort of way, and seemed completely unaware of the fact that
most of the women in the city would have sold their right arms to get in the same spot she
was in right now. Then he noticed the warmth spreading from her hand over his chest,
and he flinched, his muscles seizing and vibrating in painful spasms. When they started
to shift and pop like cracked knuckles, his eyes widened with fear, and he put a hand on
her shoulder.

“Stop…stop!” His muscles had started to grow, and he shoved at her shoulder,
trying to get away from her and not succeeding in the least as he scrambled back against
the couch. He groaned and curled up in the fetal position, trying to clamp down on his
unstable powers, which she’d just apparently jumpstarted, in a most painful way.

She fell on her ass staring at him, dumbfounded. This never happened. Healing
was her shtick. But his pain hit her like a blow to the stomach and she blanched, choking
back vomit. Christ, what have I done? “Shit. Fuckassdamn, what can I do?” Her body
was ratcheting up in to full panic mode and she was balanced already on the balls of her
feet, ready to run if it looked like he was going to explode. Hell, the guy was called the
Hulk-Smasher for a reason, right?

“Belt…” One word that sounded like it had gotten ripped right out of his
stomach, and not pleasantly. He hadn’t felt like this in ages. The metallic taste of blood
filled his mouth as he bit his lower lip hard enough to break skin. Being this strong
mandated sacrifice, they kept telling him, but that was hard to believe when all he wanted
was to be able to fall asleep without wondering if he would wake up having ripped the
bed apart.

She was back before he could even realize she’d gone to grab his belt, pushing the
thing into his hands without touching him, worrying that contact with her skin might just
make things worse. Damn those government assholes for turning him into this.
Reducing a man to a dog, then making him utterly dependent on medication to regulate
the sheer size of his muscles. Classy. But then pain smashed into her skull again like a
sack of bricks and she clutched her head, closing her eyes to keep the light out, trying to
shut him out of her mind.

While she wasn’t looking, he fumbled with the belt and pulled out a huge needle
from a pocket in the damned thing. Slamming it fully into one of the little rings in his
chest, he shoved at the plunger. After a few moments, a low groan echoed in his mouth,
and he let his head fall back, prostrate on her couch with a massive needle still in his chest. “I’m…ok now.”

“Jesus Fuck!” When the first thing that met her eyes was the image of a hypodermic needle that size sticking from his flesh, what else did he expect? He gently removed the thing, capped it again, and set it onto the table next to the couch. He watched as she let out an almost silent sob and fell to her knees, her hands still clapped over her ears. After a minute or two, she managed to haul her lean frame up to her feet dizzily, looking like a drunk on Bourbon Street. She collapsed onto the couch, tangling her fingers with his intimately and leaving no room for argument as she just…sat on him. Reassuring herself more than anything else, that he was alright.

“Hey. It’s ok, I’m fine, I swear.” Hesitating for just a moment, he lay his big hand on her dark auburn hair and stroked gently, shifting to pull her a little closer. I’ve known this woman how long and I’m already treating her like we’ve shared a bed? Could’ve sworn her hair was black earlier. What the fuck is wrong with me? “Don’t need to worry about me, I’m stronger than I look.” He chuckled softly, trying to calm her down with humor. Yeah, it certainly unnerved people who had never seen him administer his meds, and more than once he’d heard a doctor say ‘What have we done?’ whenever he had to view a controlled test of Rick’s withdrawal symptoms.

“Dammit, don’t do that when I’m within fifty feet of you, ya asshole!” She was still shaking, but the fear and pain was replaced by anger and not a small amount of trembling laughter now. “Fuck, that hurt.” She reclaimed her hand to squeeze her head violently again, as if it would push the feelings out, which it never did. She finally noticed that her hair had changed color. “Well crap. You really made me lose my concentration, didn’t you?” Her head was masked for a heartbeat by what appeared to be the shimmer of heat waves, and her hair was black again, in a relatively short, punky cut. She looked far more comfortable that way, but in Rick’s opinion, the other color had been more interesting, by far.

“You’re an empath.” It wasn’t a question, but she nodded all the same. “That makes sense now. Telepath too, right?” She nodded again, still shaking, but he could tell that she’d calmed down quite a bit, and, at the very least, since he wasn’t in pain any more, she was probably feeding on the residuals of the high that the drug usually deposited in his system without asking permission. He turned his eyes to the ceiling slowly and added “Yeah, tends to hurt me too.”

“Let’s not do that again.” She detangled herself from him, refusing to admit to the pang of regret in her belly, and flopped onto one of the chairs next to the couch, watching him carefully. “At least I don’t have to do shit like that, right? I just get headaches and go panicky when there are too many people around.” He snorted softly and shook his head.

“Oh yeah, you’re so lucky. Knowing exactly what that construction worker would do to you if he got half a chance.” She snickered softly at the face he made, a mixture of anger and disgust, and rolled her eyes a little.

“Get some sleep. I’ll make some breakfast when you wake up.” She paused, pulling herself to her feet and moving to the kitchen to get some work done. Mostly bills that she didn’t have the money to pay, but hell, there were days that being a superhero trumped making money. Screw you, Bruce Wayne. “I’m sorry, Rick.” But he was already snoring softly on her big couch…which didn’t look so big when he occupied
most of it. Disposing of the needle as safely as she could, she turned on an older version of the same computer she’d been using at work and sighed, trying to keep herself focused and failing miserably. But again, she refused to believe that it was the handsome man on her couch, and decided it had more to do with the six dollars in her bank account. Hopefully, internet would go out before electricity did. Damned landlord.

Waking up should never be a disgruntling, disorienting experience, but far too often it is, especially if sleep crept up in an awkward or unexpected place. Delia never did excel at waking up, however, especially in a place that was not a bed. So she was immediately grumpy at the light hitting her eyelids and the voice that seemed to be inside her head, having a frustrated, supposedly hushed conversation. It even took her a moment to figure out who belonged to the male voice, since she was relatively sure that it was not her brother, since he would not have shown up without waking her immediately with an assault on her person. She vaguely remembered hearing “Stars and Stripes Forever” before the talking started, too. Lifting her head wearily from the desk and realizing that sleeping at a computer had done a number on her neck, she glanced around and spotted Rick just outside the partially closed door to her apartment. Oh. That’s who it was.

“Ricky. What do you need?” Ricky? Jesus, they had him whipped. Grumbling as she stood slowly, trying to work the kinks out, her brows rose as she heard the screaming on the other end of the line from a solid ten feet away. “Consider this me taking a break. The shrink said I was fucked, right? What’s wrong with me visiting a friend?” From where she was, she could feel him glaze over and sigh softly. This wasn’t going to end well for either of them if he was going to keep getting all mopey every time the phone rang. “Look, trust me on this one. The secret is safe with her.” More yelling, and a suddenly very angry Rick. She winced a little, moving over to the kitchen to dig out some eggs and start making omelets. “And if she has a sexually transmitted disease, I’m fairly sure I haven’t caught it.” That was a new one. She almost stormed out into the hallway to snatch the phone out of his hand and show the fucker on the other end just how much hell he could get, but barely restrained herself, guessing correctly that it would only make things worse. Catching sight of her hair in the glass of the microwave, she noticed it was that dark auburn again, curly to boot, and…well, decided to give up on it. Obviously, she was not meant to have anything but her natural hair color today. Besides, who was she trying to impress? Certainly not General Jackass. Right. Well, maybe that wasn’t true, but she just couldn’t make herself care, still brain-addled from bad sleep and angry at the evil government monster on the phone with her couch-guest. “Fine. If you insist, I’m going to go back inside and ‘fuck my girlfriend’ as you so delicately put it. I’ll be back by ten. The cops should be able to handle this fucking city for one day. It’s their job, after all.” Slamming the phone shut, he stomped around the hallway for a few moments, and Delia could feel him calming himself down, itching at the edge of her senses, before he came back in and softly closed the door behind himself, locking it. Like someone would really get really far into her apartment with two professional heroes in the room. And like she had something worth stealing.
By the time he turned his attention back to her, the eggs were already beat to hell, mostly fed off of his anger, channeled through the cook, and the opening credits for Steve McQueen’s “Bullitt” were on her big TV. She was leaning against the counter easily, a crooked little grin curling her lips and her arms cross over her chest. “Well, ya better get over here and fuck me, lover-boy. Wouldn’t want to make a liar out of you.” She chuckled darkly and winked, noting he’d put his shirt back on already. At least she could still crack a solid joke on little to no sleep, that was a good sign that her sense of humor had yet to abandon her. Especially when it was laced wit innuendo. Stretching like a cat, she listened to her joints crack and turned back to breakfast. She heard him retreat to the “bathroom” and reappear a few moments later, after the quiet sounds of liquid streaming to hit more liquid, and smirked.

Her back to the room meant, though, that she missed the look on his face, the appraising glance he spared her entire frame, and the slow smile spreading across his face. She startled when his hand reached past her hip to turn off the burner, though, her brows shooting up once more in surprise, and she looked over her shoulder, shocked to find him just a few inches away all of a sudden.

“Well, I might as well. I’m under orders.” Never one to be caught in a bluff, not to mention the fact that it’d been ages since she’d gotten well and truly laid, she chuckled softly, trying to cover up a strange, sudden nervousness. Besides, she was just calling his bluff. She wasn’t used to men being this forward. They were always intimidated by her bluntness. Or something.

“I suppose it can’t be helped, then. National security issue, at this point.” Pivoting back around to face him once more, her lower back against the hot stove, she reached down and peeled her shirt slowly up. She was fully expecting him to stop her at some point, mostly because it still seemed like a big joke. When he didn’t, however, she flushed almost violently and let the shirt drop back down before he saw anything he shouldn’t, covering the scars and dark marks she’d so carefully hidden under her clothing. He took her hand gently, far softer than she was at all accustomed to, and led her back to the couch. Probing at him, flinging out all of the little threads of consciousness that usually let her read people better than they could understand themselves, she was utterly flabbergasted by her inability to find any doubt in his mind, any hesitation or wonderment. He really just wanted her. Wanted to touch her. And that, alone, was enough to make her suspicious.

His shirt disappeared somewhere between the kitchen and the couch, and she blinked. Glancing down at their hands, joined, she was relatively unable to understand how big his were. Not meaty, he had long fingers that looked almost delicate for the body they were attached to, and callused in interesting places.

“I’m in a relative state of undress. Why don’t you join me?” Where did this guy come from? So polite, so gentle, but capable of making butterflies she hadn’t felt since high school flutter up into her stomach and make her knees all weak. With a slight nod, she took her hand back and stripped her shirt off, leaving her naked from head to waist, and tried not to doubt herself. This was no time to lose the infamous Delia cool, even if her head was screaming to close the blinds, something, so that he couldn’t see her body. An ugly rope of scar arched from her right shoulder down between her breasts towards her left hip, ending below the waist of her jeans. Smaller scars, countless, dotted her body, with marks where sloppy stitches, some of them homemade, had been put to knit
the flesh back together. There were a few tiny numbers tattooed on a few of the scars, the neater ones that looked almost surgical, and an amorphous kraken, a real one and not the tentacle monster that she put on her face every day, hid against her ribs, under her left arm. She stood there, trying to be cocky not self conscious, and stared at him, trying to understand the scars that crisscrossed his own torso, visible now under the light of day.

“I suppose this makes me Frankenstein, and you my bride.” His eyes were dark, filled with a lust that she understood, and an emotion that she didn’t. Making a face at the bad taste of his comment, she started to move away, aware that she shouldn’t. He reached out and traced the upper edge of the biggest of her scars, the angry ridge still red and numb under his finger. “Nice…”

“Nice my ass. They’re shameful.” She twisted away, turning her back to him, and reached for her shirt. His eyes were consumed, for the moment, by the massive tattoo on her back, a pair of intricately detailed black wings that stretched from the top of her shoulder blades down, again, past the edge of her pants. Her body was a canvas, and she’d obviously sunk a lot of money into it at some point. He slid up behind her and rested his big hands on her hips, his generous height leaving him little option but to rest his chin lightly on her soft hair. Damn, not four hours ago she was about ready to take his head off for inconveniencing her, and now she was ready to let him hold her.

“Look, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings or anything. You know very well that you’re the hottest thing to hit the superhero rounds since Jean Grey. I just didn’t manage to say it the right way. I excel at putting my foot in my mouth.” Despite herself, she found herself believing him. Probably because he believed himself. Resting her hands on his, lightly, she nodded, his chin rocking against her head, and shrugged a little.

“Not so bad yourself.” He chuckled darkly and shook his head. “You should still thank your lucky stars I’m even letting you touch me, don’t forget that.” His laugh redoubled and he spun her around effortlessly, wrapping his arms tightly around her ribs, pulling her to his chest and listening for the uncomfortable grunt that signaled he’d forgotten how strong he was yet again.

The light kiss she leaned up to place on the side of his neck was calculated, specific, and she was, thankfully, back to her old self, her long fingers reaching down to grope his behind playfully.

“You know, just because all of my powers are—” she tapped her temple once, watching him, “Doesn’t mean that I’m going to break. Unless you play way too rough.”

“So I’m your backup. I’m alright with that.” He paused, chewing on the corner of his lower lip in a habit that she was suspicious would become way too endearing way too fast. “Back up a second. You’re empathic. So, you know that you…flashing me. Turns me on.” He was obviously curious about how her power worked, which made sense, since it was the opposite of his brute strength.

“Well I would know that without the power.” She glanced down pointedly and he had the good graces to flush, making her laugh again. “But yeah. I know. I could shut you completely out if I wanted to. But you know how a bruise feels when it’s healing? Kinda itchy and just a shadow of the pain from before? That’s what it feels like. A shadow of emotion under my own. But I can use it very effectively to make people believe things.”

Rick wasn’t really in the mood to hear more about her power any more. If she was going to be honest about it, neither was Delia. It was rare that he got a chance to
spend time with a woman, and rarer still when it wasn’t just ‘He’s famous, I’ll fuck him’ or ‘He just got me out of a several thousand dollar ticket or fine, I’ll fuck him.’ Delia, for her part, just didn’t have time to look for anyone lately. So they were both perfectly happy with the way things were turning out for the day. Rather unexpected, but certainly appreciated.

They discovered a few things over the course of the next several hours. Rick had much clumsier hands than Delia did, especially when trying to deal with zippers. Rick gasped softly. A lot. Delia was, by Rick’s standards, a nymphomaniac. Delia did not appreciate getting picked up and tossed over Rick’s shoulder. She also didn’t appreciate it when he was, by her standards, far too careful with her. She kept having to remind him that she was not going to break.

“Don’t be afraid to hurt me, Rick. I’m resilient, and I heal quickly, trust me.” This at a particularly awkward moment, with tangled limbs and skin covered in a fine sheen of sweat, both of them breathless.

“Honey, I have the ability to throw a tank. Everything is delicate by comparison.” She hit his shoulder…or what she could reach of his shoulder. Damn was he big.

“Just pretend I’m a tank then, dammit!”

“But…I don’t want to throw you out the window.”

The day was filled with laughter, mostly at each other, and more discoveries. For example, Delia made really good omelets, and Rick was good at getting half-cooked eggs out of pans. They both dozed off on her massive bed feeling as though something, god knew what, had been accomplished.

Waking up in a bed that smells of sex and man was far more pleasant than waking up to a computer and that same man discussing her on the phone, Delia decided the next morning, yawning and stretching slowly, her spread arms seeking out the massive hunk of muscle and warmth that she knew would be there. Well, she thought she knew. When her hands met paper instead of flesh, her eyes opened indignantly and she brought the not to her bleary eyes, glaring at it as though she could set the damned thing on fire.

Delia-

Had to go in to work. Expected me last night, but you distracted me. And yes, I will blame you if they ask. I’ll call you later. Promise.

Rick

P.S. That was not a false call promise. I’m not that kind of guy. And you’re worth it. And now I’m rambling so I’ll stop. Hope you slept well.

There was a reason that Delia got called the Kraken. Mostly because it was not a good idea to irk her. When she finally did get out of bed, which was not early, it was not out of any laziness on her part, but because she was genuinely exhausted. A few days without sleeping followed by a several hour romp with a rather strong superhero-pain-in-her-ass-turned-actually-decent-human being would do that to a girl. So now the hunt was on. Thank god she didn’t have to work for a few days, because even if Spector didn’t pick up on the fact that she’d gotten laid, Charlie would have, and she would have lost her opportunity to track him down and make him come back for dinner. It was the matter
of a half hour for her to shower and find some clothes that were more suitable than the crime-fighting getup. With a yawn, she stepped out of her door, all but skipping down the stairs and out the front door, scenting the air like a hound dog, as if she could find him that way. A thermos of coffee dangled in her fingers as lightly as the cigarette between her lips, though it wasn’t lit yet. Time to find her prey.

A few moments of speaking to a homeless man, flipping through his most recent memories, she dropped a ten in his cup and set off towards her car, little tendrils of consciousness cast out to catch people that might have spotted him walking away. Turned out he’d caught a cab back to a building owned by the Pentagon that was not so far from her ME’s office. Chatting with the woman at the front desk, she discovered he was out to lunch, and a little more sniffing led her straight to a tiny diner around the corner. She watched him from outside for a few moments. He was apparently considering a piece of pie, and thought better of it. A moment’s concentration and she knew he couldn’t see her anymore as he exited the greasy spoon, his big hands tucked in his pockets. He looked good in a suit. Maybe too good. But the tie was the same color as his eyes and that was…damn, she was swooning over a tie. Shaking her head clear again, she concentrated on him and just watched, knowing exactly what he would be seeing any second now. She sucked down the last of her caffeine and nicotine kick to banish the sleep from her eyes and enjoyed the show.

Rick’s brows shot up when he caught a stray dogging his heels, grinning as only canines can, with tongue lolling. It was a mangy thing, gray and red, and he paused in his steps, staring at it. What the hell was a coyote doing in the middle of DC? As the thing trotted off, dog laughing, he shook his head and looked up just in time to see a very naked Delia walking down the middle of the street, about to be hit by a bus. Only immediate logic saved him from exposing himself to the entire block by leaping out and taking a several ton vehicle to the shoulder to save her. No one else was looking at the street, and he knew that a woman of her caliber walking down the middle of the road naked would certainly attract that kind of attention, not to mention that the bus driver wasn’t even honking at her. As he stopped walking, his toes dragging against the sidewalk, the entire world around him started to dissolve into white noise, and he blinked, hard, trying to clear his head. Muttering something about LSD in his burger, he started walking again, not that he would know what direction he was going in. Pausing to stretch his senses out, he realized that it was more than just white noise and an absence of color. There was nothing, no breeze against his skin, no filthy street smells, just a soft, dark chuckle in his ears that sounded suspiciously familiar.

“Hiya.” Now, to anyone who was walking along the street, it would look like Delia and Rick were just taking a stroll next to one another, accompanying each other back to work after lunch. In fact, that was how it looked to Delia herself. All he could see, on the other hand, was her, and that was how she was going to keep it for the time being. Watching his eyes travel up and down her frame as they walked, knowing that the deep purple of her shirt offset her yellow eyes, and that her jeans looked like she’d been poured into them, she preened just a little bit. “How are you?”

“I realize now that my hours spent watching Twilight Zone marathons when I could have gone to a party have come back to bite me in the ass.” He was twitching a little and looked around once more, still utterly flummoxed that he couldn’t see anything. “You’re not hallucinating, m’dear. Remember, I can make things like this. Or, at
least, make you see things like this." She chuckled and stood on tip toe to kiss him briefly. So this was her true power coming to bear. Telepathy so all encompassing, so invasive, that she could literally change the perception of a person’s reality completely. Make them live things that could not, did not, actually exist. “You left.” Her voice, and her face, fell, disappointed in his sudden departure from her bed. There was abandonment in her eyes that she wouldn’t admit to, but he could spot none the less, despite only having known her, if he could be said to really know her, for a day. Being inside a woman tended to clear that stuff up pretty quickly. “I told you that you needed to take some time off, didn’t I?” She watched him tuck his big hands into the pockets of his suit pants again and lean into his hips watching her.

“I technically am. Sometimes, I just need to be…me, not the other guy. So today is a forms and requisitions day. Pencil pusher.” He watched her laugh at the mental image of him stuck behind a desk far too small for him. “Hey, at least I had the courtesy to leave a note and some contact info, right?” Suave, he wasn’t.

“See a note just doesn’t cut it when what I wanted was morning sex. Perhaps in the shower. I’m a big fan of morning sex.” Hooking her arm in his, she allowed his mini-universe to dissolve away, revealing that they were standing just outside of his office building. “Let me make you dinner tonight? No powers, no superhero bullshit. Just dinner.” She grinned up at him lecherously and winked. “Well. Maybe not just.” She watched him blink, trying to figure out what was going on, and chuckled darkly.

“Ok. Just…warn me about that in the future or something, so I don’t have a heart attack and die, right?” Taking the initiative once more, he slid an arm around her waist and pulled her close to kiss her, a little more overtly than he normally would have on a city street, but hell, you only live once, and you definitely only get one chance at a woman like this. He watched her pad off with a bounce in her step that hadn’t been there before, whistling softly and grinning like a fool. Her long legs ate up ground faster than should be legal. What he didn’t know was that she was desperately trying to think of something she could cook without killing them both that wasn’t omelets.

Rick’s intern, a nameless, faceless government worker that would be replaced in a few weeks by another just like him, was the first person to greet him at the door, a huge grin plastered on his narrow face. “So she’s the one that you fucked last night.” Not a question, and it made Rick’s face fall into an angry, vengeful scowl that would have warned off a smarter man. Unfortunately for the intern, he was not a smarter man.

“First of all, what the hell leads you to believe I had sex? And secondly, why is it any of your business.” Apparently, Rick had been oblivious to the little smile that had been lingering on his lips all morning long, leaving his workers suspicious of their oft-absent boss’s mood.

“At least you have good taste. She’s got nice tits, but…eh, gothy. Sad chicks.” The intern still hadn’t stopped grinning, and he didn’t appear to be moving on with himself and his unwanted observations.

“Do me a favor, Dave, and take the rest of the day off.” That left him to get even more work done, but somehow, with something to look forward to for the first time in months, if not years, it seemed easier to face the mounting pile of paperwork on his desk with some semblance of good humor.
As it turned out, Delia was capable of cooking one thing with any sort of consistency that wasn’t breakfast food: an amorphous stew/chili that her mother had apparently invented at some point in her family’s youth, spicy like the Southwest and filling to boot. It prompted a whole bunch of questions that neither of them had expected to answer at that particular point. And after Delia had described her childhood in New Mexico, and the life that one could expect to lead in the Stevenson-Crow Dog family, Rick realized that he knew less about her than he’d thought he did, including little, stupid things, like her last name. And her religion. And her favorite color. This had lead to further interrogation, and when she realized that it was four o’clock in the morning, and had offered that he crash once more with her, Rick had agreed, though not necessarily for the reason that most would have expected. Leaning over to kiss her cheek as she snored on her bed, the TV flashing images of sex tapes that they only sell in the early hours of the morning on random channels, he was struck by a sudden pang, wondering what it was like to live the life of someone utterly free to do what they wanted, to save innocents all the time, and never have to sacrifice for the will of others. Nodding off himself, big arms twitching around her ribs, he wished he could have that same life, and be able to offer himself, his whole self, to another human being.

Getting accustomed to waking up alone was not something that Delia was desirous of becoming accustomed to, and, thankfully, there were days that the gods smiled on her. The spasms of Richard’s arms around her woke them both up a little before noon, and she glared down at the appendages as if it was their fault, pushing at the big man’s chest and realizing too late that there was no hope at all of her moving him. Yawning, disgruntled at being woken up, she rolled onto her back and poked him in the chest, carefully avoiding the injection sights that she knew were starting to itch again, by an echo of the sensation on her own skin.

“I think campy is contagious. I want to go make you breakfast and get you some slippers.” He choked on a yawn and stared at her, half horrified and half amused.

“Hey, I do what I have to do and it’s supposed to be campy. If you catch it from me...just think of yourself as part of a government social experiment.” He grumbled something else under his breath and shoved his head under a pillow, in absolutely no mood to be awake yet.

"Oh no, the government touched me! I need to go get a chemical bath now. Or a shower." Delia was laughing at him, her feral eyes dancing with humor.

"I could go for a shower." He didn't move, however, regardless of her knee nudging his hip, trying to get him up.

"Oh, no, mister monkey suit. You don't get to join me in the shower. You look almost as goofy at normal-people work as you do in the spandex." She yawned, prompting him to do the same, again, and closed her eyes, giving up on the shower for the time being in favor of lounging in a sun-lit bed with a furnace of a man.

"Hey, at least I'm not following loyally in Ghost Rider's footsteps with the leather and ripped shirt get-up." He peeked out from under the pillow at her, just in time to see her hand come down onto his ear, albeit lightly.

"I dunno, I always kinda thought skulls and log chain were sexy." She made a
face at him and poked his ribs, trickling her fingernails up his skin and hoping beyond hope that he was ticklish. She was immediately rewarded with a convulsion of his big body away from her fingers, and a growl from under the pillow. "What do you do that requires a suit, anyway?" She realized that had never come up in their infinite conversation the night previous, and the offending dark clothing draped on her couch haphazardly had her wondering.

"Sort through paperwork. Mostly for authorization. Allocating funds, stupid stuff. That's the quote unquote day job they left for me when I volunteered for the GJ gig after my last tour."

"You were in the army?" Somehow, the fact that she hadn't known that seemed to surprise him. Apparently, he expected most people to have done at least a little internet research on his past, and to know that he was the product not only of the United States military and their programs, then the post-apocalyptic panic of the lack of Cold War or Nazis to fight that resulted in genetic and hormonal alterations to his poor body.

"Yeah. Joined right out of college. It was a…decision." Rick said it as though it had been something greater than just a decision, something grand and dangerous and horrific that he had not really understood when he'd made it. Something that he now resented just a little bit, maybe more.

"They were the ones that did this to you?" She touched the little rings of plastic on his chest lightly, gently, reverently, as if she was worshipping at the alter of his poor, altered body. Too bad she didn't have any holy water, just her lips, shadowing her fingers and echoing the question she'd just asked.

"Yeah." He sighed softly and wondered when all this had happened. There was a slender, dark haired woman next to him stroking and kissing the very things that made him somehow not human, though the debate about if it was more or less than the average homo erectus was still open. Two days. Really just two days of the whirlwind that was the Kraken and the painful punch to the gut that was Delia.

"Glad I never let them touch me." That made him flinch a little. He poked his head out from under the pillow that had been his sanctuary, blinking hard in the bright light.

"They tried to grab you?" She chuckled at the incredulity in his voice.

"Oh, like I'm not a good enough superhero for them to want me?" He sputtered and she chewed on his shoulder playfully. "I'm kidding. Yeah, they tried to get me when I moved off the res to Chicago in 2003. You would think it would be easier for them to get me when I was on federal land, but the BIA regulations and tribal police are sometimes way more effort than they’re worth." He had a rather blank look on his face, and Delia was relatively sure that it had little to do with the bright sunlight in his eyes.

"You just used a whole bunch of words that had no meaning for me." She laughed at him and shook her head slowly, clambering gracelessly out of the bed and pulling on the closest piece of clothing, which turned out to be his undershirt, hanging down almost to her knees. He didn't remember her being in that particular state of undress when they fell asleep, but he would not have been surprised if she was the kind of person to strip naked when asleep just to cool off. Or to feel the slide of flesh on flesh. Either way, he was not entirely displeased with the circumstances.

"Res, reservation, the place where tribes of Native Americans can live on federal property, given to them to try to make up for the genocide, murder, and the theft of an
entire continent.” She dug around in a cabinet for a few moments and came up with a box of cereal that probably wasn’t stale. A minutes later, and she had a bowl of grain and dehydrated strawberries, and was folded neatly back on the bed beside him, munching on the food with borderline happiness. She was pretty sure that Isabella had bought the crap she was currently pushing into her mouth. But it was food. And there was a boy in her bed. And that made everything better, regardless of the terror that gripped her belly when she thought about just how long she’d known that boy, or rather, how not long. “BIA, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, formed to deal with Native groups so the rest of the federal government doesn’t have to, originally under the War Department. Tribal police, a group of police officers and personnel specifically hired to keep law and order on reservations, since supposedly only federal law enforcement agents have jurisdiction over the things that happen on reservation property.” The look on Rick’s face didn’t change overly much and she shrugged, grabbing at the remote. It was, after all, Saturday, and despite the fact that she had to go to work in a few hours, she had cartoons to watch. Something Japanese and colorful flooded the screen, and she continued to munch. “What?”

“Well, I mean…you told me that you grew up at San Juan, that your mom was Native, but I had no idea exactly what that meant, I guess.” He shook his head slowly, rubbing at his gritty eyes. “Why the hell do I not know this stuff? I work for the government, for god’s sake, and they really should have taught you all of this in, ya know, high school, or something.”

“Yeah, but why does it matter to a group of upper middle class kids in Suburb, USA, what happens to a bunch of redskins out west?” She shrugged and kept her eyes on the TV, mostly to make sure the he wouldn’t see the anger in her face. It should matter, just like Katrina and Wilma and Darfur should matter and didn’t.

“But it should have. Hell, my high school mascot was the Ute. Ugly son of a bitch with some feathers on his head—”

“Which has nothing to do with Ute culture, by the way.” She hadn’t meant to interrupt him, she really had no intention to do that, but hell. This was one of her soapboxes, though if you’d ever asked her growing up if she was white or Native, she would have said white without hesitation. She’d spent all of her youth trying to be someone she wasn’t and she was finally done with it. “Sorry.” She leaned over hesitantly to kiss Rick, not really knowing if that was the best response to her transgression.

“It’s ok. Hell, I don’t know anything about this stuff. And I probably should. What’s a superhero that can’t save everybody, right?” There was an awkward silence while she stared at him, d umfounded.

“A human one, jerk.” Shoving at his shoulder, she rolled her eyes and started to climb out of bed again, to go rinse her bowl.

“So you know what I do all day long…what do you do?” He liked watching her move around the apartment, just putzing and pretending to do something important because she needed to keep her hands busy and occupied or run the risk of them doing something she didn’t want them to do.

"I take pictures of dead things." She glanced up from the sink with a look of complete innocent plastered on her face, as though she was completely unaware of the way that sounded. When he didn't rise to the bait, she at least had the good graces to not look disappointed. "Speaking of which, I actually have to work today."
"Hold on, I took the day off--"
"Passed out in my bed and didn’t wake up in time--"
"Just to have you bail on me to go to work?" He shot for incredulous and barely made it, shaking his head and covering a smile with a too-big frown.
"Yeah, but not until night shift. I don't go on until seven." She rolled her eyes and flopped back down on her belly to turn her eyes once more to the TV. It appeared to be some rip off of the standard anime superpower fare, probably American made and obviously cheap around the edges, where repeated backgrounds took over and unmoving extras wandered like zombies with no knees. "I work for the ME's office, cataloguing crime scenes." She felt a question lift from his brow like an eased itch and smiled a little to herself. "Believe it or not, I started off painting puppies."
"Aw...puppies."
"Dead puppies."
"Zombie puppies?"
"Only when I could get my hands on grandpa's wampum belt and daddy's rifle."
They shared a laugh like they did the bed, with a little discomfort and trying to figure out if the other person had really found that amusing.
“So what exactly does your job mean?” There was a moment where he wanted to pull her back into bed, but didn’t, hesitant to test the tenuous bond the twisted joke combined with good sex had created.
“I’m a forensic photographer. I work along with the crime scene investigators to document the crimes, and somewhere along the line I turned into the violent crimes and homicide specialist. Apparently, I’ve got a knack for seeing the whole picture in a way that most people can’t.” He nodded, and she wondered if he really did understand what she was saying. Most people didn’t, but it wasn’t as though that was really a surprise. What usually happened is that it started out as a voice in her skull, itching like the discomfort on Rick’s chest, just a murmur and a mutter to make her go a little crazy with what she was hearing. It was usually the voice of the victim, though very often they were drowned out by the chaos and sorrow that had descended on the scene after the death itself. Now and again, especially in particularly cold or violent killings, she was consumed for a time by the pain and rage and horror of the mind of the murderer. If she was honest with herself, then she would admit that those were her least favorite, though they were usually the easiest to solve. Passionate murderers left sloppy crime scenes. That didn’t make it any easier to sort through the milieu and find the information she needed to build the crime from the ground up, make it all better. And she hated every minute of it, despised herself for not being able to fix it all and undo the damage. But after a little while, she realized that he had started talking again, and that she wasn’t paying attention.
“…go into work, I should probably go back to the apartment and check in. Go on patrols.” Looking back over her shoulder, she wrinkled her nose a little and licked her lips, shrugging. He laughed and shook his head a little. “Neither of us have been on patrols in how many days because we’ve been too busy with one another. Somebody really should just give the city a once over tonight.” She made a ridiculous face, pulling her lips out at the side, and clambered out of bed. “I should probably go shower, anyway.”

The feeling of a big hand on her wrist, keeping her next to the bed, was almost
enough to trigger a panic attack that would have eventually brought them both to their knees, him with a nightmarish world filled with his own worse phobias, and her with the pain of trying to destroy the world she had shoved him in while experiencing the shattering fear that he was living through. It would be, experience told her, worse because they had slept together. But she forced herself to remain calm and turned to look at him as he stood, only partially dressed, somehow clumsy as he moved out of her bed. His size made every motion seem awkward and painful, like a puppy not yet grown into his paws and ears. Jesus…this was awkward. People how had at least dated for a while or were living together after having an established relationship had no problem figuring out how to say goodbye in the morning. But the two of them, they did of course. He bent to kiss her, and suddenly she felt rather exposed. Putting a hand on his bare chest, trying not to feel like she’d been electrocuted with the contact, she turned her head and kissed him on the cheek, refusing to let it be awkward, but at the same time unable to act like they were the Cleavers, and Ward was getting ready to go to work for the day. “Call me later. I’ll be working the next couple of days.” She left the last part unspoken, warning him to be careful, to ensure that he didn’t get himself busted up and useless to both her and the city. His brows furrowed, and he looked like he was none too pleased with not kissing her goodbye, but she didn’t really let him have any say in the matter. She turned and wandered towards the corner of the room that was designated for bathing, tossing his undershirt at his head as she pulled the curtain shut behind her. Now, if he’d been in the mood to test her, then he could have easily just walked in behind her. She suddenly, for the first time in ages, wished for a door to separate the spaces. Fortunately for them both, he was smart enough to preserve their fledgling relationship by refusing to test her boundaries just yet.

There was something just wrong about leaving her alone like that, just to go off to work, at least as far as he was concerned. Maybe he could have gotten her a cab rid to work or something. Bought dinner. Something besides fuck and run. Even if he didn’t actually get laid that night before. He had crashed with her. Give it up, Rick. She obviously would prefer to have you at arms length. And you can’t do much about that today. So go back home and get your suit on and make sure there’s a place for her to live tomorrow.

Work was never truly exciting for Delia, unless there was a major homicide investigation to keep her busy for a few days, and then she usually ended up feeling guilty for enjoying herself at the cost of another human being's life. But that was the way things worked in her alter ego's life, and she had accepted that a long time ago, when she'd taken her first forensics job in Chicago. Not that it had been a bad choice, but it had certainly been one she'd had to think about long and hard. As much as she had no problem catching criminals, her night job made that much apparent, her issue was with dead bodies. She'd been raised by a Catholic man and a devoutly Native woman who only celebrated her faith when her husband's back was turned, and when she had finally escaped them both, her grandfather, or the equivalent of what her grandfather would have been, had taught her more of her mother's heritage. Combined, it resulted in a young
woman that was reticent to ever come near a dead body, fearful of the taint, but not of the mortality.

Having an audience made her job even more difficult. Even though it was just Isa and Spector, it made her feel awkward as she looked over the evidence from the Farwell case, which had officially been termed a homicide. Spector had found traces of common household cleaners in the woman’s system, just enough for her to have died of it, and it was not making it easy on Delia that there wasn’t any physical weaponry involved. She had the jewelry of the victim in front of her, courtesy of her redheaded friend, who had the smarts to not ask why she wanted them, and the good graces to not mention it to anyone just yet. Thankfully, she’d not had to test that tenuous part of their friendship. That still didn’t make it any easier to sort out the emotions of the victim from those of the other people that had touched the jewelry, let alone trying to shut out Spector’s admiration for Isabella’s generous chest or Delia’s own legs, the itching boredom in Isa’s skull. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, easing the strain of staring at a computer all evening long, and with a flustered noise in the back of her throat, turned on the other two with heat and anger in her eyes.

“Would the two of you please be quiet and let me do my job?” Her guests, rocked back in their seats, stared at her. Neither of them had said a word in over ten minutes. Glancing at one another in a farce of cartoon characters with too much innocence on their faces, utterly confused as to what they could have done to piss off their friend, who turned back to the computer in a huff. “It was the eldest grandson. He has a cocaine habit and he was trying to swindle the poor old lady. She caught him lifting something, probably money or something he could fence, they fought. She was probably taking medications, pain killers for the surgery she just had, and blood pressure meds, maybe aspirin for heart attacks. Maybe even some antidepressant meds. All ads up to a very weak elderly woman, who was probably taking diet pills and running too many miles every single day. Wouldn’t be hard for a teenage boy to overpower her accidentally, things get out of hand.” Delia shrugged and turned back to her audience, rubbing at the headache that was forming between her eyes.

“You finally knew the touch of a man for the first time in what should be an illegally long period. Why is it that your mood has not improved?” Isabella crossed her legs in her expensive pencil skirt, for a moment making Delia jealous that she had none of the liquid grace that seemed more natural to the petite woman than breathing itself. She looked more often than not like a particularly beautiful statue, and it was hard to remember that she was, in fact, a living person half the time. As it was, Delia could barely manage a shadow of her usual wrath when she glared at Isa. “Just curious.” With an absent shrug, the blonde glanced at Spector, who looked ready to shit himself.

“Look, it’s just this case, that’s all. I don’t like stuff that we’re not gonna be able to prove, you know that. And it was a little old lady.” She took a deep breath, but neither of her friends seemed at all convinced. Spector looked like she was trying to sell him his own puppy that she’d just run over herself, and Isa appeared to have met better salesmen before, because it was all too clear that she was in no way buying it. It was the same look that her grandfather had plastered on his face when she was trying to trade him snakeoil for candy or an extra piece of fry bread.

“You haven’t been this wound up since that asshole at the DMV tried to take your car away. Or since the whole General Justice thing exploded.” Isa nodded seriously
when Spector started to speak, and the tall redhead quelled a little, trying not to shrink back in his seat when Delia turned her eyes on him. The cool, coin gold of her eyes did a whole lot to quiet anything that she might not want to hear, most of the time, and almost all the time with Spector, who started to pick at his callused fingers again nervously.

“Stop picking.” The man grunted and stopped for a moment, but only absently, twisting his fingers together slowly, as if he could wring meaning out of them. “It’s nothing.”

“Who is the lucky young man?” Delia growled softly, under her breath, though Isa heard her and smiled to herself, shaking her own head as she repeated the question. “Who is the lucky young man?” She was obviously not taking ignoring as an acceptable answer.

“His name is Rick.”
“Rick what?”
“Rick Boyd.”
“What does he do for a living?”
“You sound like my mother, Isa.”
“Yes, well, you obviously need someone to be your mother, my dear.” Isa gave Spector a once over and shook her head at his disheveled state.

“He works for the Feds doing DoD paperwork.”
“Any money in that?”
“Stop pretending that you’re actually being protective of me. We all know that you’re trying to get in my pants, let’s just move on.” A violent flush covered both freckles and pimples on Spector’s face, and anger sparked in his pale eyes. Delia regretted snapping at him like that, but she really was just tired. “Things are just awkward right now. I’m not sure where we stand…” she motioned vaguely in a circle with both hands, as if including a non-existent person in a little ring with her “…together.”

“So basically, you’re being Delia and you’re sorta kinda starting a relationship with a guy you barely know.” Spector’s color had faded, but his anger obviously hadn’t, and Isa elbowed him sharply in the ribs.

“Come. You had to leave early on Tuesday, let us at least try to enjoy ourselves, yes?” Isa shook her head at Spector, who appeared to want to say something else, but closed his mouth at the look on his blonde companion’s face. Not that he was intimidated by her, but he knew from first hand experience that those heels hurt when stuck into his anatomy. So did her nails, which she was picking at slowly. Somehow, Isa managed to walk silently on her outrageous shoes, and when she lay a hand on Delia’s shoulder to guide her out of the by now too stuffy office Delia jumped, but went with her, leaving Spector to finish packing up the rest of the evidence and put it away before anyone noticed that they’d been missing. A handsome older woman waved at the two of them when they passed her in the hallway, Delia shoving her arms down her sleeves. The instant she could, Isa slipped her arm around the other woman’s narrow waist, hugging her tightly.

“You do realize that this makes it impossible for me to walk properly, right?” Delia laughed softly, her mood improving slightly as she walked with her friend, ignoring the calls of Spector down the hall behind them. The height difference between the two woman made it damned hard for Delia to move properly with Isa hanging on her like
“Yes, well, I cannot help it. You ask me to resist your beauty, but how is that even a valid request?” Isa’s dry, quiet voice wriggled with humor like a puppy offered a treat. Spector trotted up behind them, panting and glaring at the two main…well, the two only women in his life. “Right, Spector?” The young man nodded obediently and shoved his hands in his pockets, grumbling something.

“Where are we going, anyway?” Isa shook her head as the only response to Delia’s question and ushered the two of them out of the building with all the effort of a swan floating. They all piled into Delia’s car, which warmed quickly with just a little protest, and she turned back to the blonde with a difficult look plastered on her dark face. “You know I can’t take us there if you don’t tell me where we’re going at this ungodly early hour.” The sun was just barely awake, but more so than Spector was, who yawned hugely.

“Sure you can. I am fully capable of giving you directions, you know. I am not entirely the idiot that you appear to think that I am. I also wonder how it is that you think, despite my significant advantage of age over you, that I can be this useless.” The blonde scoffed softly at her friend and shrugged gracefully, indicating with a casual wave of her hand where the other woman should turn to reach their destination. She couldn’t have been more than a few years older than Delia, at most five, unless she had discovered a fountain that generations had spent hundreds, if not thousands, of years trying to find in water and New Worlds, unguents and magic potions. But that didn’t mean that she didn’t use her age as an excuse to override Delia at every chance she got.

“It’s really only because you’re pretty. I have difficulty remembering that people who are pretty can have brains too.” She laughed along with her friend while Spector pouted in the backseat, as was his wont when he was shoved back there, obviously too tall to really fit. He usually ended up with his feet in the opposite foot well from where he was sitting. “Where the hell are we going, Isa?” After taking two too many familiar turns, Delia gathered that they were probably headed towards Isa’s apartment, which was fine by her, really. Isa then indicated a random right that was not on their route to her posh uptown loft in a suitably pricey part of the city, owned by her friend Claudius and operated by her sometimes lover, mostly just annoyance, Eric.

“Eric is opening a new restaurant, and he has invited a few people to come try out the two chefs he has vying for the position yet available on his staff.” Isa’s almost stiff, but somehow liquid formality luckily never got in the way of their communication, though sometimes Delia and Spector had to share a quick glance of recognition and discomfort before they understood what she was trying to say. A young guy in a red jacket took Delia’s car as they pulled up in front of a massive building covered in scaffolding. Isa seemed not to notice that Delia’s car was in such a state of disrepair it could have easily been mistaken for a junk yard reject. Spector self-consciously shrugged and pushed his hair out of his eyes, trying to pretend that he didn’t belong to the piece of shit he’d just crawled awkwardly out of. The valet disappeared with Isa’s wave and another kid that looked barely old enough to be out of high school opened the door, him in a black suit jacket, shivering almost violently in the cold air as he stepped into the dim space behind them, obviously not expecting to be waiting outside most of the day for the people coming in for the test drive.

“So what’s the theme this time around?” Delia had been in Eric’s New Orleans
location, and in his Tokyo (at his expense, thank god) and San Francisco ones, and she’d
driven past the Chicago one while she lived up north. He had at least a dozen other
restaurants all over the worlds, each with its own distinct theme and sense of style, as if
they were all living, breathing creatures that had been unleashed on an unsuspecting city.
Soon enough, however, her eyes answered her question without Isa’s input at all, and she
sucked in a breath through her teeth. The ceiling was as high as she could imagine, with
flowing, dark cloth laid under it, pricked to let pinpoints of light through on fiber optic
cables. Slowly, smoothly, the moon, a little more than half full, was marching its way
across the sky, nearly pinned to the wall by the sun on the opposite side of the cathedral
sized room.

“Welcome to Celeste.” Eric’s voice was honey and sunshine, the surfer of his
youth never quite absent in his adulthood, or what amounted to maturity in his blue,
laughing eyes. It never ceased to amaze Delia that he and Isa could get along so
thoroughly as they did, the cool, quiet confidence and icy chill of the blonde woman’s
mere existence the complete opposite of Eric’s good humor and refusal to sacrifice
entertainment for propriety. The sun lightened blond of Eric’s hair pushed boldly into the
platinum of Isa’s slick bun as he slung an arm around her waist and pulled her in for a
kiss. Isa planted a firm hand on his chest and pushed him away, though the shadow of a
smile played on her lips, and she did not extract himself from his hold. This was the Isa
that Delia had become accustomed to, and the one that only existed when she was alone
with the younger woman or Eric had arrived for more than a fly by night sort of moment.

“How the hell does this place work?” Spector’s eyes were on the ceiling still,
trying to figure out the mechanics of a device he couldn’t see, his fingers twitching and
itching along one another, picking at the calluses that had built up there from keyboards
and scalpels and came consol controllers. He was desperate to find out, and that was the
exact reason that Eric was not going to tell him.

Leading them to a table that had been set up in the middle of the room, the rest of
the furniture still shoved to the side with tables on top of one another and the circular
slabs of what appeared to be cheap plywood that would one day be covered with very
expensive silk. The place that was prepared for them, however, could comfortably seat
twenty, and was an unmovable slab of black marble, veined in silver and white.

“You outdid yourself this time, Eric. What the hell inspired this transformation?”
Delia had been in the restaurant that Eric had bought and gutted for this place to be built.
It had been pricey to begin with, and she’d only ever been there with Isa, whose job was
one of those increasingly vague, high powered positions that no one understood but
everyone respected, just for the amount of money that she made. And Eric had been able
to buy the entire place outright, despite the fact that until that point it had not been for
sale, and rebuild it entirely, cleaning up the art deco face of the building slowly but
surely, and completely replacing the interior with that of his own design.

“The last time Isabella and I were in New Orleans, and she walked into that dark
dank church I call a club, I couldn’t help but notice the contrast between her and
Claudius. Sun and moon, powerful as ever and utterly unable to do anything but control
the entire world. Thus, this place was born, so the love of my life would be celebrated by
all of us, even when she was not here.” He flashed a brilliantly white smile at the blonde
woman as he seated her, to which she did not respond in the slightest, instead covering
her thighs with a linen napkin the color of the sky just before dawn. Delia chuckled, and
turned to look as a few more people were ushered into the restaurant and seated around them. The table was about two sizes too big for the number of people in their party, and the maitre d’, who was obviously experienced if just a little too pale, pushed their chairs as close as he could without cramping them in the slightest. Without any warning, a waiter arrived with drinks for them all, and Delia was a little ashamed to discover that Eric had stocked his bar with her favorite scotch, which was not exactly a common request in the group that most of his restaurants catered to, but this one did seem to shoot for a different clientele than was normal.

“If you’ll all forgive me, I ordered specific dishes for all of us, to see what the chefs can do.” He motioned a second and third waiter over, who carried heavy black trays laden with plates. Taking solace in her scotch and trying to pretend that she could grow used to this kind of treatment, she glanced at their host and tried to ignore the growing nag in the back of her mind that was telling her something, somewhere, was wrong, and warning her that she was going to have to get moving soon.

“Salmon for the lovely blonde, the mignon for the other gentleman, the lamb goes to the beauty on my right, and that steak better have waved when you walked it past the stove.” The waiter smiled at his boss, and Delia realized that this place was going to be just as homey as the other restaurants backstage, just as caring and inclusive for the staff as ever, and that was the key to Eric’s rampant success. It wouldn’t have surprised her if this particular staffer, as well as the maitre d’, were actually transplants from Eric’s base in New Orleans, or his London location, just to cover for the potential flop that would be the chefs. Realizing that the others had started to eat, Delia cut a piece of lamb straight off the bone and her eyes went wide as it all but melted on her tongue.

“Jesus.”

“Ah. The Irish girl’s specialty. She does better with red meats than anything else, but really, she is remarkable.” Isa smiled and picked delicately at the salmon and the bed of baby greens, crossing her legs slowly at the ankle, tucked neatly under her chair.

“I kinda wish I’d gotten what you have.” Spector looked a little disappointed in his mignon, and Eric, who never looked happy with his food, was particularly and glaringly irked with the all but still bleeding steak in front of him.

“He put garlic on my steak.” With a long suffering sigh, Eric pushed the plate away from himself and covered it with a napkin. “John, will you please go tell that Spanish hack that his ass is gone. And ask Danielle to come out. She should hear from my lips that she’s got the job.”

“He really did not listen to your instructions, did he, mi amore?” Isa wasn’t even trying to hide her laugh at his distaste for the meal. “It is so astounding that people cannot follow simple directions these days.”

“He probably just thought it was a stupid dislike that he could get away with breaking a little.” Delia shrugged and jumped as her phone started to buzz. “Allergies are too important to ignore like that, though.” Pulling out the damned piece of technology and checking it under the table, her brows furrowed as she saw a picture of a bald eagle and an American flag on her phone. Rick had messed with it when she wasn’t paying attention.

“An emergency?” Isa caught Delia’s eyes and raised one arched brow, pushing a stray strand of liquid gold hair behind her ear. “I hope not.”

“I’m not sure. I’ll go find out.” Realizing too late that she should have excused
herself properly, and angry that she hadn’t, she retreated to a corner and flipped the phone open just before it clicked over to voicemail.

“I’ve got a problem.”
“What do you need?” She tried to cover the snap in her voice in such a way that she didn’t sound like a complete bitch, and sort of failed.
“There was an explosion over near the Jefferson Memorial a few minutes ago, and I can’t manage to get there. Are you any closer?” His voice sounded rushed, harried.
“Why can’t you get there, this is your full time, isn’t it?” She’d already bailed once this week, and she was not doing it again.
“Yeah, but I’m kinda…in the middle of something.”
“What could be so important that you can’t get there? I’m on the other side of the city, traffic is not going to make it any easier for me, besides which, I’m with the same friends I left on Tuesday to help you out.”
“You’re not really complaining about that, are you?” He finally snapped back, his volume jumping, and he dropped his voice down again. “Look, I just…I’ll handle it, forget about it.”
“Listen, I’m sorry. When you’re done, stop by my place, alright? We should—”
The unmistakable sound of a click when the phone was hung up met her words and she shook her head, utterly failing at schooling her face into a look of calm and happiness.
“You don’t have to go, right?” Eric unleashed a big blue pair of puppy dog eyes on her and she couldn’t help but smile just a little. “Because I want you to meet the hottie that Isa found for me hiding in Chicago. Wasn’t the lamb just…ugh.” He unleashed an orgasmic moan on the collected audience’s ears and Delia chuckled. The maitre d’ returned with a slender brunette on his arm, wearing a thick white wool knit sweater and a red stained apron that appeared to have actually been used for the purpose it was meant. “We’ll have to get her a nice set of uniforms so the assholes she serves don’t judge us, but isn’t she just an elf waiting to happen?”
“As though you would know.” Isa and Eric traded a look that Delia couldn’t read, so she shrugged it off. Settling back on her surprisingly comfortable seat, she smiled at Isa, who was just about glowing with her salmon, all but licking her fork. At least, she would have, if it was allowable of someone with her dignity.

Danielle proved to be charming and soft spoken, with a smile that could break glass and hearts alike. She was obviously elated to get the job, but was far more comfortable behind a stove than in front of her clients, and for the sake of her own sanity, Isa excused the poor girl back to the kitchen, and the four of them remained mostly silent through an extravagant dessert, the chocolate and hazelnut and blood oranges keeping their mouths largely occupied with something other than speaking. Eric tacked on instructions as they came from Isabella, who clearly had a more refined taste when it came to those things, especially wines. It had always been a bit of a surprise to everyone that his ripped jeans, son blond surfer bum was one of the most wealthy restaurateurs in the business, and it had always been very clear to Delia that Isa’s opinion was very important to his entire empire, and she wondered what the man had done before Isa had wandered into his life at Claudius’s bidding.

“So where is the boss this week?” Thinking of the muscular brunette man prompted the question from Delia as she pushed the last of the chocolate around her plate with her finger and licked the digit clean. Isa’s violet eyes slid from Eric to Delia and she
took a swallow of wine.

“This week he is back home in Roma, then off to eastern Europe to try to…reconnect with his roots.” Something about one single Italian word made Isa’s accent far more pronounced, and she cleared it from her throat with a little difficulty.

“The rest of North International is probably coming back into the States sometime next month, so our savior here has been ramping up to that like there’s no tomorrow.” Eric settled backwards, tipping the chair onto two legs, and eyed the petite blonde like the sun shone out of her face, which, at the moment, it wasn’t. The mention of her boss and his bosses usually had her face growing cold and secretive. There’d been a while there that Spector, who had been unusually quiet this evening, had himself convinced that she was really working for the mob. Italian Mafioso conspiracies were a favorite of Spector’s, along with Star Wars books and pictures of anime women with big eyes and bigger breasts. Delia had only ever met Claudius by accident, and she’d seen Ivan and Tristan, two of the four brothers that owned the infamous North International, from a distance once when she’d picked Isa up. It had been the only time that she’d felt utterly disgraced by her vehicle. For a while, she’d been inclined to believe Spector, but now, she was not so sure. She’d known Isa since she’d lived in Chicago years before, and the likelihood of Isa getting involved in something utterly illegal was slim to none, and Slim was on vacation. Now, something moderately illegal for a good cause? She’d do it. But otherwise, Isa wouldn’t sully herself and her name with something so distasteful.

“So you’re gonna start having to skip out on Tuesdays?” Spector tried to look disappointed, and barely managed to suppress his obvious glee at getting Delia alone for a few weeks. As far as he was concerned, the Italian woman was the only reason that he and Delia hadn’t been together from the moment that they met in the ME’s office months before.

“No. I have already told Claudius I am unavailable for work on Tuesday evenings unless it is an emergency, just as Delia does.” Shooting the other woman a pointed look, Isa glanced at the delicate gold watch on her wrist. “That being said, we do have to allow Eric to get back to work, or he shall find himself unable to keep himself from stealing me away much longer.” Sliding to her feet, she kissed the tall man on the cheek, who looked dumbfounded and a little irked, and ushered her friends out the door without another word. Spector tried to resist and object, but Delia just drained her scotch and kept moving, elbowing Spector in the ribs again, adding to Isa’s earlier contributed bruise and making the younger man grunt softly in surprise and anger. Her car was already waiting when they got outside, and they all piled in, Delia taking a moment to exhale the effects of the scotch and light a cigarette, a habit that earned her an angry look from Isa.

“Where to now that we have abandoned my erstwhile friend, captain?” Isa crossed her arms over her chest and sat back, staring out the windshield coolly.

“First of all, you need to accept the fact that he’s your lover, or at the very least your boyfriend. Secondly, we’re going back to my place, because I can’t afford parking in your neighborhood and Spector can take the train home from there.” Delia’s quiet, confident driving, more for their sake than anything else, had them back at her apartment by ten am, which made none of them feel at all uncomfortable, given their usually hectic and not in the slightest normal schedules. Isa worked just as many nights as Delia and Spector did, another reason no one believed her job was really legit, and it was not
uncommon for them to ensconce themselves in one of the ladies’ apartments watching a movie or just sitting and laughing over a bottle of wine.

“I will do no such thing, thank you. I am a fully grown woman, and I will only accept what I choose to accept.” She sounded as petulant as one ridiculously dignified woman could possibly be. “Movie?”

“Yeah. What do you guys want to watch?” Even driving conservatively for her passengers’ sanity, it didn’t take too terribly long to get back to the apartment, at which point she promptly realized that her place still probably smelled like sex and the bed hadn’t been made. Fuck it, not like Spector and Isa didn’t know what was going on in her life anyway. Apparently she was just that readable. The post cuddle glow probably hadn’t hurt, nor the whistling. She always whistled when she got laid, or so she’d been told. Since it was largely unconscious on her part, she didn’t know.

“I adore what you have done with your loft, my dear. New candles?” Isa’s comment prompted a blush as they walked into the room, Delia trying to cover her discomfort by tugging the blankets back into place on her bed and tossing her jacket down over the rest. Spector looked displeased as he flopped down onto the couch, staring at the TV expectantly. Isa wandered over, picking through the pile of DVDs on the floor, and humming softly to herself as Delia poured a glass of water and handed it to the blonde woman, knowing she would ask for it soon anyway. “Brokeback Mountain?” Spector started to sputter and curse, and both women laughed.

“No. Just…no. What about Boondock Saints?” He slithered to his feet and scooted across the room faster than his long body would lead one to believe. He snatched the movie out of Isa’s hands and put it back on the pile, rifling through it. “Yeah, yeah, too violent. Leon the Professional? Dammit, Dee, you’re not making it easy to find a non-violent movie.” Folding his legs like a teenage giraffe, all ungainly joints and overly long legs, he sat down and continued sorting through the heap on the floor, grumbling to himself absently as he tossed options aside.

There was a knock on the doorjamb, and Delia turned to discover that someone had left the door open when they got in, probably her, and that now Rick was standing there, with a thunderhead forming on his brows and an angry scowl on his mouth.

“Hi.” His voice was just about as stormy as his face, and Delia flinched a little, noticing a bruise blooming at the collar of his button down shirt, where his tie was loose and about to escape. She was suddenly struck by how much money he had to spend on clothing, just because of his sheer size. Ties alone probably had to be hunted for, and the selections, judging by the one around his neck, were not very good.

“You’re Rick.” The cuss was evident on the edge of Spector’s lips, as was the shear shock at the other man’s size.

“Yeah. And I’m angry. Would you excuse us?” He stepped into the apartment and stepped aside, motioning at the door impatiently. Isa scooped up Spector like a gangly puppy and scooted him to the door, raising her fingers to wave at Delia as they escaped.

“Hold it, how do we know that he’s not going to—” Spector yelped when Isa did something, and the two people left staring at one another in almost silence could hear the sound of two sets of feet, one delicate and precise and the other flopping like fish out of water on the wood, stomping down the stairs.

“It is none of your business what he does to her, besides which, she can certainly
“Before we start yelling—” She didn’t have the chance to finish whatever it was she was going to say, because very suddenly there was a very large man swooping down to wrap his arms around her and take her mouth as his own, his fingers furiously hard on her ribs as he dragged her feet across the floor, smashing their bodies together. Well, this is unexpected. Not unappreciated, but...oooooh. Then she was incapable of even thought as he pushed her backwards across the floor, shedding clothing like melting snow, her heels catching on the edge of floorboards and her fingers clutching desperately at his shirt.

“Hey. Spector was the one that put *Batman Begins* into the player, I can’t be blamed for that.” He just grunted at her and moved her elbow to the bed rather than his bicep. “Besides, it’s not like he knows the importance of this movie.”

“You mean what we do in our off hours?”

“Besides each other? No, I mean the fact that Bruce Wayne set me up with Dick Grayson and we dated for about a year.” Rick stared at her, dumbfounded, and she actually managed a giggle.

“No shit.”

“Right after I moved to Chicago, they were both there for some kind of convention or something, and I stumbled into them trying to handle a bit of a situation together and ending up fighting with one another instead.” She shrugged, as if dating the former Boy Wonder was no issue at all, all nonchalance and smiles at the man that was currently taking over the majority of her bed. “Did you know he’s dating Arsenal now?”

“Wait, wait. The first Robin, sidekick if Batman, is dating Arsenal, the former Speedy, *male* sidekick to the Green Arrow?” Rick’s shock, if it was possible, only grew. Apparently, no one had ever told him about the rampant homoeroticism that came along with the spandex uniforms.

“Most people think that you and the Cap’n have a really close relationship.” She didn’t say a word more than that, just waggled her brows suggestively and winked.

“Good God, woman, don’t ever say that again!” Clapping his hands over his ears, like she often did when she was trying to shut the world out, he screwed his eyes shut tight and whimpered pitifully. “There is no way that he and I...shit...I don’t even want to—”

“I wonder who would be the top? I mean, your reification of the man would indicate that you’d bottom for him, but you’re just so damned big, and if you had any sort
of hair at all you’d be the perfect bear.” Rick took a swing at her shoulder, slow enough that there was no way she wasn’t dodging it, and she leaned down, biting his chest playfully.

“You’re evil. Are you absolutely sure you’re on the right side of the villain/anti-hero line?” She nodded and he smiled, wrapping his arms tightly around her ribs and pulling her closer, ignoring the sight of a dying brunette on the TV.

“Don’t you have to go back to work at some point?” This was murmured against his hair as his lips found other things to focus on than her mouth, and he shook his head slowly. “You have the rest of the day off?” A nod this time. “Lucky us.”

“See, but if I’m officially off duty, how can I whisk you off your feet as that dashing red-white-and-blue fellow?” He lifted his head and grinned at her, smacking at the remote until something happened. She shoved at his shoulder and he rolled jovially onto his back, dragging her with him and letting her be the dominant one if she wanted. **Hell, if any other guy had such a great piece on his hands, he’d let her do whatever she wanted, too.** Grinning, he planted his hands on her hips, watching her brows shoot up.

“If you really wanna whisk me off my feet, love, I’d prefer that it’d be you. General Justice and Kraken are really great for what they are, but I like Rick and Delia better, myself.” Laughing and kissing him playfully, she wrapped her arms around his neck. “So get with the whisking, hm?”

“Oh, is that a challenge?” They both laughed louder, and with a but of a grunt, pretending to strain to get back onto his feet with her clinging like a burr, he started to make his way over to the bathroom.

“This is whisking?” She hooked her ankles at the small of his back and tilted her head like a curious dog. “Hm. I’ve never been whisked before. I like it. We should do more whisking in the future.”

“You’ve got a bit of a deathgrip going. Think you might be able to loosen up a little?” He made a choking noise, half mocking, and twisted his neck around in her hold. “You’re too damned pretty.” He shoved the door open with his shoulder as he kissed her, and her clutching arms loosened. His foot pushed the shower curtain aside and he reached down, dipping her as though they were dancing, and hit the water.

“Ah…one of the few reasons I still live in this dump. Hot water on demand and actual water pressure.” She grinned at him and wriggled, fully expecting to be set down. Waiting for the water to warm up, Rick refused to do so, holding her closer, if it was possible for him to do so without her just crawling right into his skin with him. “By the way, don’t you think that’s pot calling kettle just a little?” He shook his head. “’C’mon, you don’t even know if I look like this or I’m just manipulating your senses to make you think I look like this.” He gave her an incredulous look and finally stepped into the shower, putting her down.

“I’ve got hot woman radar, you can’t fool that. Besides, not many people can reproduce perfection.” Reaching randomly for something stacked on the shelf, he opened it and sniffed. Making a face at the floral scent, he repeated the process until he found something he could stand. Inspecting the label to see what he’d found, he grunted softly.

“I get it. Some people have gaydar, I have guydar and baddy-dar, Jewish people have goi-dar and you have woman-dar.” Laughing softly and shaking his head, he smiled down at her and kissed her cheek as she found some conditioner. She shoved at his shoulder to earn some more space in the tiny shower. Of course, the big, brutish
traditionalist that he was, he followed the ‘no hurting women’ rule strictly. His fingers stroking gently up her spine, playing her flesh like a finely tuned instrument as she arched and purred. “I’ll kick you out if you don’t let me take a shower.”

“Fine, fine.” Keeping his hands to himself for a little while, he rinsed himself off, now and again trading spots with her under the water and trying to duck his head under the showerhead once in a while. It required some contorting, and eventually, she just laughed at him, his fingers gripping her hips tightly as he reached up to tickle her ribs. Realizing he was probably bruising her, he released her instantly and she glared up at him, managing to somehow not look like a drowned rat.

“I don’t know how many times I have to say this, Rick. I’m not going to break. I’m tougher than that, and if you go too far, I know you’ll stop. Don’t lose yourself in trying not to hurt me, dammit. Lose yourself in me.”

“Delia, you know it’s hard.” Sucking in a breath through his teeth, he shook his head for what felt like the millionth time that day.

“Fuck it, Rick, if you hurt me I’ll just heal myself. Trust me, ok? I trust you, don’t I?” Grabbing his chin and pointing his eyes at the light bruise he’d left on her hip, they both watched as the mark disappeared. “Convince the body that it’s not injured, and it won’t be any more.”

“With great power comes great responsibility. And a carefully planned sex life. Until they get me off some of these meds, we won’t be getting into the heavy S&M and any sort of bondage.” Shooting for a joke and missing by only a narrow margin, he earned himself a bit of a smile. Skimming his knuckles over the thick rope of scar tissue between her breasts, his eyes got dark. “Sometimes it’s not worth it.”

“Silly man. You didn’t do that to me. And you wouldn’t do anything like it, not even to the jackass terrorists you spend all day chasing instead of earning yourself a real nemesis.” Shoving playfully at his shoulder, like he was a brother instead of the man that had spent more of the last week in her bed than out of it, she rinsed soap from her shoulders. “We’ll take it as you like it, you stupid, wonderful man.” Shooting him a smile that warmed him like sunrise, she closed her eyes and hummed a little, filling the shower with the smell of passion fruit from her conditioner. This was not exactly the shower that he’d been intending on…but it was nice, regardless of the fact he could barely fit under the water.

“I feel almost as bad as Superman did when he snapped a hooker in half after she made the ‘faster than a speeding bullet’ joke.” Laughing along with her, he lifted her out of the shower and shoved a towel in her face.

“You calling me a hooker?”

“No. I am, however, saying that his is going to be very interesting.” Empaths have this great ability to pick up on things just with a facial expression, and he watched understanding, and a wide grin bloom across her face.

“Fangirl heads would explode if they saw us together, wouldn’t they?” Rick nodded and toweled off, stepping back into the rest of the bathroom and crowding her away from the mirror as she slung her own towel around her torso. Pleased with the fact that it was just a little too short for her, he grinned. “And my gothy little groupies will flip out when they find out. I don’t want to think about what’s gonna happen if we end up dating for more than a few weeks. I’ve already got hate mail from the publicity stunt, and that was all from your friends.”
“Back that up just a little bit. A few weeks?”

“Hey, you’ve almost reached the week mark, that’s pretty good for my records.”

“That’s not—”

“Speaking of Superman, what the hell is going on with him lately? I know that we’re not supposed to pry into the big leaguer’s lives, but what the fuck was he thinking with that whole fight with Bruce?” Grumbling and following her back towards the kitchen, he stared angrily at the back of her head, trying to get her to change the subject back.

“Well, he is only human, and no one can get blamed entirely for their dating practices.” Settling onto a stool and watching her fidget with her hair, he realized that she’d basically given up on making him think it was black. He apparently made her concentration waver too much for that, and if he was perfectly honest with himself, he would’ve admitted that he liked that idea. Now, all he had to do was wait and see if she would stop doing the same with everyone else in her life. She was doing something complicated with it now that he didn’t entirely understand, but he was entranced by the twist of damp auburn hair around her fingers, and watched with rapt attention. “And don’t give me that ‘he’s not human’ crap. He may be an alien, but he looks like us and he’s got a dick and some equivalent of testosterone that makes him go a little crazy sometimes.”

“Yeah, but you never hear about us doing things right. You’re the poster child for superheroes doing good, baby, but you’re the only one. You hear about the bad shit, especially with the antiheroes. I had to watch Dick deal with Roy’s drug addiction and the aftermath, children out of wedlock, suicide, scandal. You don’t get that with the minor leagues, you don’t get that with anybody that nobody’s heard of, except for you. And you’re as much a product of September 11th and Nazi Germany as I am my childhood.” She took a deep breath and stuck her head, now firmly in the grasp of her hair, and pulled out a carton of milk, which certainly would not have been there without his preference for it.

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“Oh, come on, Delia. That’s a load of bullshit and you know it. Yeah, people delight in knowing that their heroes are human, they want to know when we fuck up, but part of the problem is also the mentality that so many of us take on. We save lives everyday, and can’t manage to save ourselves, dammit—” He watched as she waved her hands in frustration, cutting him off.

“Look at the two of us, Rick. The only thing that we have in common is the fact that we save people. It’s the reason we met, but we can’t manage to get through a day without fighting about something, and we both know that you have checked your cell phone at least once an hour since you got here, making sure your bosses don’t have anything lined up for you, and it’s not like I can just turn off my danger sensors.” She rapped a fist on her temple and shook her head. “This kind of life is not conducive to creating lasting, healthy relationships. The Fantastic 4 only work because there’s blood ties, fear of outside rejection, and a preexisting romance. Teams stick together for sex and back up and out of sheer terror. Solo acts are solo acts no matter what part of their lives they’re facing, just like the two of us.”

“Wait a minute, that is just not fair. We’ve known each other a week, really, how the hell are you comparing us to that?” He was starting to get pissed off again, and remembering how angry he’d been when he’d returned to her apartment earlier that day,
the playful, easy mood of their lovemaking lost to them both.

“Oh get off it. How many superheroes actually manage to maintain any kind of relationship, excluding sidekicks, butlers, villains, and helpful cops?” She handed him a glass of milk and leaned back against the counter, crossing her legs at the ankle and glaring down her nose at him...which was barely possible given the fact that even sitting down he was still as solid six inches taller than she. He didn’t have an immediate response for her, so he kept his mouth shut and just watched her with angry eyes.

“Nothing in this business is fair, Rick. Nothing. And you can’t expect it to be.” As she turned her back on him, he sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, refusing to let his anger get the better of him.

“Listen, I know you had a bad one. A really bad one. You wouldn’t be the woman you are today without an,” hesitating, he started to tick off the list on his fingers, “abusive father, an abused mother who was convinced you were possessed, and a grandfather that allowed you to mature into the woman that spends days and nights bringing justice to the world around her. That’s not fair, you’re right, but that’s what it is.” Crossing his arms over his chest, he stood up and moved around the counter to where she was standing, glaring at him in frustration.

“Just because you grew up in a good home and you didn’t get beat on—”

“You might want to stop there, Slim.” Leveling a finger at her, he glared down his nose at her, astounded by the fact that she seemed markedly shorter than before. Has she really been hiding the way she looks from me? With a dismissive grunt, he continued, and she got defensive, standing up straighter to prove that she’d just been shrinking under the pressure of his attention. “I didn’t come from the perfect household you seem to think I did. My dad left when I was a kid, and my mom got remarried. Now, my stepdad’s a great guy, he’s my father in a lot of ways that my biological one wasn’t, but that doesn’t mean that my life was picture perfect.” She stiffened, fistng her long fingers when he stepped closer, hunching her shoulders and turning her face like she was expecting a blow. His heart stopped for a second, and just stared. “Do you actually think I’m going to hit you?” Her angry, indignant eyes said more than she could, and he suddenly felt like steel cables were tightening around his chest, a feeling so similar to the one he got when his meds wore off that he reached for his belt in a panic. That certainly didn’t help her flinching, by any stretch of the imagination, and she actually raised her fists to the level of her hips, prepared to go toe to toe with a man almost four times her size. He could, however, be thankful for the fact that she didn’t just shove him into his own little reality and call it a night, dumping his naked ass on the front stoop of her building. “What the hell ever happened to you that you think I would hit you?”

“You have a dad that uses his belt and fists and a brother who likes wrenches and knives and a fiancé that favors rape and you learn really quickly to just assume things like that.” She spat the words out like venom, growling at him with those feral eyes. He felt his face pale, then flush with anger, and without warning he dragged her into a hug so tight it should have crushed her, but he could still feel her shaking, though whether in fear or anger or confusion, he wasn’t sure, and it really didn’t matter.

“You didn’t tell me that before.” This after a few minutes, and even he could sell that his voice was tighter than normal, the cinch of pain having settled firmly around hid throat as well as his chest.

“You didn’t ask,” she muttered, trying to smile into his chest and loosen her fists
and not quite succeeding. With an aching sigh, she opened her eyes finally and looked
around a little, biting her lower lip. “Hey Rick?”

“Yeah?”

“Do me a favor and don’t open your eyes, huh?” But it was too late, and he’d
already done it. She felt him jump as he looked over the top of her head at the rest of the
room, which had entirely dissolved around them, leaving white space and noise. Beside
them, and just beside them, there was the shadow of a tree and a rock, a large rock, one
that even he could fit on, in red with veins of gray and a smoky yellow. “Sorry. I
panicked. This is what happens when I panic.” Taking a few slow, deep breaths,
inducing the calm that only her grandfather had ever prompted in her, she glanced up at
him and wrinkled her nose, twitching it like a rabbit, and the shadow world disappeared,
sliding away around them like water tossed on a painting. They were both silent a
moment as the room stopped its spinning for him, and he loosened his vice grip on her
ribs, letting her breath a little easier and muttering an apology.

“It’s not like I was the only one to have an abusive dad or anything. Or that I was
the only woman in the history of the world to get raped. It just triggered my powers, and
that opened up a whole new can of worms.” He kissed her to stop the words, but she
pushed him back. “If you’re gonna know it, Rick, you’re gonna know all of it. You grew
up in the ‘burbs south of San Diego, with your mother and your stepfather, and you don’t
like alcohol, I’m assuming because of your dad. You smoke pot now and again, yes I
know you do I can sense it, remember, and you don’t like the fact that every once in a
while you smell cigarettes on my breath. You were obsessed with Captain America as a
kid, you joined the Army because at heart, you really do love this country and all of its
potential.” He opened his mouth to speak again and she covered it with her long fingers.
“Shut up. You should play video games with me, and you need to start reading comics
again to revive your love for your job.

“My father was a dick. He was, I don’t deny that. And because of him, Derrick
went completely bonkers with my fiancé, Javier and they started tearing shit up,
including me. Javier was prone to taking first and asking for things later, which he
learned from Derrick, and Derrick learned it from dear old dad. The first time I found a
dead animal outback, I knew it was trouble. Derrie’d taken the thing apart with his
fingers, torturing the coyote before he finally let it die. Starving it, then giving it water
laced with salt.” She shook her head slowly. “You don’t have a nemesis, Rick, but I do,
and it’s him. He hides himself away under rocks and crawls out now and again to fuck
with me, and, until dad died, he kept a shotgun at the door to protect Derrie from me,
when I showed up, as I always did, like a moron, every Christmas and on mom’s
birthday, trying like hell to get her to move out of that damned house so she wouldn’t go
to Church with more make up on than clothing trying to cover up the bruises. He finally
graduated to people the year I moved to South Dakota. He killed three of my classmates,
raped and tore them apart with his teeth, and no one knows in what order.” Rick leaned
back against the counter, watching her shrink in just a little in on herself. He did not
know if he should be touching her now, trying to remind her how much she was
supported in this, that she was in no danger here, or letting her deal with it in her own
way. The room spun and fuzzed slowly around them, so he just kept his eyes narrowed
and locked on her face, ignoring the fact that she was picking her studio, in fact, the
universe, apart without really realizing it.
“Let’s talk about something else.” She shook herself and the room solidified again, leaving him finally nauseous, but feeling much better for the room standing still.

“How could he get away with that? It may have been remote, whatever, but still, there was no one to back you up, no one to see what had happened? Cops, nothing?” She shook her head slowly, obviously reticent to start that conversation up again, and shuddered. This time, he did gather her close again, kissing absent inches of her skin, trying to smooth away the hurt from her face, and suddenly he felt like he’d gotten a small sedan to the gut. He’d known this woman for days. Less than a week, really, and already she was the center of his universe, the focus of his attention and his efforts. He couldn’t bear the idea of innocent people getting hurt. That was part of his job description, that was his reason, at the moment, for living. But the idea of this woman, in particular, growing up in a house that left her no recourse but to run left him cold and hot at once, with the drive to pound a tank or the Hulk into the ground. She was not a small woman, which worked to everyone’s advantage at the moment, but she was slender, and she had very little in the way of physical defenses. No wonder her power had manifested itself younger than was normal. And then Javier, the person she’d taken solace in outside of her family, the last bastion of protection, had turned on her.

“Res, cops don’t have jurisdiction, unless they’re tribal or feds. Besides, who’s down there to help us out when they hear of a young mutant in trouble or a kid with special powers cropping up? We were totally of the Xavier School’s range, there weren’t any feds to pick up on what was going on. Just thought it was some crazy lady spouting about her drunk husband and her Native kids. You got tapped because you already belonged to them. I was so far under the radar that there was nothing that coulda found me.” She shook her head slowly against his chest and finally, slowly, wrapped her arms around him, accepting his embrace for what it was and keeping her mouth shut now, refusing to think about it any further.

“Time for some whisking.” He scooped her up into his arms without more warning, and she made a particularly undignified noise, her hair collapsing out of the complicated knot and falling straight into her eyes.

“Incorrigible, you know that?” He nodded, or at least, she thought that’s what was up against her hip, which was planted firmly on his shoulder. Latching onto a new topic, and one that was a bonafide soapbox for her. “Seriously though, think about it. You’ve got permanent superheroes in New York City, Gotham, Metropolis, Blüdhaven, all up the Northeast coast. One team out on the west coast, and plenty of teams and individuals that roam around, not to mention the behemoth of a school in upstate New York. But the South and the West are basically empty.” It was an old argument, and one that, judging by the look on Rick’s face, he really wanted to have with her as he plopped her down on the bed and curled up under her blankets. Something gave her the feeling he actually may have championed the same cause she had at some point, and gotten shot down by his superiors. “South of you in up here, there’s nothing at all, and DC is far from the edge of the country. Until I showed up in New Orleans, there was really no one covering any of that area.” He tried to stop her with a kiss an failed, earning himself just a grunt and a shove as he wrapped the covers around both of them and pushed the Play button on the remote, trying instead to drown her out with the stupid movie.

“Cut it out, Rick. You know I’m right, dammit.” She pushed at his shoulder
again and he turned to look at her, fire sparking in her eyes again and her hair turning rapidly into a brown-red rat’s nest. At least she wasn’t looking like a kicked up puppy any more.

“Yeah, I know you’re right, but what the hell am I supposed to do about it? I’m already covering the most crime prone city in the country, as well as managing a major publicity nightmare for a country, and I barely have time to see the woman that is rapidly becoming my girlfriend.” He noticed the blink of confusion at that, and smiled a little, happy to have caught her off guard. Besides which, he couldn’t tell you who Delia’s downstairs neighbor was, let alone the name of anyone south of his city that he wasn’t directly related to. “So. Thoughts?”

“I don’t know how I feel about being your girlfriend.”

“Well, I was asking about what I was supposed to do to help the state of the country’s permanently placed superhero crisis south of the Mason-Dixon. But I’ll take the girlfriend conversation.”

“As a note, we started this talk with the topic of my raping fiancé, and ended up on whether or not I’m your girlfriend.” He smiled at the irked look on her face and shrugged, pushing the button to play the movie again. “Let’s just see if you survive the first two weeks rule, then we’ll talk.” She huffed softly and shook her head, but couldn’t ignore the butterflies that had returned resolutely to her stomach. “My fanboys are gonna have a conniption.”

It turned out that he survived about two months just as easily as most men did two weeks with Delia, and he’d only threatened to strangle her twice. The only time he’d actually come close to it was when she’d managed to layer a complex, progressive sensory manipulation around him that made him completely unaware of the fact that he was wearing a pink shirt and a purple tie for two days in a row at work, and that she’d completely replaced herself with a stuffed bear in bed. Once he’d gotten over that initial embarrassment and general pissed off-ness, it had worked out relatively in his favor, because she’d spent a solid week and a half feeling guilty and making it up to him, or doing her damnedest to do so. And he wasn’t afraid to admit that he’d taken advantage of that, just a little.

But now she had the flu and he was racing against the clock every day to keep her from getting sicker, which was apparently her body’s habit, and the city from falling apart, not to mention trying to cover that damn intern’s ass every time he mad a mistake because he was some senator’s third cousin. Most of the evening had him prancing around on patrol as a costumed fucktard, itching to get back to Delia and make sure her fever hadn’t spiked again. He kept telling her that she should just see a doctor and suck it up, but in her mind, that would be admitting defeat, besides which, she hated the idea that she couldn’t heal herself. Her powers had been completely on the fritz, however, leaving her with blue or green hair and violent purple eyes for minutes after a sneeze or a coughing fit. Hours of sitting still in a single spot waiting for something to happen wasn’t exactly something he enjoyed doing normally, and abandoning her to a flu worse than death certainly didn’t make it any easier.
“So what the hell am I supposed to do about this?” Delia couldn’t hear the voice on the other end of the line, but she could guess what was happening by the sheer look on Rick’s face. A thunderhead had wandered in from outside and settled on his brow, and to be frank she wasn’t looking forward to coping with the fallout of whatever the phone call was, especially dosed up on prescription strength cough medicine. And she could even guess who the other voice belonged to. It would be raspy with too many ears of abuse with alcohol and cigarettes both. For some reason she got the feeling that the Voice was the kind of quitter that would start using the patch and still go through two packs a day. And then get addicted to the gum. By the time she shook that mental image from her mind, Rick had hung up the cell phone, making it look that much more ridiculous in his oversized hand.

“What was that all about?” Her voice was still shot with painful rasps, and she sniffled heavily.

“One of these days your mouth is going to get you in trouble.” He wasn’t quite flirting so she forced his hand to improve his mood, shooting him a come-hither glance. Then sniffled. “Oh yeah, babe. You know how hot that red nose and mucus combination gets me.” When Delia grunted and threw her hands up in frustration, Rick took hold of her by her waist, hunching over to rest his chin on her head. She sniffed again. “I’m sorry.” It was more of a grunt than a sentence, but she understood it. Or, at least, the fact that she hugged him back indicated she did. “The Pentagon boys want to get a press conference together.” Dejected sighs somehow meant so much more when the heaving shoulders were three plus feet across.

“That’s not such a big deal, is it? Every one save is a photo-op, right?” Sniff. “They want you there, too.” Sniff, again, but somehow more dangerous for his health.

“Excuse me?” Children and husbands everywhere tremble at the devastating combination of the tone of voice and those two words. He half expected to hear her triple-name him. He kissed her clammy, fever-warm skin, which felt amphibious and finally looked her in the eye.

“They want us to announce that we aren’t dating, merely working together to protect the city.” Sniff.

“They do, hmm?” He felt, rather than saw, her arms withdraw from him and cross over her chest: he was not brave enough to break eye contact yet.

“Yeah. They don’t like the idea of the two of us being seen together, that it would undermine the GJ image. I mean, you’re already getting negative responses because of the rumors, right? Has it affected any—”

“Don’t you dare even imply that us dating is effecting our ability to do our jobs.” Sniff. “That’s bullshit. If anything, the teamwork has made us stronger.” Sniff, this time thick with mucus, and she winced, reaching for a paper towel from the counter to blow her nose.

“It’s not me and you know it.” The thunderhead had come back to his face, tenfold, and it was his turn to cross his arms over his chest. Somehow, the motion was far more aggressive than when Delia did it. A difference of a hundred pluss pounds of raw muscle would do that. She stuck her chin out, like a child, which she hated herself for, but couldn’t really stop.
“Doesn’t mean you’re going to do the right thing, does it?” Sniff. She turned on her heel and retreated to the bed, grabbing her boots and lacing them on. As she stomped to the window, rather rapidly everything about her but the angry set of her jaw and shoulders changed: her hair darkened and shortened, her body gained fifteen pounds of raw muscle mass, ratty jeans and a shirt turned into black clothing, and a leather jacket groaned tightly in protest around her ribs. Rick suddenly envied her the fact that she didn’t have to squeeze herself into a Spandex costume every time she wanted to go out.

“Delia, you’re still sick, you really shouldn’t be—” Before he could finish, she was gone, disappearing down the fire escape to work off her anger. Pulling on his suit, with a little difficulty, he decided to do the same, turning his nose to the north end of the city and burning off the worry and rage that this woman, still in many ways a stranger, manages to bring up in him. A few hours later, she made her presence back at the apartment known, when he was consumed by boredom and an inability to focus on anything but the fact that he wanted to make sure she was ok, and then strangle her.

“I take it you would rather be doing something – or someone – more interesting?” The sound of her voice ringing between his ears, rather than in them, had at some point stopped startling him, and especially because now she sounded genuinely apologetic for their earlier fight. Dating a telepath certainly did save money on phone bills. Even so, the echo of her words in his skull was hallow, strained, and he couldn’t even sniff and find the scent of sage and jasmine that usually haunted her mental presence without his bidding, making it very uncomfortable in his spandex suit.

“Yeah, nothing going on out here. A few speeders and a busted taillight. I think most of the hard crime has moved out of this neighborhood for now.”

“You doin’ ok? I wanted to make sure you didn’t catch the nasty piece of shit bug that bit me.” Her cussing had only gotten worse as she’d become more comfortable around her, which really didn’t bother him, but had resulted in a couple of very interesting press conferences.

"Yeah, nothing going on out here. A few speeders and a busted taillight. I think most of the hard crime has moved out of this neighborhood for now."

"You do realize that you don't need to talk out loud for me to understand you, right?” He grunted in response and grinned at a homeless guy as he meandered down the street, who obviously had pegged him as utterly crazy. He understood his desire to be at her place rather than out patrolling dead streets. It was only natural, with his protective nature and all. But the utterly sappy descent into a brand of campy-ness heretofore only known with GJ and not with Rick Boyd did have him feeling like he had the wrong shoe on the right foot.

"Want me to grab anything for you on the way back?” He pushed down the red glove past his wrist to stare blearily at the cheap digital watch around his blue sleeve. "Before you say it, it wouldn't be inconvenient, and it's almost dawn as it is."

"Hey, I'm the telepathic one here. You don't get to read my mind." Even as she said it, the echo of her laughter wriggled into his skull and he smiled. "Just bring your spandex butt home."

If that wasn't scary, she didn't know what was. The idea that she'd already become comfortable thinking of her studio as his home, as well as her own, brought up a whole new set of issues about commitment and fidelity that she just wasn't prepared to deal with, regardless of the fact that he'd been crashing there more often than not and he'd been helping pay her rent since the flu had mangled her ability to work at sterile crime scenes and the ME's office. Riding around in his head like this was not her preferred way
of getting to know him better, but it was still interesting to see what thoughts floated to the top of his mind when he wasn't paying attention, moving around the city like a big, flag-draped ghost and watching everybody's backs for them. There were more than a few that involved her, and she tended to avoid looking too closely at them after one particularly curious moment had left her very frustrated and utterly unable to wait for him to get home and follow through on the promise of that mental image. As it was, most of his being was dedicated at the moment to making sure he hadn't missed anything, which, judging by the sudden crack of glass, he had. The sensation of him trotting briskly towards the noise was an odd one, since she could not only see the bounce, but feel it, in a body that was far too large to be hers. A couple of kids were beating on an old Chevy, using pipes and bats to pound the poor car into the ground, and as Rick pursed his lips to whistle, she suddenly got hit by the vast impression that this was not a good situation.

"Baby, wait, I don't think--"

Too late, however, as he let loose a piercing noise and cleared his throat, glaring at the three dark shapes surrounding the car. One of them stepped below a flickering streetlight in a mockery of the classic horror film tactic, his eyes all but red in the dim light and a feral grin on his lips. This wasn't good. Reaching out, straining herself to reach the two rat-headed mutants that were still behind their leader, she encased them in a world of gnawing wild dogs and terrifyingly large trucks trying to run them over, doubled over on her bed with the pain of overextending herself, and only faintly aware of her body. "Rick, they're not human!"

He realized she was right as the only one left launched himself at the big star-turned-target in the middle of his chest, what sounded like claws scrambling against the asphalt for purchase. Panicked, he reached out with a big hand and caught the thing by the neck, thick fingers ending in talons raking across his costume, trying to get past his long arm and gouge out his eyes. Holding on as loosely as he could without letting go, trying not to strangle the thing, he felt his lip curl, and he reached back into his mind for the faint feeling of Delia that was still there. When he found her, he discovered that, for the first time, he could feel what she was feeling rather than the other way around, her powers so shot that she was projecting now rather than reading. Her nose was bleeding into her cupped hands like someone had turned on a faucet and pain was lancing through her skull like fire and lightning, first hot then hotter.

"Dee?!!?" He felt her trying to struggle back to him, even as his arm dropped a little, a desperate clinging to his senses as she floundered. She made it back for a moment, gasping like a drowning woman, and he felt the faintest impression of a smile, sighing with relief when he assumed she was ok.

And then there was black. She just disappeared off his radar, and he felt a sickening crunch in his hand as he stood, terrified by the sudden lack of communication. He realized that she'd been riding with him, or at least part of her consciousness had, since they'd begun to basically live together, and the sudden absence of her entire existence was like a blindfold being dropped over his eyes, taking away his primary sense. Looking out finally from the intense panic of her disappearance, not knowing what had happened to her, if she was even alive any more, he realized that the creature in his hand was most certainly not. It hung, gray and limp, from his big fingers like a rag doll, eyes still shiny with moisture and staring at him accusatorily. The two whose senses she'd been cloaking while he dealt with the leader stared with beady, faintly glowing eyes, shock and blame etched clear on their rat-faces. They took off with a snarl,
bounding first on two legs, then dropping to all four limbs as they picked up speed, moving like only rodents can through spaces far too small for Rick to follow. He flung the carcass aside, smearing grease and blood from his glove to his thigh and stabbing at the button on his belt that called his handler.

“There’s a body at my current location, two large rat shaped mutants running northwest. Handle it,” his voice was hard as diamond, and words clipped. There were sputters of protest on the other end of the line and Rick let loose a string of curses that were harsh enough to burn ears and create an uncomfortable silence when he was done. “Just fuckin’ handle it. I have to go.” Shoving his finger into the button he took off at a run towards home, refusing to even think about the possibility that she could have done herself permanent damage because of him, or her flu, which was officially his fault now. Bolting up the fire escape without pausing to do more than yank the window open, he shoved his big body into the room, sweating bullets and ripping off his mask, beside her bed in a heartbeat. “Don’t you dare bail on me, Dee. I’m not done with you yet.”

But the body wasn’t there when he ripped back the covers. Her bed was empty and he desperately tried to figure out what had happened. Turning, his eyes sliding across the TV, which displayed something ridiculous on MTV, he finally found her on the floor in front of the couch, slumped over like a mockery of a meditating monk, her hands held up and out as if in plea for benediction and blood staining her lips, chin, and shirt. He swooped in like an avenging angel for his martyr, gathering her up in his arms and pulling her close, slapping her cheek softly, his movements becoming rougher around the edges, pinching, poking, prodding, trying to get her back to herself, draw her back. Closing his eyes and tilting his chin up as he hadn’t done in years, pleading with his mother’s God to release the woman in his arms from whatever was holding her. After a moment, he shuddered and opened his eyes again to look down at her, demanding now that she wake up with the twitch of his arms against her ribs and shoulders.

He discovered that he was no longer in her studio apartment, off the quiet if too dark street with the Mexican place and the WebSuds laundry mat and internet café. It was ghost white again, silent but for the sounds of his own heavy breathing in his ears, his big arms cradling the overly still Delia against his chest. He was sitting on the big red rock with gray and yellow veins, under the tree with broad green leaves a few inches wide. The rest of the world was light and the absence of anything worth mentioning, but whereas it had been white before, now it was various shades of gray. He glanced down at her and watched as she curled slowly closer to his chest, her fingers fist ing against his uniform, demanding more of him without saying a word. Blinking and looking around, he realized that this oxymoron of a place, with what was obviously a desert rock and a northern forest tree, without any other mark to determine where the fuck it was that she had decided they were. But this was obviously her safe place, this was her haven from the world when she could no longer cope with the mass hysteria that took over her life, and now he’d been invited into it not once, but twice. The fact that she’d been completely unaware of that fact both times meant very little to him, since the unconscious was more powerful anyway, given what he’d been told in psych classes.

What he really wanted to do was put her into bed, or into a bath, but there was no way that he could do that with her completely masking his senses as she was. He began to slowly set her down, and she made a noise of deep frustration, half whimper and half
moan, her fingers digging into his chest angrily. Her nail hooked on the edges of one of his injection rings and he winced, biting down on his lower lip to bite back a grunt.

That, apparently, was enough to wake her up from wherever she was. She did do her pest impression of a petulant child, squeezing her eyes shut tighter before opening them in the overcast brightness and giving him a look like he was a puppy that had left an unwelcome gift on the rug.

“Jerk. That hurt.” She rubbed absently at her chest, her real voice cracked and raw with the flu in her throat.

“Oh, that hurt, did it? First of all, you’re the one that did it to me, and secondly, that could not have hurt more than whatever you did to black out.” He tried to be angry with her, he really did, but he found himself utterly incapable, burying his nose in her hair and realizing that not only did she really did need a bath, but he didn’t particularly care about the fact that she was greasy. He kissed her desperately, blinking hard and refusing to admit that he was feeling something other than relief. She stared at him when he finally pulled back, a look of raw confusion and not a little pain etched across her face. “Let’s not do that again, ok?” She nodded slowly, watching him with sleepy, cloudy eyes. He stood slowly, stepping away from the rock, and jerked his head at their fog-blurred surroundings. “Mind?”

She turned her face away from his shoulder finally and tried to blink the bleariness from her eyes. With a rabbit-wriggle of her nose, she huffed breath softly through her teeth and the fuzziness began to fade, revealing the apartment slowly but surely. It took effort for her to escape the temptation of the quiet warmth, but escape she did, and him with her, though barely. He could still see the edges of the rocks, and the gently moving leaves of the tree at the corner of his eye, immobile no matter what direction he moved in. At the moment, it was towards the bathroom once more, wondering if he would ever actually get to spend time with her when they weren’t fucking like bunnies or trying to keep each other from dying. He supposed he really shouldn’t be complaining—seriously, who would, with the piece he had in his arms fixated on them—but it certainly irked him that half the time he was inside her and the other half he was desperately trying to not let a weapon be inside her.

He didn’t bother to undress her, just hit the tub’s faucet and set her down in the slowly rising warm water. The second his body left hers, the fuzzy, half-desert disappeared, letting him finally fix his eyes on something that really existed, at the moment the sink. Resting his heavy head on the cool porcelain and shuddering slowly, he reached for the zipper under his arm to remove the top half of his uniform, keeping an eye on the water level around Delia’s floating body. He dumped a few capfuls of soap under the stream of water and watched the tub fill with bubbles as well as water, infusing the air with the smell of jasmine. Sitting heavily beside the tub, resting his chin on the edge, he smacked the faucet to turn it off and heard the metal groan in protest at his too-rough treatment, then just staring at her lax face for the moment. The sleepy, only halfway paying attention look on her face led him to believe that she had wandered back to her desert place, which left him alone and abandoned to deal with the fact that for the first time in his career as a superhero, he’d killed a man. Well, a rat-man, but a man nonetheless.

This was not to say that he’d never killed before. Mosquitoes, road kill, the odd deer here and there when he’d gone hunting with his stepfather. Then had come his years
in the Marines, building up muscle and an emotional resistance to guilt attached to self
defense or the carrying out of orders. He’d never killed with his bare hands before,
strangled the life physically from someone’s body, sapping them of breath and strength.
He stared at his left hand as if he’d never seen it before, flexing the fingers slowly, as a
group then one at a time, the muscles and nerves remembering the feeling of bones and
cartilage grinding under pressure, breaking against one another, the oppressed noises of
breath struggling through blood and broken body until, at last, it stopped. He could read
every moment of that night etched into the back of his eyelids, and closing his eyes, as
much as it may have eased the uncomfortable itch of exhaustion, both emotional and
physical, he couldn’t bear to experience it over and over again.

“What are you obsessing about now?” Her voice, never one for rainbows and
butterflies, sounded ripped ragged by the past few hours, and nasal with the snot and ache
of a flu. Fully awake now, though certainly not without some amount of gogginess that
left her eyes swirling around the room without focusing on him, she rubbed at her
temple and dunked her head under the water, surfacing with a sputter. "And you couldn't
have taken my clothes off?"

“You’ve been in those clothes for I don’t know how long. Two birds, one stone.”
He tried to keep his words neutral, so she wouldn’t be able to tell that he was bothered by
something other than her little jaunt into the world of the almost dead, but he was fully
aware of the fact that the likelihood of that was just about a snowball’s chance in hell.
He could all but feel her poking around in his skull; after about two months of the
sensation, he still wasn’t quite accustomed to it, and he was starting to get rather
annoyed.

“You killed the leader?” There was a note of surprise in her voice, but nothing
near the shock that he himself had felt, nor the desperate sense of doing something
wrong. He watched as she shook her head and rested it against the edge of the tub in an
odd imitation of what he, himself, was doing. “Is that all?”

“Shut up.” That brought her eyes back to his face and her attention suddenly, and
very sharply to him. All she could see was those green eyes and ridiculously long lashes
for a moment, consumed by the anger in his eyes, something she’d never once seen
directed at her. This was not to say that it was a surprise that he could be so consumed,
mostly because she had, in fact, seen it when he found himself facing a particularly brutal
criminal of some kind, on one of the few occasions that they’d gone out on patrols
together. But the idea that he was capable of feeling that shear amount of hatred towards
her would have floored her, if she hadn’t already been in a mostly horizontal position. “I
am sick and tired of you crawling around in my fucking head, Delia. Sometimes, not
even I want to confront the emotions that I’m feeling, dammit, and if I was dating
anybody else, this wouldn’t be something I would talk about. Even if it was another
hero, even if it was someone that knew my secret, I wouldn’t talk about this. Not even
to my own goddammed mother would I talk about this.” Her eyes widened as he raised his
voice, and she threw up her arms to shield her head when he surged to his feet, glaring
down at her with a surprising impersonation of Superman’s angry laser eyes. Not even
her obvious fear, the reaction prompted by years of abuse at the hands of other people,
could pause him. As it was, it really only pissed him off, because he couldn’t believe that
she would, after all this time, think that he was capable of beating her, let alone would.
“Keep your filthy little nose out of my head. I don’t know where the fuck it’s been.”
Turning on his heel and stomping from the room, he slammed the door behind him, leaving her alone in the tiny room, shivering despite the warm water.

She could hear him moving around in the rest of the studio, but, unlike what she was expecting, never once was there a curse or a crash of furniture breaking. Hell, Rick could probably bring the entire building down around their ears, but he didn’t do a thing, just moved and seethed and got himself good and worked up about the entire day. She kept her tendrils of sensation resolutely in, though, keeping everything contained to that damned big bathtub, which felt atrociously empty without him in it, too. She started finally when she heard him slam the lid on the cedar chest at the foot of her bed and the two drawers where he’d been keeping his things, mostly clothing and a few books, when he slept over. After some rustling and a grumble, the front door slammed and she winced again, covering her feral eyes with her hands and wondering what it was that her big mouth had finally done.

So it had been a week. Just a week, that wasn’t a horribly long time, right? A week was just long enough for both of them to make headlines, though no one in the media had picked up on the fact that they hadn’t been seen together in a week. Yet. It was more common for them to go out on rounds of the city alone, given their schedules, and catch time together between work and fighting crime, but eventually someone would catch up with their lives and announce to the world that the power couple of superheroes had split.

Then one day, on her way out of the ME’s office, chatting absently with Spector about whatever game it was he was playing this week, she happened to catch a glimpse of the news, and what she saw had her racing to her car, making no excuses to the pale redhead, who stared at her like her ass was on fire. Changing into uniform in the car wasn’t an easy thing, nor one she would have suggested anyone try, but it was manageable, and she smudged her thumb across the last whorl of her trademark mask of the Kraken just as she shoved the car into park and threw her body at the melee that was surrounding her—former?—boyfriend. Making it to the front of the crowd just in time to see a visible sphere of air hit GJ’s chest, she growled like a wolf cornered and stepped forward, pushing the photographers back and away form the conflict.

“Morons, get the fuck back. I’m not takin’ care of you if you get busted.”

Looking back, trying to see where and how she could help, she could feel the power rise up in her as her fingers fisted. The jackass in green tights was laughing, his head thrown back and his eyes closed, and Rick was rising slowly from the rubble of a Volkswagen, moving like he’d been seriously injured. A few gasps flew up behind her like startled birds, and she felt people move further back as the raw black anger fed her power to visible heights. It wasn’t often that a non-telekinetic had a perceptible manifestation of her power, and for her, it was damned near unheard of. Just as green-tights began to gloat, spouting his world domination plots, Rick cut him off by grabbing his ankles and vaulting him down the street like a javelin, grinning that trademark General Justice grin and turning to the crowd to say something witting. Catching sight of Delia standing there, glowing black and looking about ready to slaughter something, he paused, but
continued.

“Talked too much, didn’t he, folks?” There was a cycle of nervous laughter through the crowd and Delia forced herself to calm down, the relief of the people behind her palpable through even the Kevlar. Wanting desperately to figure out what Rick felt about her showing up, she resolutely kept her brain inside her skull, just watching him with wary eyes. She realized it was well and truly the first time that she’d not been able to read some one by power of will, rather than distance or illness. Shoving her hands in her pockets, she waited until he motioned her over to approach him, wondering what this reaction was going to be like.

“I keep showing up too late to help you out. Kinda puts a girl off her Wheaties.” She kept an eye on green-tights, as did Rick, as the cops collared him and shoved him in a van that would hopefully hold his powers in check. One, smarter than the rest by far, and vaguely familiar, took off the gloves that fueled most of his attacks. When he turned and waved to the Kraken, she waved back. Ah, it was Davis’s partner with the utterly impossible to remember last name. She started when she felt Rick’s arm around her waist, and looked up just in time to get a kiss on the cheek.

“Covering up the discomfort with humor, I see. We’ll talk about this later. Alone.” He pulled back, and she realized it was General Justice’s arm around her, not Rick’s. The thought made her shudder, but she stomped on the movement, refusing to let any one see it. “Louder, pretending it was his first and only response to her statement, he added “Not my fault you sleep in.” The audience laughed, more confidently now, and one of the reporters for the Post proposed that it might, actually, be his fault. The innuendo made Delia blush a little, and the group took that as verification. He left his arm where it was, but Delia started to pull away, uncomfortable with the knowledge that he didn’t really want to be holding her.

“Kraken!” At first, she thought that the call was for an autograph of a photo, which surprised her enough, but hearing the panic in the voice, and spotting a finger pointing to her right, she turned around, ripping away from Rick, just in time to see a massive guy in a trench coat exiting the big Buick that she was starting to think had been the escape vehicle. The coat was tossed aside, revealing odd, purple-gray flesh that was too close to the Blob’s to be comfortable.

The General was faster than she was, grabbing the big fender off the early model car and swinging at, long and low, at the knees of the behemoth that was stacking up before them. If she had to guess, she was going to say hockey in high school. Only one problem. The blobby guy didn’t break, he bent, and then reformed right where he had been. The General tried to shove her away, but she resisted, just flowing for a moment like a tree in the wind under his hand, then stepping in front of him as he prepared to take on the shifting mass of sand and silt alone. She felt the black flames licking at her skin again, felt the power build up and up and up until she felt like she was going to burst at the seams with it. She let the anger burn, let the frustration and the fear that Rick was going to leave her because she’d been sick and she’d said something stupid, ride through her body, hitting her like tsunami waves and carrying all the negativity into the mutant standing in front of her, instinct searching out what it was that he was the most terrified. The flames pursued him like predators, relentless, as he tried to run, then dropped to the ground, his eyes rolling back in his head and his jowls twitching as he apparently had a seizure. It wasn’t as though this was unusual in her captures, and, if she really had
thought about it, she would have seen that she was basically incapable of stopping at that point. Snakes. Falling to his death. Extreme cold freezing his body so he could be shattered like ice. Speed, sex, women, darkness, fangs, fire, everything he had ever feared she pushed into his brain bodily, like hatred and terror could be Cuisenart-ed into someone’s brain, only instead of carrot juice you were getting pain and heartache unimaginable without experiencing it.

Delia blacked out for a little while. She could admit it, if someone had been so kind as to ask her about it. But no one did. When she came back, she was resting on the pavement, her head on someone’s jacket or sweatshirt, and staring down at her was an EMT, who had apparently been just about to touch her. She batted his hand away and sat up, experiencing no dizziness, no nausea, nothing. In fact, she felt better then she had in days, since she’d last seen Rick and hadn’t been sick. Sliding to her feet and padding to the largest swath of red-white-and-blue that she could see, and thankfully it was Rick’s back. Opening her mouth to speak, she came up around him and managed to do one thing: stare.

The Blob guy had completely dissolved onto the pavement, and a girl that worked the day shift that had just replaced her at the ME’s office an hour earlier was trying to scrape what was left of him off of the street. Blanching, she turned away as her stomach tried to empty itself, and all she could see was the contorted fingers of a man that had been trying to claw his way out from under his nightmares. Even if he had been a mutant, he had still been a man, first and foremost. When there was nothing left to puke up, she turned her eyes pleadingly to Rick, who gathered her close and pushed their way through the crowd of photographers and reporters, who were all being respectful enough to keep their questions quiet and just let them go on their way. Pushing her into a Humvee that was waiting on the edge of the crowd, he got into the driver’s seat and steered them away from everything, though whereto, she wasn’t exactly sure.

“Have you got enough left in you to cloak the car? I need to take you home, but an Army issue is not exactly the most inconspicuous vehicle.” He didn’t look at her, just drove and drove and drove, while she put two nice elderly people in an older Cadillac going down the road towards a not so great part of town. She had to really concentrate to do it, and she still worried that a camera would catch them somewhere along the line. But despite being completely sapped for strength, she managed it without a blip on the radar of the people around them.

Rick pulled up to her apartment building and pushed the car into park. Without looking at her, he unlocked the doors and just waited. Not a word, nothing. Delia stared at her hands, twisting her fingers together and looking at the black smudges along her skin, wondering what it was. Some of it was clearly makeup from her face, but some of it smelled odd. With a start, she realized it was burnt flesh, but she couldn’t tell who it belonged to.

“Get out of the car.” She looked at him, her eyes wide and full of something closer to fear than she would care to admit. “Go back home, get some rest, go to work. The Pentagon will call you tonight to get a statement they can mess with and release to the press.” Leaning across her to the door, he flicked the handle with one finger and it popped open, leaving her no option but to clamber gracelessly out of the car, looking for all the world like herself, without the costume, getting out of a standard sedan. She hugged her ribs, looking at the man in the car with hurting yellow eyes, and lowered her
head, padding up the front stairs slowly into her building and then to her loft, trying to ignore the sensation that her heart was exploding. Or imploding. She could never remember the difference. Crawling straight into the tub and running the water over her head without removing any of her costuming, feeling the oily sensation of her makeup sliding down her cheeks and lips, leaving her feeling somehow dirtier than before. She refused to believe that those were tears that were streaming down her face, salty on her lips under the grease of the black makeup and warmer than the shower.

Rick didn’t leave right away, even though he knew that eventually she would lift the cloaking on him and the car. He stared up at the window that he knew was closest to her front door, and watched it open and close. He almost expected to hear the cartoon wail of grief and loss from her loft, and when he didn’t, he could admit he was a little disappointed. Pushing the car back into drive and taking it back to the base that he’d been calling home since he’d abandoned her a week ago, he phoned in a tow for her car so she would have a way to get to work and took a shower, then went to bed, staring up at the stark white ceiling in the windowless room on a too narrow bed and spending yet another night unable to sleep at all because she wasn’t snoring like a lumberjack against his ribcage. A vicious word fell from his lips and he pounded a big fist into the wall, the concrete already cracked and complaining from many such punches. His mind was reeling with questions, swimming sickeningly and making him feel far too nauseous to even think about staying still. *Why the hell did she come? How did she know that guy woulda kicked my ass?* Finally, thinking of the look on her face when she saw what she’d done to the man for his sake, and then when he left her at her building, he was left with only one question for himself.

“What the hell have I done?”

“*Oh God.*” Delia’s voice cut through the stoner-metal like a hot blade and both Spector and Isabella followed the line of her shocked gaze to see what she saw. Usually it was a drunk guy she’d gone on a date with or a woman severely underdressed in latex that revealed every roll of fat in excruciating detail. This time, however, it was a tall man, not young or old, but with thick, dark hair and a jaw that could sever steak. He wasn’t dressed oddly—no more so than any other man on the DC streets—but he didn’t fit in. A clean white button down and crisp blue jeans, not to mention the man in them, stuck out like a maimed rather than sore thumb in a room that could have been an ad for Hot Topic.

“You calling dibs? Because if not...” Spector had his pale eyes on Isabella’s face, where a hungry smile had settled on her lips. Without waiting for any more input on the matter, the man spotted Delia and surged through the crowd towards their table, his eyes hardening, as he parted the poorly garbed black, gray, and red sea of bodies like a far more vengeful prophet than Moses.

Delia’s first instinct was to just disappear into the floor and let Rick wander around the bar looking for her. She set down the neon blue drink with a stupid little umbrella that Isa had bought her not fifteen minutes earlier, and instead slid through the crowd, dodging elbows and shimmying sideways between hips. Rick did the opposite, all
but taking a linebacker pose and shouldering his way through the last fifteen feet of people between them. They were shoved together as the crowd closed behind them at once, breastbone to rib, thigh to thigh, like Purdue chickens.

“What are you doing here?” She barely managed to make her voice heard over a particularly good bass solo, which caught her attention long enough that he slipped his arm around her waist uninhibited. You can’t really dance to stoner-metal, but you can do your best, and they did, mobbed by the writhing mass that was really no longer a crowd of separate bodies, but a living creature.

“Looking for you.” Rather than shouting, he bent down to slide his voice straight into her ear like a key in a lock. He could feel her shiver and suddenly was rather glad for the wretched music and crowded bar. There was no way she was getting away from him easily here. “We need to talk.” Her eyes were closed when he stood straight, and her fingers were splayed across his chest. Her hips moved against his and he smiled thinly, trying not to respond.

He didn’t hear her response, but saw her lips say ‘fine.’ When his eyes opened form the next blink, the dingy, smoke-filled room was gone, and it was just the two of them. She was laying down on the large, flat red rock with the yellow and gray veins, her head pillowed on the arching root of what he had come to identify as an elm. He was standing, though he wasn’t sure on what, once again. It was odd still, this partially built world. She had only once before left the interior unfinished, and in the five weeks that he had not seen her, he’d forgotten the odd mix of disorientation and calm that this place prompted in him. And it was not as silent as it had been the first time. Half-heard noises that tickled his ears were almost distracting enough to yank his attention from her, and the lines of exhaustion on her face.

“I want you.” He began without preamble, and saw her flinch. “My life is less rich without you.”

“And none of this has to do with the fact that mutant attacks have spiked?” Her voice was guarded and she didn’t look at him. Even so, it didn’t take an empathy to read the lines of tension and anger in the set of her shoulders and the furrows between her brows. She was right. Mutant attacks had gone up of late, and there were rumors circulating that it was because the two of them hadn’t been seen together in so long. Every once in a while, they would both show up at the same incident and there was a moment of hesitation that could have been catastrophic, and nearly was, once, when a young woman, who wasn’t very attractive, was taken hostage by the one of the big, mushroom-smelling men that apparently leaked poisonous sweat, judging by the look on her face when he grabbed her.

“I miss seeing you when I come home. I miss smelling you in the sheets when I wake up, even though you’re already up and gone. I want to cook you breakfast again.” He was proud. His voice only broke once, but he kept his eyes resolutely on her, watching her expressions.

“You mean you miss fucking me.” It was his turn to wince now, looking down and away from her face.

“No. I miss seeing you.” He decided he was done giving her too many chances to push him further away. Sitting down beside her, grabbing her hand and lacing thief fingers together, he pulled her closer. When he met with no resistance, he was a little worried. “I miss arguing with you. I miss worrying about you and knowing you’ve got
my back at the same time.”

“You need to shut up now.” She refused to look at him. Utterly refused. She felt him tug at her hand, his fingers encompassing her wrist and slowly creeping up her arm. Shivering, the sensation of his callused fingers on her skin, she bit her lower lip. “I should’ve just taken you outside.” She saw, or rather felt, since she refused to look at him, the question on his face. “Where do you think you are? Just in a construct? I’m too intoxicated to make any decent construct without a fear trigger. You’re inside me.” She took a deep breath and let it hiss out through her teeth. “You’ve been here for days. Weeks. Fuck if I know how long.” She felt his arms slip around her ribs and despite herself, she curled into his chest, winding herself as close to him as she could without crawling into his skin with him. “I want you out.” Those last words were muttered against his chest. She almost hated him for chuckling.

And then they were back. The Blacklight Barbarians were just wrapping up a great set. Delia was a little pissed that she’d missed most of it. But Rick was still holding her up. He kissed her, lightly, on the cheek, and slid away, leaving her utterly without knees. She barely managed her way back to the table, swaying slowly, where Isabella’s eyes were laughing. Spector was just scowling at her, or rather, at Rick and her.

“Slaves to the beast, my dear?” The blonde’s lips curled, just a hint of the amusement she was no doubt feeling.

“I really wish you wouldn’t call it that. Makes me feel like I don’t have a say in the matter when I dance.” Delia couldn’t manage much more than a whisper-quiet smile as she sat.

“First of all, you and that man were the only ones dancing, and just barely that. Secondly, you do not.”

“Who the hell was that guy?” Spector cut in before Isa’s words had a chance to settle in Delia’s stomach.

“Her pet man.”

“He’s not my pet.”

“Are you his, then?” Isabella truly laughed then, the sound of crystal and dry bone knocking one another around musically.

“He’s a good guy.” Delia wanted to be less annoyed with her friend, but she found it just too difficult, crossing her arms over her chest defensively.

“Every time you say that, I know you mean it, but my first instinct is to hate whoever it is.” Spector handed her a jacket, which turned out to be Isabella’s, so they switched back and slid away, leaving her utterly without knees. She barely managed her way back to the table, swaying slowly, where Isabella’s eyes were laughing. Spector was just scowling at her, or rather, at Rick and her.

“Who else have you called a good guy? That’s right, the heroine addict, the pimp, the guy growing pot in his garage—”

“The one that hit you, the one that was married,” Isa supplied helpfully.

“Not to mention the one that only dated you to get access to the morgue bodies.” Spector delivered the final blow.

“Alright, alright. But he’s a good man.” Delia waved her hand vaguely in the air in an attempt to halt the conversation. She should have known that wasn’t going to work.

“Oh, and there’s a difference?” Spector sounded incredulous, to say the least. Isabella just laughed disjointedly again and hooked her arm with Delia’s, supporting her jelly legs.
“Next time you buy me a drink, I’m sending it back for whiskey. I feel ridiculous.” Her toe caught on a dip in the sidewalk, and Isa, who was stronger than her slight frame would indicated, caught and righted her easily.

“You seem to think of that as a bad thing.” Isa’s voice was quiet, offered only to her ears, and Delia shook her head just a little. Spector continued to list her mistakenly named ‘good guys,’ and she began to be a little ashamed, or at least sheepish, at the number of men that she could be linked to, given her brief time in DC. She could feel Isa humming against her arm, and even as it distracted her from putting one foot in front of the other, she was filled with a quiet warmth and comfort, the kind that most people would have called maternal. “Don’t worry. Even the good men are oblivious to what you need sometimes, but you can always count on even the most mediocre of women.”

“Calling you mediocre is like calling a Rolls-Royce a beater.” Delia chuckled softly and waited for a light to change while Spector punched the crosswalk button impatiently. “I kinda wish we didn’t have to walk all the way in the back.”

“At least you’re not wearing these shoes.” They both glanced to the concrete, to the delicate black satin of Isa’s four inch heels, slender spires on which she was balanced more comfortably then one would have thought possible. Even with the gathering slush.

“He, those were your choice.” That was Spector talking, as they crossed the street in front of a cab, prompting a whistle from the driver, earning himself a glare from Spector and Delia both, and a cool look from Isa that had been known to make full grown men wet themselves.

“But they do such fabulous things to my legs,” Isa finished when they made it to the other side of the street.

“You know, they tried to rename this street once. But every time someone tried to walk from one side to the other, an act of got would come along and bang! Dead. The city officials kept asking ‘why can’t anybody cross this street?’ And finally one day an intern—”

“Nobody crosses Chuck Norris.” Delia furnished the punch line with a giggle that was completely disconnected from her body. Spector tended to tell the same jokes several thousand times before he finally got tired of it or couldn’t remember enough of it to be amusing. He tried to slip an arm around her waist to help her walk, but delicate little Isa, who didn’t look like she could lift a particularly heavy purse let alone Delia, glared at him over the top of their friend’s dark head, lips thin.

“Go home, Spector.” Every blemish on his face flared red, absorbing his freckles ravenously, and his wishy-washy eyes got angry. “I’ll get her home.” There was something of a childish stomp in his step as he walked away, but Delia was a little too preoccupied with her feet to notice, and Isa didn’t particularly care.

What did you put in my drink?” Delia’s next words waited until they were halfway up the flight of stairs to her loft, both taking a breather from the talkative, ancient wooden steps.

“Nothing. You were just especially vulnerable to a Blue Lagoon and a Sex on the Beach.” Isa couldn’t help but chuckle at her poor friend.

“No jokes about beaches or sex. I’m in no mood, and it’s too fuckin’ cold.” Isa gave her a beatific smile and pulled her to her feet to mount the last twenty steps to her door. They fell against it, both laughing almost silently, and Delia neede both hands to even attempt to unlock the door. Only with Isa dragging at one of her arms, her fingers
cool and metal-hard, did she manage to get to the bed at all. Her coat and shoes, which were far more practical than Isa’s, if not nearly as aesthetically pleasing, were dispatched in just a few jerky movements, the jointless kind that young children and intoxicated adults always make. Curling up under the heavy black blanket, she used her toes to remove her socks as well, watching Isa spread another massive one over her prone form. “You’re so good, Isa.” And thusly began the drunken, heartfelt conversations.

“Ah, I am not good. I am just making up for my past, that is all.” Slender fingers tucked red and black wool under Delia’s shoulders, her face a mask of calm. “What are you going to do about the good man?” Perched on the edge of the bed, she cocked her head and looked remarkably like a beloved housecat inspecting a curious addition to her territory, hands folded neatly on her lap.

“I don’t know, Isa. He’s gotten me all tangled up and I can’t seem to get him out of my head.” Mopey, Delia curled herself around her friend and submitted willingly to the gentle fingers that stroked her brow and hair.

“And the worst part is that you do not know if you even want him out.” Delia grunted softly in agreement and closed her eyes again. “Ah, Dee. Are you not glad that I followed you here now? What ever would you do without me to chase Spector off when you are the most vulnerable?” Another chuckle, softer than eiderdown, cascaded through Delia’s mind, and she couldn’t help but smile in return, finding solace in her friend and astounded by the feeling of safety that one tiny woman could evoke by doing something her own mother had so rarely done. Arching into the petting like a kitten and settling again, she shrugged.

“Probably punch him.” They both laughed, and Delia used the opportunity to try to move away a little, muscles bunching and tightening under the hand on her back that was trying to keep her from going too far. Isa shook her head slowly, as her dark friend could not see. Even drunk, with the only person in the world that would without a doubt never hurt her, she didn’t trust herself enough to be close to another person. “Or tell him I was gay.” That one caught Isa off guard, and she blinked, looking down at her friend that was still trying to get out from under her hand like a worm.

“Do you really think he would believe you?”

“I’d find a nice girl to make out with once or twice to convince him.”

“As though that would not just make him lust after you even more?” Isa stroked Delia’s hair softly, an odd smile curling her lips. Had Delia’s eyes been open, she would have undoubtedly been uncomfortable. As it was, the smell of ash and sandalwood that clung to Isa’s soft skin was making it difficult to stay awake. She refused to believe that it had anything to do with the two dinks her friend had ordered her. She was the drinking queen. There was no way that two fruity drinks could have had this much of an effect. “Go to sleep, mia bella. You need to rest.” Delia paused, hovering on the edge of dreaming, and cracked one yellow-brown eye to look at her friend.

“I didn’t know you spoke Italian.”

“Sleep, you stubborn child. You have heard me do so before.”

“Oh.” And she faded, like a good film noir, into black.

Isa sighed softly once more and pushed a butter colored curl from her eyes, shaking her head at the incapacitated photographer, who was starting to snore softly, curled around the other woman’s hips like a chair. With a regretful kiss to Delia’s cheek, leaving an ache in Isa’s belly that had nothing to do with hunger, she slid to her feet and
retreated to the door, somehow gliding silently on heels that most people couldn’t even
walk on, through the cacophony of smells that managed to fill the tiny loft. Smoke, sage,
and exposure chemicals, not to mention the garlic and thyme that dominated the kitchen,
assaulted the nose the moment you stepped in. She paused to hit the lights as she left the
room, and noticed that the cable was unhooked from the back of that ridiculous tv.
Glancing over to the computer, she saw it was unhooked from the internet. Glaring at the
sleeping Delia, she decided to pay the damn woman’s bills without her knowing, rather
than trying to make her accept the money herself. Taking one last deep breath, she
opened the front door and locked it behind herself with the spare key that Delia had given
her the day that she’d moved in. She didn’t care what the other girl said, no matter how
tough you were a guy breaking in while you were passed out drunk mean you were in
trouble. By the time she’d pulled her coat back over her bare shoulders and reached the
pavement in front of Delia’s building, her gaze could’ve cut the chilled air with a knife.
Standing on the sidewalk staring up at Delia’s window like a dog accidentally left behind
on the family vacation, was button-down and jeans guy, new snow dusting his bare head.

“Before you say a word, I’m just here to make sure you got home alright.” He
didn’t look down at her at all, which actually threw her for a moment. He was humming,
straining like a pointer towards Delia blindly. After a minute, she dug into her pocket
and unclipped the spare key from her own, slapping it lightly against his chest when he
didn’t take it from her right away.

“If you hurt her, you won’t even know how you die. You’ll just realize that you
are.” She began to pad away down the street, praying for a cab to show up soon. Before
she got too far, though, she heard his voice, filled with almost the same ache as her belly.

“I notice you didn’t say ‘again.’” He was still staring up at her window, the key
ridiculously small in his beefy hand. God, he really was as tall as he’d looked standing
beside Delia. He was almost a foot and a half taller than she was.

“Delia’s better at hurting herself than she’ll usually admit. This time around it
wasn’t you.” She did her cat impression once more, a tawny lioness watching a creature
she was confident she could destroy. She had no current intention to do so, but it was
clear that she would if necessary.

“I love her.”

“Have you informed her of that?” There was a long moment of silence. “I never
have, either. She tends to respond negatively to the word.” Turning on her heel, she hid
her smile from him and added quietly, “Good luck.”

Waking up to the smell of cooking eggs when your head is inflated approximately
four times its normal size and your stomach is actively warring with contradictory
instincts to digest itself and reject all food forever is not really advisable. Especially
when garlic is involved. Groaning, Delia hid her head under the blankets and made her
displeasure known though a scorching series of words, only some of which were in
English. When she finally opened her eyes, squinting in the half-light that managed to
elbow its way under the blankets, did she realize that she was laying on clean sheets, still
dressed, and didn’t know who was cooking. Sticking her head out experimentally, she
winced and withdrew into darkness once more. Too bright.

“Sorry. I forgot to pull the blinds.” Ah, Rick. She heard, rather than saw, a pan moved off the stove momentarily and long strides taken to reach the heavy maroon drapes that were usually pulled back, away from the small window above her bed.

“What are you—”

“I love you.” There was a moment of shocked silence after Rick interrupted her, as she listened to the weighty rustle of the drapes falling into place, undoubtedly shooting handfuls of dust into the air. She knew she was right when he sneezed. Her silence hand him speaking again in seconds flat, and she had to hid the warring surprise and amusement on her face under the thick blankets, feeling the bed shift as she settled his weight onto it. “I love you more then I’m really sure how to say, and I’m not letting you run away from this.” He took a deep breath, and suddenly a hand whose comforting weight could have easily crushed her ribcage settled on her ass, though she had a feeling that wasn’t what he was shooting for, since it scooted quickly to the small of her back.

“The only reason I left you there at that shithole last night—” She couldn’t help but laugh at that choice of words. “—was because giving us both a little bit of time to think sounded like a good strategy. But I changed my mind. I don’t want time. I just want you, and either you’re ok with that, or you’re not, and I’ll go.” There was a moment of hesitation, and he added, “Even if I don’t want to.”

Delia slowly pulled the blankets down from her eyes, but kept her smile hidden for now, looking up at him and realizing just how much she’d missed him. “I was just asking what you were making for breakfast.” The look on his face was damn near priceless at the mention of the food, and with an exclamation about the omelets, he began to scurry back to the kitchen. “And remember, you’re the one that left me.” While he was clanging and cussing his way to breakfast, she went to take care of the uncomfortable pressure in her lower torso, reemerging just as he put her plate and a glass of orange juice on the island counter.

“No coffee?” Her face pulled into a mournful look without even thinking about it, and Rick tsked her around the forks clamped in his teeth.

“You know that stuff is awful for you.” Richard pushed her gently onto a stool and shoved a fork into her hand, pointing at the food with a peculiar scowl on his face that she could only assume was a relic from military days gone by. She didn’t need to read him to know that he was trying desperately to ignore her pointed jab at the fact that he’d been the one to leave. So, not really up for a fight so soon after waking up, she dug into the omelet, ignoring the protests of her disgruntled stomach. Soon enough, toast joined what turned out to be a “kitchen sink” meal: Rick had thrown in a little bit of everything, from spinach to mushrooms to garlic to those spicy green peppers that were left over from the last time she’d made chili. Her belly continued to grumble and pop, but it settled enough that she didn’t feel the need to wait a few minutes between every bite to see what her body would reject.

“Eventually it’s going to go on strike, you know.” Delia started when he spoke again, staring at the massive bull of a man that was hunched over her counter eating. She wondered if he’d noticed that all of the picture of the two of them weren’t out any more, or that she’d shoved her General Justice stuffed animal under her bed, the tear-stained cloth now covered in dust bunnies. She resolved to right that situation as soon as he left.

The thought struck her, however, as he continued to admonish her about her
nutrition, that this seemed just too simple, too natural to be real. He’d slid back into her life like a hand into a glove, and this glorious, deceiving full feeling had warning bells going off in her head. Nothing could ever be this right, this sweet and good.

“Are you real?” It was Rick’s turn to stare, his green eyes wide on her face and forkful of egg halfway to his mouth. “Because I could have finally snapped last night and made myself a construct to live in rather than deal with all of the bullshit anymore.” She calmly took another bite of her breakfast, cleaning her plate slowly but surely. “And no, there’s not really a way to assure me that you’re real. If you act completely in character, then I’ll just think that my fuddled mind has come to predict your actions so well that I can’t tell the difference—” Rick’s fork hit the plate with a clatter, and there was an almost murderous look on his face as she continued, completely unfazed. “But, if you act erratically, then I’ll know that I’m filling in—making you act the way I would prefer, rather than the way you actually would.”

“Is there any way that we can forget for just five seconds that you and I have powers?” His voice dripped venom, though she wasn’t sure if it was genuinely directed at her, or at their situation. He threw up his hands in frustration, and she flinched backwards, watching him warily. “I’m damned tired of letting our powers define and dictate our relationship.” Delia blinked. That was the closest he’d come to looking like he was going to hit her since they’d met, and for the first time, the look in his eyes indicated that he might actually do it.

“We can try.” That was all she could offer him for now, unfortunately. It was all she had. This was starting to feel more like reality, with that painful throb behind her breast bone, and the not-so-easy process of getting back together with a former lover. Now, that wasn’t to say that she was positive about the actual existence of this place and time, but she was willing to give it a shot. “How did you get in here, anyway? I locked all the windows up when it started snowing.”

“Your blonde friend let me in.” Well, that certainly put a firm point on the board for reality. Delia’d never put Isa into her construct before: every time she tried, she discovered she was incapable. Something in the woman’s nature made it impossible. One detail or another would be too off to ignore, and Delia would get frustrated enough to give up for a while. On the other hand, however, she had not actually seen Isabella, merely been told that she existed in this world, reality of not. So she was right back where she started. This would have been a perfect make-the-evil-robot’s-brain-explode-before-it-kills-us-all logic puzzle.

“That, at least, makes me a little more confident in your intentions, if not your existence.” Delia grinned without humor and shrugged absently, moving to the sink. Her world jerked out from under her suddenly, and for a moment she panicked, assuming that her construct was, in fact, starting to fall apart around her ears. But, as a big hand took her dishes from her and dumped them unceremoniously on the counter, she recognized the new ache in her belly as the pressure of a shoulder. Rick had picked her up in a fireman’s carry and was hauling her to the massive bed without any effort at all. He was thrumming under her like a motor, and it took her a moment to realize he was growling softly. She slapped his back once or twice, futilely, demanding to be set down. Instead, she was tossed onto the bed and pinned there by a man more than half again larger than she was, fear sparking like fireworks in her eyes.

“Be quiet now.” There was no room to argue with him, or the look on his face.
Besides, soon enough, his mouth was rendering speech impossible, then the rest of him distracted her enough that she concentrated on breathing first. Speech was pretty low down on the priority list at that point, though by the end she found herself incapable of being quiet.

If she was going to be completely honest with herself, which she so rarely was, the days following Rick’s return to her life were something were something far less linear than a blur. She couldn’t remember anything except that one day he’d been gone, and what felt like a few short hours later, he’d reclaimed his two drawers, the chest near her bed, and half of the closet that she’d just barely resisted filling with old martial arts equipment, bought the week before his return in a moment of panic. She’d lost the musclebound half of the team, and all it took was one solid suckerpunch to the kidney to remind her how vulnerable she could be. Pissing blood for a few days only drove the lesson home. But soon, his clothes were back and the bed was starting to smell like him, and she’d barely managed to return all of the photos and things to “their” spots before he noticed. There was something to be said for using a guy’s post-coital crash time against him. She was so cross-eyed about the entire thing that it’d never even occurred to her to use her powers to make him think nothing had changed.

When he tapped her on the shoulder one day, waking her from a light doze, they found themselves in that same half-formed spot as before, but now he could pick out birdsong from the muted, musical noises in his head. He smiled softly, taking his hand from her skin and shaking his head.

“It’s funny. Part of me knows that you still don’t trust me. That’s why you run to this place.” He motioned at the air around them expansively, and the breeze that swept her hair into her face finally touched his. “But regardless, whenever you run away, you take me with you.” She shoved the dark hair back into place with impatient fingers, hoping she wasn’t blushing too badly. “I can’t help but wonder if it’s intentional.”

“I’m not sure that even I know any more.” His smile echoed hers, and she moved aside on her rock to give him room to sit down. His knee brushed against hers, and the wind shuddered through her little world, leaving goosebumps along his arms.

There was something very unsettling for Delia in facing cameras. The press conferences that she had faced beside, or more often behind, Rick, had done nothing to alleviate that fear. She could fool people easily, make them see what she wanted them too, but cameras didn’t have a mind to manipulate, only the operators did. And she just wasn’t powerful enough to control the minds of everyone in the world, as much as she might walk like she could. The worst part was that she’d gotten cornered in the bank going to deposit her check, the one from the ME, the one that was supposed to pay her bills. It wasn’t lost on her that the cable and the internet had miraculously come back on
a few days after Rick’s return, and they’d nearly gotten in a screaming match over it, but he still resolutely refused to admit that he was paying her bills for her. But when a gun had gotten turned on her chin while she was signing the back of the check, instinct had taken over and she’d ended up saving the day, sort of. One firm shove of the heel of her palm into his nose and the gunman had been down for the count, and she’d run into the back while the security guards were containing him, yanking on her get up so that the cameras wouldn’t see straight through to the real Delia.

By the time the real cops had gotten there, the press had sniffed her out and were pinning her to the front wall, battering her with questions that hurt a hell of a lot more than the bruise the gun had left behind. A headache had begun to actively dance behind her eyes, and she was using them to try to kill the reporter asking her about ‘GJ’ as he insisted upon calling Rick’s alter ego. So instead of reaching out and strangling the entire crowd with her bare hands, she crossed her arms over her chest and tried to be patient, muttering responses only when they were necessary, and only snapping at someone once. When the angry, clipped words spat from her lips, a few of the photographers and reporters jumped back a little, and one actually blanched in fear. Apparently her little explosion and killing of the blobby guy had given her a bit of a reputation for violence.

After almost forty-five minutes of uselessly fending off questions about her better half, since they’d been spotted once, just once for Pete’s sake, since they’d gotten back together, and it had sparked yet another media frenzy of attention surrounding their love life. Hell, she was really tired of talking about who she was fucking.

There was that annoying itch in the back of her brain telling her there was something she needed to do, and she all but clawed out for Rick’s location in anger, wondering what the hell was so desperately important that he needed her right then, when she was twitchier than a long-tailed tabby in a room full of rocking chairs. Christ, that phrase hasn’t even floated through my head in years, let alone come out of my mouth.

While the reporters turned on the cop in charge, she retreated to her beater, which was almost out of gas, and found her way to a high school in a wealthier part of town, not ritzy, but certainly nicer than most. The school itself was empty when she walked in, which was odd given the time of day. She’d been at the bank when it opened, and judging by the growl in her torso, it was about lunchtime. Zeroing in on Rick, she found herself wandering into the auditorium, where the entire school had apparently gathered, and poor Generalissimo was standing up in front on the stage, fielding questions. He was seething, quietly, his brow twitching, and his usual confidence was shot, leaving him feeling like a complete toolbag in front of the students. Waiting a few more moments and listening to the errant thoughts that he threw out, not really in her direction so much as into the ether, she sighed. Apparently it was part of his government contract to be mister Propaganda Machine, making an ass of himself by spouting rhetoric, listening to kids ask him really tough questions and answering them with canned government responses.

One of the kids in the very back of the room stood up and made his way to the front. Delia, settling against the back wall and acting inconspicuous, noticed a big Kraken patch on the back of his black hooded sweatshirt, and she was curious to see how well this would go over. Black dyed hair, black eyeliner, black fingernails…Rick could be in a little bit of trouble.

“Why do you wear that moronic costume? It’s like you’ve got a target painted on
your chest, and it makes you look like a retard.” There was a murmur of agreement from
the rest of the room, and of protest from the teachers, one of whom pulled the kid aside to
admonish him. At least no one had noticed her yet. Her ears perked up when Rick
started to respond.

“I’m supposed to be the embodiment of the entire country, all of the patriotism
and bravery of every single citizen, and the history of a nation. What better way to do
that then wear the flag on every inch of me?” Well, at least he made a good comeback
with that. Parts of the student body even sounded convinced by it, though obviously
those that sided more with the anti-hero projection of the Kraken’s image were not
amused. “Let’s say, after September 11th, we all felt pretty patriotic. We all felt like we
needed to stick together. General Justice was born from that feeling, my existence as a
hero, my choice for what to do and what to stand for came from that. Just like Captain
America in World War II.” He took a deep breath and continued, to Delia’s chagrin.
“Ask any costumed hero why we do what we do, and I don’t think you’d hear very often
that we do it because it’s fun. Rest assured, we’ve all failed time and again. In our
personal lives and in our chosen and voluntary occupation. There have been times that
I’ve ‘saved the day’” How cute, he actually used the air quotes. “Out of sheer dumb luck.
And in my real life, I’ve messed that up too. I’ll be honest, things are just now working
out for me in that area.” He, and many of the students, laughed at that. “In the end, guys,
we wear costumes to give people something to aspire to. If we didn’t wear costumes, we
wouldn’t stand out as symbols, would we? Next question.”

A gothy girl sitting in the back with her gaggle of idiotic friends made a
wisecrack about having more success if he stuffed the codpiece of his costume, and Delia
took three steps forward, thumping the girl soundly on the back of the head, her leather
gloves still sticky with blood. Hell, the moron would probably think it was an accessory.
And Kraken, being basically the opposite of GJ in basically everyone’s book, was
probably pretty damned close to being this girl’s idol, though she would never admit it
out loud, and that left the teen staring, open mouthed, as the female hero just stood,
waiting to see if anyone had a real question for her man. Christ did she feel out of place.

“Corporal punishment laws don’t apply to non-teachers, chickee, so shut up.”
Her voice was an angry growl, though it wasn’t as forced as she thought it would have
been. She was actually annoyed with the girl for bashing Rick, and that alone surprised
her. But she then felt Rick’s mood lighten, and lifted her eyes to see him looking at her.
She wiggled her fingers a little, hoping to fend off criticism a bit longer, and stayed put.
The next question had come up, a nervous looking, bookish kid with glasses as big as his
face. He looked a little like Spector, actually.

“How would you deal with a bullying problem?” There was a long silence before
Rick responded, leaning his elbows down against the podium.

“Who’s the bully?” Delia smiled and thumped what appeared to be the goth girl’s
boyfriend when he laughed at the poor kid. She’d been there, in her own way, and
understood what it was like to be the outcast kid. The angst and resentment, as well as
the sheer terror of standing up in front of his classmates was boiling off of him in waves.
She raised a brow at Rick and shrugged a little, asking if she should come up to the stage
or stay put in the back where only the too-pale vampy ones could see her. Part of her felt
like she could field this question better than he could, but hell, what she didn’t know
about his life before superheroing was pretty big.
She watched Rick hop down off the stage, the young man far too nervous to respond, and had apparently clammed up after the big man’s question. A few long, loping strides brought Rick up to his side, and he rested his hand on the boy’s shoulder, covering the microphone with the other beefy paw. After a few murmured words from both, he gave one of his glowing smiles, which the kid returned, and Rick patted the boy on the shoulder. As he walked back to his seat, his shoulders were higher, his chest puffed a bit, and he exchanged excited gestures with his friends upon sitting back down. It was obvious they were all jealous of him: the General was the guy everyone wanted to be, that was a known. But now he was with the Kraken, the girl everyone wanted to fuck, but Rick’d been lucky enough to get there first. He was tempted to let people fight him for her, and see what happened, though that would undoubtedly get on her nerves.

Another one of “her kind” of kids was walking up to the microphone, and Delia was caught between a smile and a grimace. This was bound to go badly for someone. It was a crack-addict skinny boy in ripped fishnet sleeves and black pants that could have held four of him, buttons and pins festooning his skin tight shirt. What, are there no dress codes any more?

“Young, I’ve got a question. How the hell did you land the Kraken? To hot for you by far, and way too cool.” Two teachers descended on the kid for swearing, but there was a muttering of similar questions from various people in the room, and she had to struggle not to just punch all of them, a blush rising up her neck to her cheeks like a school girl. As it was, she landed a couple of solid thumps on kids near enough to her when hey laughed. Fuckin’ high schools. Still unsure as to wheter or not he’d want her to step in, she shifted her weight nervously and waiting for some type of cue. Alright, so he had fangirls, and she had idiots.

She watched Rick open his mouth, grinning down at the boy as he was escorted out of the theater, and drew out the silence for dramatic effect, leaning back and crossing his arms over his chest. He nodded minutely at her and smiled wider, shutting his mouth. She took it as an invitation to approach the stage, and did exactly that, grinning all the while and feeling a couple hundred pairs of eyes on her ass as she went. Yellow eyes narrowed, she stood on tip toe to give him a peck on the lips and boosted herself up onto the stage, leaning into her hands and staring out past the bright lights into the crowd. Cameras, she didn’t know how to deal with. She was moderately better with kids.

“Who wants a guy that’s gonna make them feel like shit?” Oops, swearing. That wasn’t a good thing. “I’d rather someone that’s really gonna back me up, make sure we both get out of sticky situations ok.” Oh wow, sexual innuendo, crap, she was getting worse. There was some outright laughter at her now, and she shook her head a little, smiling to herself. “I’ll admit it, alright? It’s really just the way he fills out the costume.” Even the teachers laughed this time, and she shrugged, glancing at him. So she’d tanked. Public relations was his shtick, not hers. He was just about the same shade of red as his costume, staring at her a little, and he began to stammer something incoherent before he stopped himself. So he just stood next to her, sliding an arm around her waist, and nodded to the principal, who was waving at him.

“Alright, guys, your principal says time is up. Stick to school, don’t make me come back and catch you at doing something wrong.” There was a cascade of giggles again, and he spotted a couple of kids rubbing the back of their heads as they filed out, undoubtedly Delia’s doing. A few wandered up to talk to the two of them, and Delia
proved just as awkward with one or two of the kids as with the whole room of them. She swore like a sailor, making a few of them blush, and sniffled loudly when she didn’t know how to respond. He started answering questions for her, which earned him a dirty look that had thanks buried in it, and most of the kids moved on, the newspaper photographer asking politely to snap a shot of the two of them. He managed to catch one were Delia didn’t look like she was about to kill him, but just barely. When they were all gone, she rested her head heavily on his shoulder and made a pained noise.

“You’re a lifesaver, you know that?” He tightened the arm around her waist and smiled a little. “That kid would have sunk me.”

“You shouldn’t let the little shits like him get to you. Just pretend they’re me and let them know exactly how you feel.” He shot her a suggestive glance and chuckled softly, then noticed that the bookish kid from before was walking up to the two of them.

“What can I do for you, son?” The kid stayed quiet a moment, just staring at the two of them, before muttering his thanks and scurrying off, glancing back over his shoulder once or twice. When he spotted Delia’s quizzical gaze, he laughed and added, “It’s the cleavage.” She rolled her eyes at him and grabbed her breasts lewdly,shrugging and putting her head back down on his shoulder. “Headache, huh?” She was moving stiffly, like the day had just taken way too much out of her.

“You need to stop being more empathic than me. It’s one of my only powers, stop stealing it.” After his explosion, she’d kept her brain resolutely out of his, and it was incredible how difficult it was for her to read people without it. She’d had to reteach herself how to interact with a lover without that kind of power to rely on. Without looking away from his face, which always weirded her out when she couldn’t see his green eyes past the white film of his mask, she called out in the direction of the soft click of a camera in the back of the auditorium, “You can just leave the camera here, unless you’d like a couple new nightmares to live though.” The photographer scrambled off, the film tossed at them wildly. “Too cheap to even go digital, and he thinks we’re not going to notice him.”

“You know, I’m surprised that you even caught that he was there. I forgot I was wearing the mask, and I was doing the eye flick thing at you.” Lifting her off the stage and padding to the back of the auditorium, he crushed the canister underfoot, listening to the grind of plastic on film with a smile.

“You know how hot I get when you use superhuman strength,” she purred up at him, winking in the dim light, and they meandered out into the hallways. “So, what’s on the agenda today, besides getting punched in the face and assaulted by reporters and school kids?”

“Want to trip people out and go to that TexMex place in costume?” Waggling his brows at her, he smirked and checked the cash he had in his pocket. He could at least cover dinner, which was good, because handing over Rick’s credit card with GJ’s mask on would not be a good thing.

“Yeah, I’m up for spicy, but you know if we show up at that place in costume they’ll try to beat the crap out of us.” She shrugged and scooted out of the building as fast as she could, trying desperately to get away from bad memories as quickly as possible. So she was a coward. Oh well. “You look really good today.” He blinked at her in surprise, and she nodded slowly. “Seriously. You do. I missed waking up next to you.”
“God you’re sappy when you’re horny.” He ducked his head to steal a kiss before piling himself into her too-small by half car. Most people would see them getting into a Humvee, that at some point would turn into something else, until they could change back into civilian clothes. He handed her what amounted to a giant Wet Nap from the glove compartment so she could wipe the make up from her face. “We shoulda gone and done it in the bathroom while we were still at the high school.” He laughed when she blanched, then turned tomato red, happy to have gotten her back finally.

“You’re ridiculous,” she grumbled, rolling her eyes at him and throwing the beater into drive. “And no, I’m not letting you buy me a new car. You’re the first boyfriend to not fit successfully, I’m not giving up on her just because you’re freakishly large.” He chuckled while she seethed, and rested his big hand on her knee, closing his eyes and letting her act like a teenager as long as she wanted. Hell, by the time they got to the restaurant, it would be out of her system, and she’d be spewing Spanish at the waitress, whom they both agreed and a magnificent ass. And that was just part of the reason that he loved her.

He chatted lightly with her as she drove, and kept it up while she shimmied awkwardly out of her costume in the parking lot of the restaurant, looking away awkwardly as he did. Thinking about it, he wasn’t exactly sure why. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t seen her naked before, right? So he turned back, and caught a glimpse of a bruised rainbow across her shoulders as she yanked a hooded sweatshirt that ordered him to go climb a rock at Yosemite National Park.

“What the hell are those?” His voice was poisonous as he spat the words, his fingers pressing lightly into the wounds. She craned her neck to look back at him, eyes wide and trying desperately to be innocent, but failing miserably. His hand kept her body facing one direction and her head another, making her struggle to maintain the pose.

“Would you believe me if I told you it was fangirls?” She offered him a cheeky grin, but didn’t immediately return to her tactics of combined humor and sexual innuendo, now that it was relatively clear that they weren’t working so well. Sinking back, twisting her shoulders out from under his hands, she cursed herself for not hiding it from him.

“You were viciously attacked by angry lesbians?” He frowned viciously and tried to bite back amusement at the mental image. “How about you tell me what really happened?” He could feel the bruise on his back stiffening, from repeated impacts with concrete. He rubbed at the small of his back and stared at her, shaking his head slowly.

“How about we pretend they’re not there and enjoy the fact that we both have the evening off?” She clambered out of the car and slammed the door angrily, crossing her arms over her chest and waiting for him to get out too. He rolled out of the car like an avenging stone and looked about ready to take her head off if she didn’t tell him what had really happened. “Fine, damn you, my brother is aggressive in his arguments, ok?”

“Wait a minute, the fucker’s here?” She waved him off as he strode towards her angrily and began to stalk towards the restaurant. He had the angry, protective lover look on his face, and she didn’t feel like dealing with it at the moment. He grabbed her wrist to whirl her around and growled softly at her. “What did you let him do?”

“I didn’t let him do anything, ok? Besides, it’s not like it’s the first time it’s ever happened.” She ripped her hand from his and glared, as though that was going to help the situation. He blinked, recognizing the dark fire that was burning in her feral eyes, and
almost backed up a step, but stopped himself. “I handled it, alright? No more problem, he’s gone back to the desert for a year or two before he crawls out from under his hole to bother me again.” She turned her back and stomped through the front door of the little hole in the wall restaurant, stopping only when she saw the quizzical look on the face of the waitress. She didn’t need to turn around to know that Rick wasn’t there, and sat in a booth alone, grumbling into her fajitas about idiot men and refusing to admit that she was about two seconds away from crying. The waitress brought her a margarita without even asking if she wanted it, and sat down across from her in the late-afternoon lull, chattering aimlessly about her son with Delia, bring out pictures and tossing out words like niño and muchacho. Suddenly, looking at a picture of a sticky-faced little boy who was half inside an exploded piñata, she missed something she had not realized she had in the first place.

Rick, for his part, spent the better part of the day calming himself down, letting the rage sputter high and ebb systematically, feeling his face grow red and then pale in turns as he thought about someone hitting Delia. The idea of Kraken going through the same thing didn’t bother him as much, he realized sharply, and that alone bothered him, but he couldn’t get past the idea of his delicate-looking girlfriend getting the snot kicked out of her because he wasn’t there to keep her asshole family from beating her down. As though it was his fault that she’d been born into a group that not only didn’t understand, but also violently feared her. By the time morning was starting to think about getting itself together, he’d found himself just wishing he hadn’t left her there at the restaurant by herself, streaks of black make up still thick around her eyes like a too-sad emo high school girl. He turned his feet home, ignoring the last of the low garden walls that he’d punched in out of sheer frustration, and crawled awkwardly up the fire escape for the first time ever, almost busting the window entirely in his attempt to open it. A shower would do him good, and seeing Delia would do even better.

But she wasn’t home. Held up on her refrigerator with a magnet shaped like a penis was her work schedule for the week, a scribble written in purple pen that he could only assume was an indication that she had to be at the ME’s office that evening, well into the night. So maybe she hadn’t had as much time off the night before as she’d imagined. Or it had been a last minute call and she’d left the scribble as a completely unreadable note for him to find.

So there were hours. Hours of boring shit. Hours of sitting there waiting, because she was working, and she was rapidly becoming his only form of sanity, maybe because she was so damned unbalanced. Even so, he was an eight hundred pound gorilla to everybody else, he stared at his hands for a while, trying to figure out what he could do with himself. The apartment was long since spotless, dishes washed and put away, two rounds of Halo 2 played on the pretty white machine next to her TV. He’d left her clothes largely untouched, knowing she would kill him if he did more than wash it all for her, and that he’d already done, folding them and leaving them on the neatly made bed for her to completely undo and toss haphazardly back into drawers. It bothered him, when he let it, that she was so discombobulated that she lost her keys on an almost daily basis, but he tried not to let it affect the way he treated her too much. He didn’t always
succeed, but at least he tried, right?

He turned his attention to the new costume laid out on the kitchen counter, having arrived to him by military personnel the day previous, where he’d just dumped the thing in the corner. The spandex tights were gone, replaced by heavy rip-stop camouflage pants and heavier combat boots in olive green. The top half of the uniform was exactly the same, and he was slowly coming to realize that he really liked the new one, given the retro eighties look that it evoked. A sound at the window caught his attention and he started to fold up the pants without turning, a smile in his voice. “Hey honey, how was your...day.” He’d been feeling like June Cleaver until that last word, when he caught the dark, broken look on her face and his lips curved down into a frown, hoping he wasn’t the cause of the ache in her eyes that left a foul, twisting feeling in his gut.

“Raped. Beaten.” Disjoined words and phrases spilled out like gumballs from a kicked in machine, and she shook her head slowly. “Need shower. No. Bath. Yes. And whiskey. Lots of whiskey.” She just started stripping down out of her civilian clothes, walking towards the bathroom and leaving clothing strewn about the meticulously cleaned wood floor. He didn’t have time to be irked with her about it, stalking after her like a too-large shadow. He watched her hit the water to fill the tub, fixing it when she didn’t add any cold to make the temperature bearable, and put his hands on her shoulders when she sank down beside the toilet, retching a little, but not emptying her stomach. He slapped her hand aside and sat down in front of the basket that was under the sink when she reached for the bottle of whiskey hidden there, shaking his head and kissing her fingers. She didn’t need whiskey in her state, letting her get drunk would only make things worse in the long run, and he wanted to find out what happened before then. He resolved to find all the random stashes of liquor in the rest of the small loft and put them in a centralized location, like the back of the closet where he kept all the cleaning supplies. The likelihood of her going in there was so slim that he was pretty sure he was safe. Not that she couldn’t just buy more, but at least this way he had some hope of regulating the influx. He dug around in the bottles and boxes on the edge of the windowsill above the tub, found the lavender bath salts he’d gotten her. Noting with a grunt that they’d never been opened, he tossed a fistful in and lifted her easily into the tub.

“Thanks for hugging your knees. Makes you nice and compact. Might even be able to fit you in an overhead bin now.” He knew he was in trouble when she didn’t even shoot him a look of annoyance and disgust, just sat there with the water lapping around her ribs while he turned off the flow.

He knew this pain. Intensely and personally, like a kick to the nuts. Hero’s Remorse, he called it in his head, something that, at one time or another, every person that donned a costume and dedicated themselves to fighting crime in their off hours understood. With a sigh softer than silk, he took her hand again in his and waited for her to be ready to talk about it.

If it had been up to her, she would have operated as though she’d never seen what she saw that night, but it wasn’t entirely her choice, it turned out. Judging by the look on his face, she’d started projecting again, and she jerked her hand back as he paled visibly, his mouth falling open. She’d been on call at the ME’s office, bored out of her skull for the first few hours because she was really only there to make sure there were enough bodies. It was too damned cold for people to be doing much in the way of outside, and
that meant that while some domestic fights got bigger, the number of murders got reduced at least a little, and she was without a case load. So she was helping with tests, technically illegal since she wasn’t certified or trained, when the call came in for her to go out in the field with Spector once more and collect some bodies. What she hadn’t known, until the moment she’d gotten to the scene, was that she was looking for the bodies of two kids.

A twelve year old little girl and her eight year old brother, both sodomized with a wrench until they were bloody, then beaten to death with sharp blows of the same weapon to the back of the head. The girl had tried to protect her brother to the very end, curled around him in agonizing nakedness, aching for one another as they died. She had to leave, and so she did, not really giving a fuck any more if they fired her at that point. Spector’s pale face had floated in front of her a few times, calling her name, trying to convince her to stay, but even he had bent over in a bush before beginning the delicate process of detangling the bodies and taking them back to the office that they worked in every day, and most of the time managed to remember was a place of death and dying, most of it violent. She’d even taken a cab home, rather than getting back to the parking lot at work where the turquoise beater was parked.

Most of this flashed before his eyes in rapid succession, a chaotic film of the night’s events, but what was next was more of an emotion, the sudden memory of something that never happened to him. He wondered if this was the way that she felt all the time, touching other people’s lives for instants, feeling things that she’d never experienced and feeling ways that she despised. She’d spent the entire cab ride fighting the black Rage, as he’d begun to call it to himself, and staring at a newspaper left in the backseat, which was filled with no less than three articles on one or the both of them, complete with full color pictures.

She’d fixated on the new pants, thinking vaguely to herself that they looked far more alike with his new costume. But she’d quickly realized that regardless of all that, her emo kids would still continue to call her a sell out and Rick’s bosses would try to wrangle her, neither of which events she particularly cared for. He was pulled back to the present, rather than the horrifically disjointed experience of remembering her life, when his name fell heavily from her lips.

“I’m ok.” Her shoulders were still drooping, even as she spread out in the tub, unfurling like a flower in spring time and trying to force a smile. It didn’t take a genius to see that she was closing herself up as fast as she possibly could, rebuilding those vicious, crippling walls that he’d been trying to break down for weeks now, and he wasn’t letting her run away, just like he’d said. “Apparently he wasn’t quite ready to crawl back under his rock without a parting shot.”

“This was Derrick?” Shock dripped from his voice as he snatched her hand back and pushed her legs out of the way, his free hand pulling his shirt off over his head. She blinked and stared at his chest, half confused and half elated, buried under the frustrated and broken sorrow from seeing something like those two kids. The little plastic rings were gone... that meant no more major injections to boost his protein and add genetically modified muscle mass. No more waking up in the middle of the night with a spasming monster of a man beside her, gasping for his meds. That did not detract, however, from the fact that she had just been at a rape and murder scene perpetrated by her brother. It only made the guilt for never killing him, not protecting those children, not quite so
crippling.

She choked back a sob, hugging her knees again and hiding her face against them. She struggled to haul herself back together sharply, with an almost audible pop, and failed, only because he shucked his pants and somehow managed to fit himself into the empty part of the tub, pulling her into his lap and embracing her with too-large arms. A sob finally ripped itself raggedly from her and she shook her head again.

“She was just trying to protect her little brother, from my brother.”

“You wonder if it’s worth it sometimes.” After a few moments, he tried to offer this condolence, assure her that he had felt the same way, many times before.

“I could just engulf them all. Kill ‘em all outright so no one could hurt any more.” She wasn’t just talking about Derrick now, and he knew it, but the Rage building under her tears was real enough, and scary enough, that he just held on tighter.

“You won’t. You know it’s…wrong, despite what they do.” His hand found a home on her head, pushing her wet hair out of her face, and he kissed her brow, starting to rock back and forth on instinct alone. He thought about the blobbish mutant she’d killed, and unbidden images rose behind his closed eyelids, of a young man with light brown hair, sitting in the back of a police cruiser that was not from DC. He was drooling, his eyes rolling back as he flailed meaninglessly and issued tortured, garbled noises. Rick realized that this was another broken memory, one that she wasn’t intending on sharing with him, but was, regardless. Probing a little further, he tried not to shrink back when he realized that she’d taken the rapist’s mind from him, permanently, before he’d gotten arrested. She’d seen the young woman he’d left behind, broken and battered in an alley behind a bar, and in anger and terror she’d taken his mind as punishment. Feeling her self-loathing, he murmured softly into her ear.

“Sometimes…sometimes that needs to be done. You’ve dealt with things that are a bit more graphic than my work.” He was trying to believe it, trying to justify her actions after the fact, but he had to admit it was disturbing, knowing that she snapped like that against people, and that it had happened more than once. The fact that she was losing control as they sat there, letting memories and experiences leak into him, didn’t make him any more confident.

“When I realized what I had done, I tried to undo it. But I couldn’t. I don’t know how. He’s going to be living the rest of his life in a hospital somewhere, drooling on himself and enduring…things that I didn’t really want for him.” She was shaking now, and he hooked a finger under her chin, tilting it up slowly to claim her lips as his, marking his territory as it were. When in doubt, appeal to the only part of their relationship that had never had any problems: the physical.

Sometimes, the only way to banish the feeling of empty, debilitating pain was to fill it, and yourself, with something else.

Rick had once heard her say that she would drink him in like sunshine. He thought it was appropriate, because by the time he retreated from the bathroom, she was moving towards becoming her old self again, her smile returning, albeit hesitantly, and the life returning to her eyes. She was still moving like an octogenarian rather than a
twenty-something woman who was in better shape than was fair to the rest of the population, but at least she wasn’t looking at him with zombie eyes any more. When he realized he couldn’t narrow it down further than “twenty-something” he was bemused, wondering if they would ever have the time to get to know each other. Giving her space to take a shower, he settled, towel-clad, on the couch with a bowl of cereal that looked ridiculous, given the size of the bowl compared to his hand and the amount of whole wheat circles he had to dump into it to fill his stomach, almost overflowing the lip of the bowl.

Mostly because he’d been the last person to watch TV, when he hit the power button on the remote, Fox News filled the room with the hyper-dramatic music they usually reserved for information from Iraq or mass murders. It turned out to be the latter, the camera shaking as it panned over the terrified people streaming out of a marble building, many wounded and almost all covered in dust. When his bowl hit the floor, shattering, Delia poked her head out of the bathroom, a towel shaking over her wild hair.

“Clumsy much?” She was trying to crack a joke, that was a good sign, but when she saw the look on his face she stepped towards him. He couldn’t even recognize that she was there, couldn’t acknowledge her, just stared hard at the television and tangled his shaking fingers together, unable to rip his gaze away. She moved to stand beside him, and then sank slowly onto the couch, her hand fluttering like a moth over her mouth, hanging open. For the moment, there were a reported forty eight dead, and still more bodies were being found in the basement, where two members of a radical, unidentified group had blown themselves up, steps away from the office of the Speaker of the House. The Capitol building had been attacked while Rick had been gluing Delia back together with himself as the adhesive. A sobbing brunette that looked vaguely familiar was pleading with General Justice and the Kraken to come and save them.

“Kathryn Zylinski.” Delia breathed the name like a prayer, and he started. The woman that had been trying to get Kraken to fight her for GJ. The camera switched back to the studio in New York, and a clean cut, clinically cold anchor read off the names of eleven people found raped and murdered in a long line from Washington DC to New Orleans, where thirteen more bodies had been found. The FBI was working with local authorities to try to discover if this was one killer or merely a string of copy cat killers. Delia breathed again, and rather than burning the air with curses, which would have made Rick feel infinitely better, she just said another word. “Derrick.” Hero’s remorse his ass…this was a sucker punch for both of them, and he would be surprised if either of them managed to move successfully within the next five minutes.

“What have we done?” He glanced at her as she moaned the question, hugging her ribs tightly. “What did we do?” He grabbed at his phone and saw that he’d missed fifteen calls from his handler, wincing heavily.

“We didn’t do our jobs. But we will.” Watching her pinch the bridge of her nose, he recognized the heavy, tense look as she reached out to touch the victims of the bombing, see what she could do from that distance.

“We were fucking, and more then fifty people died.” She shoved herself to her feet and dug around in the chest in front of them both, yanking out the Kevlar and Lycra outfit and pulling on with a series of broken, disjointed movements. Her fingers traced out the pattern of black makeup without a mirror, her hair taking on that shorter, darker appearance, her eyes bright with anger and the need to go do something, an emotion that
he understood very, very well. It took him only a few minutes more than her to get ready, mostly because he couldn’t remember where he’d put his new pants.

When she had one foot out the door, he grabbed her wrist to keep her from moving out of the loft. Tears were in her eyes as she turned slowly back to him, shaking her head. She opened her mouth to say that they couldn’t do this, they couldn’t distract each other this much, if it cost innocent lives, and to keep her from speaking the words out loud he covered her lips with his, pulling her into a tight embrace.

“Don’t say it.” Releasing her, he rested his brow against hers heavily and left bruises on her ribs with the intensity of his fingers. “I love you.” She nodded slowly and stepped out the window, pulling him along.

Everyone dons masks to face the world, every single day. They lie to each other, they try to trick and cheat their way out of being real, being a character instead. But it takes a new breed to put on a mask and not lie. To be honest and good and face down those that would kill civilians, those that would destroy what the rest work so hard to build.

But two of those people in donned masks to the outside world, and were naked to one another. Two of those people spent of themselves and their love to shield others from the horrors of the world, the fear and the anger and the hatred that people have for one another when they feel wronged. The insanity of killing another person was held at bay by a thin strip of red cloth and black makeup. But the question remained: how many lives could they save, and would theirs be included?