Part VII: Immigration

The next hours are a complete blur for Colleen. First, she goes to the hospital and the doctors want to take pictures her broken arm. They put her in a room, arrange her arm, leave, and then turn on a machine.

The machine bombards her with electromagnetic radiation and those horrible little bits. She can feel her electrons getting shifted around and the high-energy radiation gives her a massive headache. Colleen panics and starts screaming.

This is not the normal response for people in radiology, so the nurses and technicians are understandably alarmed. They deactivate the X-ray and run in to check on the patient. She’s not visibly injured, but her physical reaction suggests that she is in distress. A nurse administers a relaxant, and the technician tries to get her to tell him what is happening.

She babbles desperately about her fields and about the bits and about interference. The technician checks the film, and while the X-ray was on long enough to capture an image, Colleen moved around too much. The image is blurry and unusable. And Colleen is still panicking. One of the nurses leaves and returns with Tachyon, who had stayed with her throughout her time in the E.R.

Tachyon touches Colleen on the shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

She takes a shuddering breath and says, “That thing was sending out bits, the bits that interfere with my fields. It hurts so, so bad.”

“The bits.... the X-ray photons?”

She nods, biting her lower lip and wincing. “It’s just like what Energy does,” she whispers. Tachyon can tell that Colleen isn’t just being dramatic. Her entire body is quivering, and she’s reflexively tensing her hands. And the way she mentions Energy... at least some of her reaction must be psychological. She files this information away for future discussion.

“Are your fields damaged, or are they sorting themselves out?”

Colleen blushes, suddenly embarrassed about her overreaction. “They’re getting better. It’s just when that thing is on.”

Tachyon pats her on the shoulder and turns back to the nurses. “If you have to take the X-rays, you’ll need to do it with her anesthetized, because I don’t think you’ll get her to sit still.”

This solution is mutually agreed upon, and Colleen wakes up a few hours later with a brand-new cast. She’s taken back to Freedom Five HQ, where someone has arranged for a cot for her to sleep on.

Legacy comes in to check on her. “Hi, Colleen. How’re you feeling?” He’s holding a bag from the drug store⎯Colleen’s prescription pain meds. “The doctor said that you should take one if you feel bad.” There had already been a careful discussion about whether Colleen had ever been exposed to prescription drugs⎯the general consensus was that they couldn’t assume she’d know what to do with anything⎯so Legacy and the others are going to dispense them to her rather than let her take them herself.

“I’m okay.” She looks down at her hands.

He watches her with a concerned smile as she examines her cuticles closely. Meredith gave him a report of the X-ray misadventure, and she seemed particularly worried about the reference to Energy. He never doubted her desire to escape the Citizens, but Legacy is beginning to see that rescuing her will take more just a few thrown punches. But it’s worth it. It’s worth it because she could be so helpful or so dangerous, depending on the direction she chooses to take herself. Also, more importantly, it’s worth the effort because she deserves to have a chance at a normal life. Most of the time, Legacy just saves a person from immediate danger and assumes that they go on about their business. Not this one.

As for how to help her, well the world always seems grimmer when you’re hungry. “Hey, I could go for a snack. You interested in a sandwich?”

She looks up at him, making eye contact for the first time. “...Do you have peanut butter?”

He nods. “I think so. And some grape jelly.”

Her eyes light up. “I *love* peanut butter and jelly. But, are you sure it’s okay?”

He blinks in confusion. “I don’t think the doctors said anything about what you could or couldn’t eat....”

“I mean, are you sure it’s okay for me to share your peanut butter? If you’d rather not....”

It takes Legacy a second to grasp the importance of what she’s saying. “Oh... it’s processed food. I guess you guys didn’t get it all that often on the island.” He smiles at her. “Don’t worry about that. Peanut butter is easily procured. We have grocery stores around here.”

The word triggers something in Colleen’s mind, Legacy can tell. A genuine smile slowly crosses her face. “I remember those. I used to go with my dad and sit in the cart.” She loses herself in the memory, picturing the fluorescent lighting, the squeaky wheels, the endless shelves. “I think I’d like to go to the grocery store, someday.”

Legacy manages to avoid being condescending. “I think we can arrange that. Now how ‘bout that sandwich?”

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Colleen searches through the refrigerator with trepidation. It’s the next morning, and she’s been given full rein over the HQ kitchen. The island had its own food supply, all of it fresh meat, fruits, and vegetables, but occasionally, someone would bring in a bunch of processed foods. The newer arrivals would gush over how happy they were to finally get to eat cereal again, but Colleen never fully got it. She knows objectively that at some point in her life she’d been a normal person and must have eaten cereal. But that entire phase of her life is a vague and distance memory. Thinking about the grocery store led to the most concrete recollection she’d had in years.

The upshot of all of this is that she doesn’t recognize half the foods in the cabinets. After some pondering, she selects an orange to eat. Then bacon catches her eye. Bacon wasn’t unheard of on the island, but it was a laborious process to manufacture. Grinning, she pulls the package out.

“Nice choice.” Colleen jumps and snaps to attention. Tachyon is leaning against the door, smiling at her. “Bacon’s my fav too.”

“Citi- uh, Tachyon, hello. May I have permission to eat some bacon? And an orange?” Colleen winces inwardly; she almost called her “Citizen Tachyon.”

Tachyon catches the slip too. “You can just call me Meredith. And I’m sure Legacy would want you to call him Paul. And of course you can. Everything in that fridge is fair game.” She winks. “Bought and paid for by the taxpayers of the United States. Though if you’re cooking bacon, could you toss a few strips in for me?”

Colleen smiles. “Of course. I wouldn’t make food in front of someone without sharing it. That would be rude.”

Tachyon (sorry, Meredith) watches Colleen figure out the electric range. It takes her a few seconds, but she’s clearly cooked before. She puts the bacon in the pan cold before turning the burner on, just like she ought to.

“Can I ask you a question? What’s... daily life like out on the island?”

Colleen doesn’t turn away from the bacon but answers readily, “Well, we have electricity, thanks to solar panels, but usually just for lightbulbs. We have to... procure everything we can’t make ourselves, and these things,” she pats the stove, “are too cumbersome for everyone to have one.”

“So no refrigeration either?”

Colleen pokes a strip of bacon with a fork. “Well, not like that over there. But Citizen Winter does a decent job with food preservation. Sometimes I help out with the electricity, charge the batteries, but generally we just let the sun do the work.” She blushes. “It’s kinda our thing, you know.”

Meredith smiles inwardly. “Yeah, I guess it would be. What about chores? Seems like there’s a lot of work to be done and Dawn never struck me as the ‘get your hands dirty’ type.”

“Oh, we have human servants for that,” Colleen explains casually. “Well... I mean the important Citizens do. I’ve never been active duty, so I never warranted servants. I did most of my work myself.”

Meredith clears her throat, wondering how best to address this. “Colleen, those human servants... where did they come from?”

Colleen stiffens and puts the fork down very carefully. Her hand trembles slightly, but enough for Meredith to see it. “They were taken, as needed.” Images of a large hut with bare bones facilities and people tied to poles flash across Colleen’s mind. She remembers opening the door one day, out of curiosity. The smell, the expressions of terror, Bold slamming the door shut, the pain for her disobedience, the memory-blanking. She starts to cry.

Meredith is instantly right behind her, guiding her to a chair. “You know what? I just realized that I like my bacon a very certain way. You mind if I take over?” Meredith tends to the bacon, keeping a watchful eye on Colleen, who seems to be crumbling emotionally.

Once the bacon finishes, she sets a plate in front of the girl, who thanks her and eats the bacon in silence. Meredith isn’t sure what to think about that little moment. First, she was talking about kidnapped slaves like it was the most normal thing in the world, and then she collapsed into a pile of jelly at the very thought.

No, strike that. Meredith is entirely certain what to think: Paul’s right. The girl is a fundamentally good person who’s had her head screwed with so much that she can’t see straight. Frightening, but also fixable.

“...What am I supposed to do now?” Colleen asks quietly.

Meredith thinks. “Well, for the moment, I guess we just want you to get adjusted. Maybe we’ll try to find you a place to live on your own, get you a job. Did you have school on the island?”

Colleen frowns, “Er, not really. I know how to read, and they’d bring back books sometimes, but no one really taught us. I learned math from a calculus book someone stole accidentally, and I guess I picked up some history from a few places. But I haven’t been to school since I was nine.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to work on that. I know I have some physics and chemistry textbooks in my office, and I bet you’ll enjoy those.” Colleen nods enthusiastically.

“Knock, knock!” Two younger girls peep around the door into the kitchen. Meredith rolls her eyes.

“Felicia. Devra. Don’t you have other things you’re supposed to be doing? Other places you’re supposed to be?” she asks.

The girls ignore the question and come into the kitchen. Felicia puts a cardboard box on the table and they both collapse into chairs.

The brunette shrugs. “We heard there was a new girl, and we figured she’d need someone to keep her company. It’d get so boring here by yourself.” She grins at Colleen. “I’m Unity, or Devra, but Unity.”

The blonde girl waves. “And I’m Felicia. I brought you some clothes, toiletries, make-up, girl stuff. I figured you’d rather have that than work-out gear.” She pushes the box toward Colleen.

Colleen cautiously peers into the box and touches the fabric of a sweater. She looks up again. “For me?”

Felicia nods, “Yeah, sure. They might be a little big.... We’ll have to go shopping, but it should tide you over.”

Colleen’s lip trembles slightly. Unity, ever cheerful, ignores the impending emotional breakdown and asks, “Has anyone given you the tour yet?” Colleen shakes her head.

With that, the three girls head off to give Colleen a full rundown of the Freedom Five HQs. Meredith notes in her PDA to look into the human servants Colleen talked about and wonders what other bits of information she might let slip. She also reminds herself to check on getting books for Colleen. If the girl taught herself calculus, she’s clearly intelligent. But she’s starting out way behind. A pity that the New World Order doesn’t seem to think that academic knowledge is worth keeping.

But this is good. There are concrete goals. Things to focus her on outside the fear and newness and programming she’d received. Meredith smiles inwardly. Maybe she’ll even be able to make some contributions to our understanding of the physical universe.

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The next morning, Brian slowly wakes himself up. He wants to blame his sluggishness on the pain meds and his injuries. He’s fresh out of the hospital after having surgery to repair his ankle, and now he’s in a walking boot (hooray for modern medical advances). Even with the boot though, he’s severely limited in his mobility, and the trip from his bed to the bathroom is an arduous one.

But Brian knows the real reason he’s lost his initiative. Well, it’s two-fold. For one thing, he’s dreading going into work today and facing the music. And there *will* be music. Sure, he got commendations from F.I.L.T.E.R. and Legacy himself for his “heroic actions” in the Block prison riot (never mind that he was primarily trying to keep from dying). But he wasn’t supposed to be there in the first place/

He’d directly contravened orders and interfered in the Mosley case after being told to stay away. This is going to end poorly. The commendations make him unfireable, but there are so, so many things that his bosses could do besides fire him. Well... given that he’s already in Missing Persons, there aren’t many places he could go as punishment. But he’s certain something official is in the pipeline. And that’s not to mention the unofficial stuff. So yeah, work’s gonna be hell.

The other thing that’s been weighing on him is this massive feeling of anticlimax. The Citizen attack had been over so fast that it barely registered, but this past adventure in the prison.... He’d been terrified⎯his life was in real and immediate jeopardy several times. He’d had adrenaline pulsing through his veins. His heart had raced. He’d saved lives. Hell, he’d *felt* alive for the first time. And now everything seems gray and dull in comparison. As part of his rehab, he was seeing a police counselor (he *had* shot someone, and even though it was clear defense of others, counseling is mandatory), and the counselor talked about PTSD. Brian knows that he doesn’t have PTSD; he has PTBD⎯post traumatic boredom disorder.

So he brushes his teeth without the worry that someone would try to kill him, and he makes toast and eggs without having to battle ninjas. He butters his toast and munches it ruminatively. There must be something wrong with him, he concludes. No one walks away from a life-or-death situation and says “More, please.” That’s just crazy.

His phone buzzes the text message alert noise. He glances at it. “Hiu Beiam its colkeen jusr hot a anertphone diest tezt eber.” He blinks, then translates: “Hi Brian, it’s Colleen. Just got a smartphone. First text ever.” He smiles and replies: “Maybe you should try turning the phone sideways so that the keyboard is bigger. Also, autocorrect is your friend.” She replies: “Oh this is much better thanks”. He decides to discuss punctuation later. She texts him again, “Meredith made a special sleeve for my phone so i dont fry it on accident.” He responds, “That’s good. Remind me to never loan you my phone.”

By the time he reaches the precinct, she’s sent him seven increasingly hilarious text messages, extolling the joys of indoor plumbing, restaurants, DVDs, the Internet, and Angry Birds. He’s glad to see that at least one of them is adjusting to their new reality well.

He’s called into the shift lieutenant’s office immediately. Brian isn’t surprised and is even glad to get it over with. He sits in a chair across from the lieutenant’s desk and braces himself for the end of his career.

“Detective Bender,” the lieutenant says his name like it tastes bad, “you are one lucky son of a bitch.” He passes a folder over to Brian. “Legacy himself just requested you for a detail they’re opening up with the Freedom Five as a ‘law enforcement liaison.’ We aren’t gonna say no, because frankly, we’re relieved to get you out of our hair. Sign those papers and you’re officially no longer an employee of the Megalopolis Police Department and are instead working for the Freedom Five and the US government.”

This comes across as an order. Brian flips open the file and glances at the document. “That easy, huh?”

The lieutenant snorts. “‘That easy.’ You have no idea what you just got out of. The deputy chief of operations wants your head, the Meta Unit wants your head, and from what I heard, your uncle is washing his hands of you entirely. You sign those papers or you’re walking the beat again. I’ve been a cop for twenty years and I’ve never met someone so incapable of following orders. You’re a disgrace to the department, is what you are, and if the government wants you, so be it.”

Brian signs his name. “Yeah, I bet I am a disgrace. I don’t ever do things the way you like and I still get results.”

The lieutenant takes the file back and stares at Brian evenly. “Let me set you straight there, you cocky son of a bitch, the rules that you hold with such disdain are the only things that keep good cops from getting killed. You know the reason I’ve never seen anyone as bad at directions as you? Because those people get killed before they have a chance to reach your level of achievement in insubordination. I have literally no idea how you’ve managed it this long, but I hope that you actually realize how very unlikely it is. And I wouldn’t be too cocksure going into your new assignment either. The stakes are just getting higher, and if you bring that same ‘I don’t give a shit’ attitude with you to supervillains, you are gonna end up dead. And I’m not kidding. So yeah, you get results. I hope you keep getting results. But don’t let it go to your head.”

Brian is wordlessly dismissed and he leaves to gather his things. He promises Corcoran that he’ll keep in touch⎯he wouldn’t miss their weekly beer meet-up for the world anyway⎯and packs up his desk. The lieutenant’s speech shook him, and his prediction reverberates in Brian’s head. When he first heard the news, he was elated that he was being pulled out of this dead-end job and given a chance to actually do what he became a cop to do. Now, he’s starting to feel like he just got called up to the bigs and isn’t sure his pitching game can stand up to the major league hitters. He reminds himself that Legacy wouldn’t have asked for him if he didn’t think he could do the work, and besides, he’s gonna be a “liaison.” That’s official code for “desk jockey.”

He leaves the precinct without glancing back and takes the train to report for his new position.

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Paul Parsons has the patience of a saint. This is objectively true. He’s spent the past five hours looking at every available apartment in Megalopolis. They got an early start though, and he’s hoping they’ll be done before the whole afternoon is gone too.

He’s accompanying Colleen in her hunt for a place to stay. She has what he thinks is a generous budget for a twenty-four year old girl, and he doesn’t actually begrudge her the pickiness. For one thing, security is a real, tangible issue for her. So no buildings without doormen⎯not even a buzzer would work since someone intent on entering can always find a well-meaning neighbor to trick. Higher the floor the better⎯Colleen doesn’t need to worry about fire escape routes, since she can just get out through a window⎯but not the top floor, several Citizens could pound their way through the ceiling. Speaking of windows, they can’t be too big, lest someone shoot them out. It needs central air so that she won’t have to open windows in warm weather. No fireplaces or fire escapes either. The deadbolt (or four) on the door can be added later, Paul acknowledges.

....Actually, the more Paul thinks about it, the worse and worse this idea seems. Maybe he could clear out some rooms in the Freedom Five HQ. Or he could finally get around to converting his basement at home into a full apartment.

But then he watches her opening closets and drooling over counter space (in a kitchen that seems the size of a postage stamp), he softens. Of *course* she needs her own space. She’s an adult for the love of Pete. And the idea of telling her, “For your own safety, you have to live at HQ” sends chills down his spine.

Paul can see that she’s wilting at the headquarters. She asks permission for *everything*, even for things like going to the bathroom or going to sleep. She minimizes her interactions with everyone and avoids all contact with Tyler and Ryan. Well, Ryan is understandable, but poor Tyler is going to wonder if he has a disease. In any event, Paul wants to avoid any implication that Colleen is being held against her will. It’s a tough balance to strike.

Right now, they’re in a doorman building, on the fifth floor of seven, no fire escape, tiny windows, central air. Plus hardwood floors and architectural details (his wife watches HGTV with religious dedication). Anything a young woman setting out on her own could want. But he can tell that Colleen isn’t pleased.

“Well? What do you think?” he asks as he examines the pipes beneath the sink⎯he’s fairly handy and can tell when someone’s been doing a bad job fixing things up.

“No. This won’t work.”

He looks up at her. “Why not?” Someone else might start getting annoyed at this point, but Paul remains genuinely calm.

“No elevator.”

He frowns. “Colleen, if you’re worried about moving heavy things... well you shouldn’t be.”

She runs her fingers along the frame of the kitchen door, ignoring Paul. “And the doors are too narrow.”

It hits him. “You want some place your dad can live too.” She nods silently. This is news to him. She hadn’t mentioned her father since Detective Bender brought him up in the interrogation room. “Colleen, you haven’t seen him since you got back. Do you want to? We can go when we’re done here.”

Colleen shakes her head. “No... not yet.”

“Mind if I ask why not?” She just shrugs and looks away. Paul ponders for a moment. “You’re afraid.” Her silence confirms. “Afraid he’ll be angry.” His heart breaks for her, and for her father. He’s a father himself, and if Felicia had been taken away....

Colleen tears up. “I left him, betrayed him. He won’t want to have anything to do with me.”

“Citizen Bold told you that, I’d guess.”

“He was being honest. My father hated them both and I went with them anyway.”

Paul rests his hands on her upper arms. “Colleen, I’m a dad too, and I promise you, he isn’t angry. He’s scared and misses you terribly and will be so happy to see you.” Several emotions fight across Colleen’s face, and he makes a mental note to ask Vanessa for her opinion on brainwashing.

Anger and sorrow give way to guilt. “...Maybe he won’t be mad about that, but I also failed him.”

He inhales deeply and closes his eyes. “How did you fail him?”

“I didn’t protect him.”

“When he had his accident.., that your mother caused? You were seven years old, no one could expect you to be able to prevent that.”

Colleen looks away, her lower lip trembling. “I’m just not ready, okay?”

Paul nods. She probably does need some space to work through whatever they did to her. And she’s clearly open to the potential for a relationship. After all, she is picking her apartment based on his needs. There’s hope yet. “Alright, well I’ve got another listing for an apartment in the neighborhood, shall we try that?”

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A man around his age in a military uniform greets Brian when he reaches Freedom Five HQ. He extends his hand and introduces himself, “I’m Lieutenant Tyler Vance. I pilot the Bunker suit and try to keep things sane around here. I take it you’re on board?”

The reality of the situation hits Brian⎯he’s *actually* going to work with the Freedom Five. “Yeah, I’m in. Don’t fully understand what I’ll be doing, but I’m in.”

Vance nods and cracks a disarming smile. “I think we’ll find something for you to do. Let’s get the tour started.”

They spend about thirty minutes getting Brian acquainted with the facilities. Vance introduces Brian to everyone they come across.

“I’m Vanessa,” says one young woman with... no hair⎯Brian tries not to stare. “It’s *such* a relief to get someone else to help with the precog duties. I’m glad you’re on board.”

Brian blinks. “I’m sorry?”

“Precog duties. Seeing what’s coming up. It’s rough being the only one who can do it, as I’m sure you know, so it’ll be nice to have someone else to pick up the slack.”

“Sorry, I don’t understand. Are you talking about me?”

Vanessa smiles, “Of course I am. You. Precognition. Don’t feel bad if you can’t do other psychic things, I’m sure you’re a crack shot too. That’ll be just as helpful.”

“Listen, I’m not here because I’m a metahuman. I’m just here to do cop things.” He glances at Vance for confirmation. Vance shrugs.

Her eyes widen. “You don’t know?”

“Wait a minute, are you actually saying that I *am* a metahuman?”

“Certainly I am. You have a highly-developed sixth sense. It probably feels like luck or intuition to you. Think hard. How many times have you known things that you shouldn’t have been able to know? Are you ever *wrong*? How’s your aim? Aren’t you always right on target, no matter how tricky the shot is? In dangerous situations, don’t you find it easier to think, rather than harder? Like you have all the time in the world to work things out.”

If Brian were in a movie, there would be a reverse tracking zoom shot on him right now. There’s rushing in his ears and everything seems to melt away. The luck. The gut. The ability to read people and situations. Hell, everything that happened in the prison lab. How could he have been so dense, there’s *no way* he should have been able to find exactly what he needed exactly when he needed it. And Colleen⎯he was right about her even when it made no sense. Shoot, he dreamed about her, getting her voice right without ever meeting her.

“Maybe you should sit down.” Vance grips his arm.

“No, I’m fine. It just... it just makes sense.”

Vanessa rolls her eyes. “Of course it makes sense. It’s right.”

“How did you know?”

She sighs. “I’m a psychic too, you think I don’t recognize one when I see one?”

“I didn’t recognize *you*.”

“That’s probably because you let your sixth sense operate at a subconscious level. Like... how you stop feeling your clothes on your body unless something weird happens, you just take in all this information all the time and quickly process it without conscious awareness, unless something catches your attention. You’ve learned over time what is worthy of attention and what isn’t. I bet you had some serious ADD problems as a kid though.”

Brian nods. Right again. So, everything he’s ever been good at (manly being a cop) he’s only good at it because he’s a psychic. And here he thought he was intelligent, capable, highly-trained. Brian frowns.

“Oh, don’t sell yourself short, Detective. Your intuition would have adapted to whatever profession you chose. Had you gone into investment banking, you’d have been a stock-picker extraordinaire. You had to learn what things are important for a cop to notice for the powers to pick up on them, so your work wasn’t a waste of time. Your power supplements your training and hard work, not the other way around.”

Vance grins. He’s becoming more and more accustomed to working with powered individuals, and he’s frankly excited to have a new one joining the team. “But let’s face it, you’ll be doing a lot more good with us than with the cops.” He winks saucily. “We don’t worry so much about probable cause or preserving the chain of evidence, so if you say ‘Hey, my gut says that the bad guy is over there,’ I for one won’t question you.”

A tiny mechanical hornet bearing an index card flies up to them. Vance gives an exasperated sigh and takes the card. “Thanks, Beebot,” he says politely.

“Why do you always insist on thanking them?” Vanessa asks. Her question has the tenor of a long-standing debate.

“Because, us mechanical things gotta stick together. Unity says that Paul wants to see you in his office, Brian, when you get the chance.”

The bot flies away again and Brian heads down the hall⎯not getting lost, thanks, powers!⎯to Legacy’s office. He knocks politely.

“Come on in!”

The office is cheerful and inviting. Legacy has an “America’s Finest Dad” mug and pictures of his family. Brian sits in a seat.

“Well, what do you think?”

“Er, sir, I’ve already signed my life away, so I’m in no matter what.”

Legacy nods thoughtfully. “You can call me Paul, particularly around here. And that’s not a rhetorical question.”

Brian takes a deep breath. “Oooh kay, well, it’s really impressive. I didn’t realize that so many heroes were actually involved with the Freedom Five.”

Paul smiles. “Yeah, technically it’s just the five of us, but you know, some threats just require a certain mix of abilities. And I’d hate to see someone face down a massive threat all alone.”

“Speaking of abilities....”

“Oh, did you speak with Vanessa?”

“Yeah, I did. You knew?”

“I had some suspicions. I asked her to confirm them. Not that I didn’t believe you, I just figured you had to have *some* kind of power. No one’s that lucky.”

Brian exhales. Now’s the moment of truth. “Well, I got some advice today that I’d be stupid to ignore.”

“Which was?”

“He basically said that I’d get killed getting mixed up with costumes, though he was operating under the assumption that my luck wouldn’t hold out and my obstinacy would do it in the end. He didn’t realize that the luck made me a costume.”

Paul smiles at the use of the word “costume,” knowing full well that it isn’t precisely a term of endearment. “So are you questioning our ability to keep you alive or your own ability to keep from royally messing up?”

Brian makes a wry face. “Neither. I... need to figure out how to use this better if I’m gonna be any good to you guys. So, before you page me next time something tries to break out of a nether dimension, let me get a better handle on what I can do.”

“No problem. We don’t even use pagers. Seriously though, I do have an assignment for you that I think will be right up your alley.” Brian raises his eyebrow. If he asks him to track down Spite, he’s walking out the door and never ever ever coming back. “Colleen is moving into a new apartment on Saturday. We need surveillance on her. You’ve got the training and the intuition.” And the hots for her, Paul adds mentally, which is a plus.

“We talkin’ 24/7?”

“We’re going to set up a rotation for later times. I’ve got friends in law enforcement who owe me favors, and frankly, keeping the Citizens from using her to nuke the city ought to be a high priority. Don’t worry, I’ll be available, in case you run into something you can’t handle.”

“You think that the Citizens will come for her?”

Paul frowns. “The five who attacked us in the hallway got out. If nothing else, they’ll report back to Dawn. They aren’t known to look kindly on defectors. My guess is they’ll send someone to work out where she stands and try to get her back by any means necessary. They probably won’t try here, but when she’s on her own, she’ll be a sitting duck.”

“Hence the honor guard.”

“Exactly.”

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Colleen picks up the beaker and swirls the liquid inside, pondering its contents. With a smile, she starts rearranging atoms. Organic chemistry is so much fun. Those six rings⎯carbon, she reminds herself⎯are so elegant.

Meredith had been amazed the first time she saw Colleen create water. Colleen thought that was silly, making water is the easiest thing in the world. Well, after making ammonia⎯nitrogen is everywhere. (Not that the island needed much help growing food with its tropical climate, but she did provide a steady supply of fertilizer. Guess they’ll have to steal that now.) Meredith gave her some books to look at, and the books opened up a world of possibilities. After a few hours with an advanced organic chemistry textbook, Colleen was churning out oligosaccharides and playing around with molecular structure to see how far she can go. Molecules are relaxing. Hydrogen bonds barely need any effort at all. Just a nudge.

After a minute, her liquid is now a cup of sucrose. Unity is bouncing on her heels, her hands shoved in her pockets. “Is it ready?”

Colleen hands over the sugar. “Save me a few of the cookies. I’m about to head home.”

“Sure thing! Thanks.”

Colleen watches Unity run off with a smile. Everyone here is so nice. Well... pretty much everyone. A few people are hard to get to know. But not Brian. She looks around. Brian is usually waiting for her by now. He pokes his head in her little lab. “You ready?”

They walk to Colleen’s apartment in silence, Brian standing very close to her in case of trouble. Colleen’s been moved in a few days, and the place already feels like home. She’d had no furniture, of course, but Paul had said that he could probably find an old couch or something. Next thing she knew, she had a fully furnished and stocked apartment, most of it brand new. Colleen isn’t stupid, she knows that they all had bought her stuff. She isn’t entirely sure what she’d done to warrant all the positive attention, but, for the first time in her life, she feels entirely certain that there are no strings attached. ...Unless you count “Please don’t blow up Megalopolis” as a string.

She waves bye and smiles at her doorman (Paul got what he wanted with that one). She takes the elevator up and unlocks her door. She turns the lights on.

“Hello, darling.” Sitting on her lovely new couch is a man with silver hair and a well-tanned face. Conventionally handsome, thoroughly charming.

“Cit..cit..Citizen Bold. Hello.”

He smiles and stands up. Colleen feels the familiar warm, happy sensation washing over her. Oh, thank goodness that Bold is here....

“Enjoying life among the humans?”

Yes, Colleen thinks. Much more that I enjoyed life with you. He’s doing that thing, Colleen. “It’s not so bad. And the heroes are....”

Bold is four inches from her face, glaring down at her. “The heroes?” The warm, happy sensation turns bad. His psychic energy sears down on her and she quails.

The heroes are idiots, sheep of the worst kind. Weak. Living here in this apartment is weak. Colleen should be ruling the world, not playing Suzy Homemaker. Letting herself get bought off like this is disgraceful. She ought to make them all bow, and if they won’t bow, they’ll scream.

Her dad is alive. He misses her. That thought hits Colleen like a fresh breeze.

“Awful, base people. Petty squabblers, the lot of them. Morally decrepit and weak.” Colleen parrots the words back, but for the first time in her life, she realizes that she’s choosing not to believe them.

Still, sweat runs down her back. He’s pressing hard, and the urge to buckle is almost overwhelming. It’s so much easier than fighting, to just go along.

Bold strokes her cheek, gazing at her fondly. His powers work so much better if he can avoid cognitive dissonance. So, he has to outwardly play the part he’s inwardly pushing. In Colleen’s case, the devoted father, strict⎯the scars on her arms and legs would attest to that⎯but ultimately working for her good. He presses her head into his chest and speaks into her hair, “Why the distance, my girl? We used to be so close.” Memories of how close they’d been come to Colleen’s mind. At the time, it had seemed natural, desirable. Now she’s seeing it with the cold light of objectivity, and it makes her sick. “Father-daughter team, inseparable, unstoppable.”

It is in that moment that he lost her, and he realizes it. Shouldn’t have pushed on the father thing. Of course, recognizing that she’s being manipulated isn’t the same thing as getting out without getting hurt. Avoiding cognitive dissonance might be necessary for long-term, subtle control, but he can go for a more vicious approach in times of need.

He tightens his grip on her arm and shoves his will onto hers. She sinks to the ground, whimpering. He sees her try to use her powers, so he cuts her off. He’s in total control of her mind, at least for a short while.

“None of that, my dearest. Now I was instructed to convince you to come home, barring that, to take you home by force. But frankly, given your resistance and your apparent willingness to help our enemies, I might even be justified in killing you. Can’t have you fighting *against* the citizenry.”

He looks around and spots the pain meds on the kitchen table. “Ah, like these.” He drags her by the wrist to the bottle and pours a handful out. “How about I have you swallow these? The stress of breaking free of those horrible, horrible Citizens was just too much for poor, sweet Colleen.” His voice drips with malice and scorn, nothing like the charming man he was before. “And what do you think that would do to all your heroic friends? Devastate them, I’m sure.”

The phone rings. “I have to answer that. They’ll freak out if I don’t.”

Bold considers for a second and realizes she’s right. He passes the phone to her.

Colleen picks it up with her other hand and checks the name before answering. “Hey Brent, you confirming our plans tonight?”

Brian needs only a second to realize something’s wrong. “Colleen, is someone with you?”

“Yeah, maybe something like that.”

“Is it a citizen?”

“I don’t know, I just feel like something special. Maybe I’m feeling nostalgic.”

“Citizen Bold.”

“It’s a date.”

Colleen hangs up. “...Don’t make him find me dead,” she begs without meeting Bold’s eyes.

Bold twirls her into his arms, hugging her tight against his chest. He breathes into her ear, “Oh, is this Brent a special one? Maybe I’ll have a surprise in store for him too. Oh, darling, don’t fret. You’ll enjoy it. I promise.”

Across the street, in a coffee shop, Brian abandons his table and races across the street, dodging traffic. He sends a brief text to Legacy, just an “SOS,” but he realizes that this is probably all on him. ...After all, the guy’s a psychic. Brian’s a psychic. It’s almost karma.

He races past the doorman and takes the stairs two at the time. He shoulders the door open and raises his gun.

Colleen is being kissed⎯deeply⎯by an older man. He breaks off the kiss slowly and strokes her arm possessively before turning to Brian. “Ah, the hero, come to save the day. Is there a problem, officer?”

Brian grimaces. “Let. Her. Go.”

“Or what, you’ll shoot me? Why don’t you swallow your own gun instead? Colleen can take her pills, it’ll be a real Romeo and Juilet end to this farce.”

Brian is vaguely aware of something brushing against his mind, like a vague recollection that he can’t hold on to, and then smiles. “Was that it?”

For a split second, Bold’s sneer breaks. He swiftly recovers. “You’re a psychic. Well then, you’re not going to shoot me because I’m unarmed and you *know* I’m unarmed.”

The two of them stare each other down for several seconds. Brian notices a drop of sweat running down Bold’s forehead. Is he... nervous? No, not nervous. He’s straining himself. He checks Colleen’s face. Her expression is blank, and her eyes are dead. Bold might be straining himself, but he’s got Colleen tight. If Brian could just break his concentration...

“Feeling the pressure, Bold?” Brian steps forward and speaks conversationally. Colleen’s hand, still holding the pills, trembles slightly, but Bold can’t make it move any more than that. He’s openly sweating now.

“Yeah,” Brian continues. “You’re definitely slipping. I think I can see that you’re balding, and is that a bit of belly flub? Not the handsome operator you like to project, are you? Must be rough, keeping up the illusion all the time. And with the Citizens.” Brian whistles. “It’s dog-eat-dog over there. I bet everyone’s just waiting for people to slip up, and you don’t have the kind of powers that they’d respect.”

“Idiot boy, I am respected, because I destroy anyone who dares defy me. Just ask Citizen Fortune,” Bold snarls.

Colleen blinks. “...My mother was killed on a raid.”

Bold gives her a look of searing condescension. “Your mother bored me, so I ordered her to walk in front of some bullets. Shut up, or it will be you next.” Her eyes snap into focus.

Bold winces, and then crumples to the floor when Colleen knees him between the legs. Without his charm, Bold is the exact opposite of a threat. Brian whips out his cuffs and restrains Bold.

Legacy and a few MPD officers arrive a few minutes later. Legacy apologizes, but Brian has a feeling that he was being given the chance to prove himself. The cops lead Bold away, and an hour later he’s released on his own recognizance.

And from a nearby rooftop, a purple light glows.