Part VIII: Jus soli

Back at Freedom Five HQ, Colleen curls up on the bed in the room she’d stayed the week before. She’s crying, and she isn’t entirely sure why. She knows it couldn’t be for her mother. For one thing, her mother has been dead for years now, and knowing how she died really doesn’t change that fact one bit. Also, she hates her mother and thinks that she might have deserved to get murdered by Bold after all she let him do to them. Then she realizes why she’s crying. She’s crying because she can’t hate her mother, not really. No matter where she goes, not matter what happens to her from now on, the burden of her mother, of all that the woman did to her, of everything that she allowed to happen, will never ever leave Colleen. And she can’t hate her for it. She can’t help but wish that she’d survived a little longer, long enough to get free of Bold. Maybe then, maybe away from his influence, she’d be able....

No, that’s stupid, Colleen. Fortune wouldn’t love her, Fortune never could. Colleen is imperfect, scarred. Some are visible, most are not. Either way, those scars mark her a fundamentally different than everyone else. She can’t be like other people. And now she can’t forget that, not again. She’d tasted freedom and joy in the past week, and her past shows up to remind her how those things are for other people, never her. She knows that the girl her father loved is dead, and only a shell remains. They saved her body, but her soul is so long gone that she barely remembers it.

There’s a knock on the door, and Brian opens it. “...We figured out that Bold got to your doorman. That’s how he got in.”

Colleen glances up at Brian, backlit in the doorway. He risked his life and his sanity to come help her. That’s something she isn’t going to be able to repay. “Thank you,” she whispers.

“I just wanted you to know, so you would feel safe going back...”

“No, thank you for coming.”

Brian leans one hand against the doorframe. His tone is surprised. “Of course I was going to come. What, you think I’d just leave you there?”

Colleen doesn’t respond, but her silence suggests that she would not have blamed him. Brian walks into the room and kneels by the bed. “Colleen, I...*like* you. I wasn’t going to let you get hurt. Not by him, not by anyone.”

Colleen’s lips twitch slightly, but she says nothing. Brian pulls her phone out of his pocket. “Before I forget, you left this behind. I... er put a playlist on too, of songs that I thought you might like.[[1]](#footnote-1) I’d guess you’re not quite up-to-date on pop music, huh?”

Colleen takes the phone from Brian, frowns for a second, then gives him a genuine smile. “You’re a good friend, Brian.”

She didn’t explicitly reject him, Brian reminds himself. He smiles awkwardly and stands up. Well, things could be worse.

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Vanessa Long spends several hours talking to Colleen Mosley the morning after Citizen Bold broke into her apartment. When it’s clear that Colleen is exhausted and there is no more info that she could extract, she leaves to give a report to Legacy. All this talking about a person without her around strikes Vanessa as dodgy. She knows what it is like to be the subject of discussion and to be treated like a problem that needs solving. She does not fully approve. Nevertheless, they are perhaps right to be concerned.

She shuts the door to Legacy’s office behind her and sits in one of the chairs across from the desk.

“Well, how is she?” he asks.

“She is not completely free of his influence. It fades over time if it is not reinforced, so it is only a matter of time. Provided she does not encounter him again. If she does, he will have less difficultly re-establishing his control than he would overcoming a person who had never been controlled before.”

Legacy grimaces. “From what I’ve seen, we’ll want to avoid encountering him again regardless. Otherwise, she’ll eventually be fine?”

“...Fine. No, that depends on your definition of fine.”

“Healed. Recovered.”

Vanessa sighs. “She was a young child when he first started in on her. The damage is vast, and even if she recovers, I cannot say what the lasting effects will be. Losing out on her formative years could be devastating.”

“How so?”

“Subtle mind control works in part by disabling the target’s internal cynicism. Before you ask if that’s a bad thing, let me tell you what happens to someone without cynicism. They have no sense of danger. They trust everyone, even people who are objectively evil. They cannot tell when they are being lied to. You could convince the person to give you all their possessions, to walk into a bank and rob it, to love you. Someone who has been primed to never distrust is a walking target.”

Legacy rubs his brow. “I thought this was a kinder version of mind control. I mean, not that any version is kind, but she wasn’t hurt, was she?”

“Yes, that type of mind control is more subtle, more gentle than other kinds.” She inwardly grimaces at the various minions she’d convinced to turn on their comrades or bosses. “But it is more pernicious and difficult to root out. What it lacks in outward violence it more than makes up for in insidiousness. On the other hand, it is almost impossible to impose even subtle mind control completely. We might find that as the vestiges fade, more of Colleen pushes through. The question I cannot answer is whether the override of her critical thinking abilities is permanent or if she could still develop the skill. She could gradually shed the outward signs of brainwashing but never gain the psychological defenses necessary to prevent others from taking advantage of her.”

“You know, she still refers to civilians as ‘humans.’ And she casually mentions our inherent superiority. Is it worth trying to correct her, or should we just wait it out?”

Vanessa bites her lip. “If I have heard the stories accurately, that *is* Colleen pushing through. And we should encourage it.”

“Colleen honestly thinks that she’s superior? And that’s a *good* thing?” Legacy is incredulous.

“Legacy, consider. The Citizens preach that they are better than everyone else and meant to rule, yes? Surely they make speeches and have propaganda posters, what have you. Your average Citizen, with a healthy cynicism, deep down realizes that it’s just a chance to exert power⎯and extract rents⎯from the weak. But what if you are incapable of seeing people’s true motives and take everything at face value? Maybe you buy into it. Maybe, if you have some innate goodness and responsibility in you, you make the logical conclusion that as the superiors of everyone else, you can think of them as yours. And then you get angry when others hurt your little people.”

Legacy nods, “So you attack the ones who are hurting them. No wonder they’ve kept her under lock and key: someone that powerful who could at any time decide that she really ought to be guarding the very people they seek to rule. Looking at what she’s been able to do, I wouldn’t be surprised if she could challenge Dawn all on her own. Their worst nightmare.”

“Their efforts to control her backfired and created something that they couldn’t hope to contain: a Citizen with a conscience.”

“So we hope she learns cynicism so that she’ll drop the superiority act?”

Vanessa takes a moment before responding. She can’t believe she’s about to say this to Legacy, of all people. She reminds herself that her future need not happen, not here. Too many things have changed. She takes a deep breath. “Yes, we do hope that she learns cynicism, for her sake. But the superiority act, is it so bad? She has power, she *is* stronger than most, and she thinks she has the responsibility to protect the world. Is it that far off from what you do? From what we all do? The protective older sister paradigm. How is that any different than any of our motivations? She uses politically incorrect terminology, but her basic instinct is the same. Those who have much are obligated do much.”

“...When you put it like that... But she still needs to not be so naïve, right? Someone who can blow up cities needs to be able to tell when she’s being used. It’s pretty grim, Vanessa. What do we do? Can we do anything?”

“Well, besides wait? Let me end on a positive note. There is more to Colleen than meets the eye. She has had her psyche ripped to shreds little by little her entire life. I have seen what that can do to a person. And the damage to her psyche is not the worst I have seen, despite the length and severity of the attack. Furthermore, she is keeping secrets, Legacy. Probably has been for her entire life, or at least as long as Bold has had contact with her.”

“Secrets? What *kind* of secrets?”

“I cannot say. There is a place in her mind that I cannot crack, or that I would not attempt to crack. She has put up defenses around a part of herself. I do not know how strong they are because I dare not test them. The development of psychic defenses in a non-psychic is a negative and a positive: negative in that it means that she had the need to create defenses and positive in that anyone who could create those defenses stands a better chance of survival and recovery.”

“But she’s got secrets.”

“Legacy, do not allow yourself to fixate on that fact. They could be good, bad, indifferent. Weigh the probability that she spent fifteen years with the Citizens of the Sun without any negative experiences. Her ‘secrets’ could be suppressed memories, for example. Everyone has secrets that they do not wish to share with others or that they share only selectively with those they trust the most. It is a sign of psychological health to have boundaries, particularly for someone who has had her boundaries systematically assailed for her formational years.”

“Right now, if you asked her, she’d tell you, right? I mean, if she’s still trusting and all.”

“Yes, right now if you asked her, she would tell you. She might also rush into a dangerous situation with no regard to her own safety just to please you. She might sleep with anyone who asked. She would do anything for anyone at this point.”

Legacy recoils. “Okay, we don’t do that then.”

“Exactly. We *want* to encourage her to require the people around her to be trustworthy. We do that by not demanding things of her, but instead acting in ways that ought to earn her trust. We show her what boundaries are and that we would not be not angry if she imposed them on us. Furthermore, we should expect the pendulum to swing in the other direction. As she improves, she might shut us all out and distrust everyone. If she follows that by then learning how to trust the *right* people, she will have recovered as fully as we could hope.”

Legacy agrees and resolves to spread the news to the others.

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Citizen Bold passes through the massive gates to the Citizens of the Sun compound at twilight. Well, that’s an accurate statement, but it doesn’t mean much. This far north in winter, it’s usually twilight. Within the compound, sunlight illuminates everything, thanks to Citizen Dawn. She could brighten the entire island, if she chose, but she wants to maintain the disparity between out there and in their utopia. Out there is darkness and helplessness, in here is light and power.

The other Citizens give Bold a wide berth as he walks to the center compound. He’s part of the inner circle and everyone knows it. Some Citizens are more equal than others.

Citizen Dawn, for example. Her quarters feature all the comforts and luxuries of the human world, and then some. Bold passes through the white marble entrance way and knocks once before entering her private reception room.

She isn’t there yet, so he makes himself comfortable on a sofa to wait. A few minutes later, the door opens.

“So, back from the humans, and without dear Citizen Matter, I see. Failure is unlike you.”

Dawn rounds the furniture and sits stiffly in a chair across from Bold. She never seems able to relax, while Bold looks at ease wherever he is. Ironically, she achieves her look of tension with no conscious effort of her own, and Bold’s casual insouciance requires constant tweaking to maintain.

Bold grimaces, “Yeah, without her. Things got complicated. The five stooges were right, she *is* helping the heroes.”

Dawn’s face twists into a look of supreme displeasure. Bold winces inwardly. Colleen is as good as dead. A pity, it took a lot of time to cultivate her and she is just now blossoming into something worth his time.

Dawn stands up and begins to pace. “After all we did for her, for her to not only leave us but to join the enemy? It is not to be borne.” The thought brings up another, more painful, defection. Dawn stops pacing and whispers, “You did not see any signs of Her, did you?”

Bold shakes his head, “The Traitor wasn’t there, and Matter didn’t mention her.”

Her face sets in grim determination. “She is so disloyal that she would not even come out of her cowardly hiding to help another in her situation. Unsurprising.”

Bold just nods. He and several of the other Citizens who spend more time outside the compound than in are more than aware that Amanda is anything but cowardly. Calling herself Ex-Patriette, she’s someone decent Citizens know to avoid at all costs. She takes a “shoot first, scream obscenities at your bleeding corpse” approach to Citizens. But no one in their right mind would disabuse Dawn of her delusions.

Dawn sighs. “Very well, I suppose we shall have to go on to plan B.”

Plan D, Bold thinks, but who’s counting? “What is plan B, Citizen?” he asks because Dawn expects him to.

“Plan B is that we send her partner after her. It is only right, after all, that partners should stay together. I’m sure they miss each other most acutely.”

“Energy?” Bold shakes his head. “I don’t like him. He’s unpredictable.”

Dawn smiles and sits next to Bold on the sofa, draping her arm around his shoulders and teasing his hair. She murmurs in a low voice, “You don’t like him because you can’t control him.”

Bold smirks and turns to face Dawn. “Same difference.” He leans in, and she lets him kiss her. Her fingers tighten in his hair and on his shirt, and he pulls her in closer. When they come up for air, he whispers against her lips, “So I guess this means that my failure is forgiven?”

Dawn unbuttons his shirt and presses her very warm hand against his chest, smiling at him wickedly. “Don’t think of it as a failure. Think of it as something that you’ll never, ever do again.”

He slides her blouse down her shoulder and leans in for another kiss. He sees her eyes harden, but he can’t get away in time. Bright light engulfs him.

“Ever,” pronounces Dawn as she stands up and wipes the ashes off her hands. Oh dear, she’ll have to get someone to clean up the dust, and she hopes that the scorch marks don’t ruin the sofa. It has such a lovely fabric.

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The next few weeks pass without significant incident (he does get his boot off, that’s nice). Brian spends his time either working at Freedom Five HQ or with Colleen. The work is easy, in the sense that it’s precisely what he has always done. Whenever someone needs phone work or any other type of average police work done, they ask Brian. When he isn’t putting out fires, he works on his two ongoing cases. Several inmates escaped from the Block, and he’s trying to find them. He also continues his search for people kidnapped by the Citizens. Now that he has access to police files from around the world, his collection has grown.

 He has several bulletin boards with photos of escaped inmates and potential kidnapping victims set up around his office, along with other bits of useful information. This is purely a TV and movie cop thing⎯most police stations don’t have the space to devote to bulletin boards that end up looking like the work of a deranged kindergarten teacher. But he didn’t point this out when he was given them. And besides, he *does* have the space and frankly, it’s very nice to have a place to put all this info rather than the haphazard semi-functional filing system he’s always had to make do with.

Not that he’s making much headway. Oh sure, he’s getting a lot of information and finding all these lovely patterns. He’s got probable cause coming out of his ears. The problem is, all his information is a day late and a dollar short.

When yet another lead turns into a very dead end, he slams his head on his desk and thinks that if he’d still been in Missing Persons, at least he could mock his co-workers with Corky. At that point, someone knocks on his door. “Come in,” he groans, his head still on the desk.

Lt. Tyler Vance pokes his head in and chuckles. “I was about to ask if you wanted lunch. I’m guessing yes.”

Yes. Yes Brian wants lunch. A few minutes later, they’re eating sandwiches from a nearby sub shop in the break room.

“It’s so weird, you know? I mean, everyone thinks ‘cause of TV and movies that cops are so glamorous and we do awesome things all the time, but really, usually, it’s like every job ever. Particularly being a detective. I’m more like a salesman making cold calls than I am some ninja, gun-wielding badass. But wouldn’t ya know it, *I* never thought that superheroes also had paperwork.”

Tyler looks at him strangely. “Paperwork? ...What paperwork?”

“Oh you know, form 479-Ds, 773-As, that sort of thing.”

Tyler chews slowly. “There’s no paperwork.”

“Dr. Stinson gave me....” Realization hits. “You’re kidding.”

Tyler almost chokes on his sandwich he starts laughing so hard. “Oh man, how long as she had you doing that stuff?”

Brian is bright red. “Three weeks.” Tyler grins.

Tyler changes the subject. “So, you know Colleen pretty well. Any particular reason she avoids me like I’ve got the plague?”

Brian thinks for a second. “I guess she’s just nervous around people she doesn’t know very well, particularly men. And, well, you’re kinda physically imposing. I think she got beat up on a regular basis.”

“By people with super strength. Jesus, it’s a wonder she opens up to any of us at all. She seems to be okay with to *you* though.”

“We’re just friends, Tyler.”

“Oooooh, you got friendzoned?”

Brian rolls his eyes. “For now. What was I supposed to do, huh? ‘Oh hey, I just rescued you from your creepy, mind-controlling, rapist stepfather. So, huh, how ‘bout a date?’”

Tyler instantly sobers. “No, you’re right.”

“I gotta be patient, you know? Give her space. Give her time to get used to the idea. I’m not worried, she’ll give me a chance when....”

A ceramic bowl shatters behind them. “Oh, don’t let me interrupt the Colleen husbandry.” Colleen is standing in the doorway with a broken bowl at her feet. She’s seething.

Both Brian and Tyler turn to face her, each feeling horribly guilty. Brian stammers, “Colleen... it isn’t, we weren’t....”

She snaps. “Oh, don’t think I’m stupid. I know you guys talk about me when I’m not around. ‘Poor Colleen. What *are* we gonna do with her? How do we fix broken, screwed up Colleen? Well whatever we do, we’d best do it outside her knowledge because weak little Colleen can’t handle it. We’ll take care of her.’” She pantomimes someone patting a small child on the head.

Brian realizes this is exactly what he’s been doing. But before he can apologize, Colleen storms out and slams the door to her lab with a vicious finality.

Brian is torn about following her. He’s feeling pretty guilty, knowing that she’s got a point. But he also feels like he ought to be able to defend himself, darn it. He stands up to go after her. Then, Ms. Twain’s voice comes over the loudspeaker. “Emergency at Pike Industrial Plant. Legacy, Bunker, Tachyon, and Detective, report for duty.”

Brian blinks. Detective. That’s his name? Tyler⎯who felt embarrassed about that but not quite as shaken as Brian⎯claps him on the shoulder. “Suit up, Bri. Suit up.”

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Colleen yanks out her desk chair and sits in it, fuming. She flips open her astrophysics textbook with unnecessary force. *Black holes exist where gravity is so dense that not even light can escape.* Ugh, she’s so mad, she doesn’t even feel like science.

HOW DARE THEY. Everyone’s pulling her damn strings, expecting her to do what they want. Well, screw. them. Unable to focus enough even to mess around with molecules, she peevishly puts on exercise clothes and goes to the gym to demolish things.

She puts on angry music and hits things. Lots of things. She barely notices the announcement over the intercom calling for assistance in Rook City. Brian⎯who she hates⎯stops by to say that he’s going. She doesn’t even turn around.

Everyone *punch* wants *punch* something *punch.* They treat her like a pet, like a spoiled child whose whims they humor. The cage might be more gilded, but it’s still a cage. And, like a caged canary, she’s expected to sing a pretty little song for the people who are keeping her.

Screw them all. Colleen knows what happens when you let someone replace your will with theirs. She won’t let that happen again. Not ever.

She’s smashed through every punching bag and dummy in the place, save for one. She places the dummy upright and winds up. The entire building shimmies when she slams it through the floor and the foundation, down ten feet into the ground.

Felicia has been watching Colleen engage in property destruction for three hours and winces when she puts a crater in the floor. She’s also impressed, concrete is hard to punch through and this building is supposed to be bomb-proof. Whatever is going on should probably stop soon though.

Felicia opens the door to the gym. “Tunneling out?” she asks casually.

Colleen, eyes solid white, floats out of the hole and lands on the floor. “Working out some aggression, that’s all. Not that it’s any of your business.”

Felicia starts; she’s never heard Colleen be so actively hostile. “Sounds like you need ice cream. Chocolate ice cream. And in large quantities. Come on.” She wraps a hand around Colleen’s wrist and gives her a tug. Defeated, Colleen trails behind to the HQ kitchen.

Once they each have a giant bowl of ice cream⎯with whipped cream and butterscotch syrup⎯Felicia asks, “So, what’s wrong?”

Maybe it’s her smile. Maybe it’s that she seems so non-threatening. Maybe she’s got her father’s charisma in spades. Maybe Colleen has just reached her absolute breaking point and can’t take it any more. Maybe it’s the ice cream. Whatever the reason, everything that’s happened, everything that’s weighing on her spills out like a word dam leak.

“I’ve been manipulated my whole damn life, I know that now. My entire past is a lie. The stuff from when I was a little girl, he *stole* that from me and altered my memories about my father and my life before the island so much that I don’t think I have any left. And then they made me think down was up and left was right. I can’t... I can’t trust *myself*. I can’t tell what’s true. The thoughts I have, I don’t know where they come from any more.

“And now, I’m here and everyone’s doing the same damn thing. Maybe not for bad reasons, but everyone’s got their own agenda that I’m supposed to fit into. All these categories they want to squish me into. Good, bad, everyone’s got their own definition of Colleen Mosley.”

Felicia doesn’t say anything immediately. She takes a deep breath. “No one thinks you’re a bad guy, Colleen. They all get that you’re the victim here....”

“Oh, that’s what they *want* me to be, sure. Well you know what? I didn’t even have it the worst. I had it pretty damn good compared to some people. I spent more time watching other people suffering than suffering myself. And no one’s shedding a tear for *those* people. I survived. I got out. I didn’t lose everything. So maybe I’m not the victim, maybe I’m the lucky one. And as for being a bad guy.... Felicia, I’ve *killed* people. I’m not a hero.”

Felicia wrinkles her brow. “No, Colleen, I heard about the cop. That’s not how it happened. That wasn’t your fault.”

“People, Felicia. Plural. I killed *people* on the island. Call it mind-control, call it duress. Doesn’t matter. A couple times, the choice came ‘me or them’ and I chose them every time.”

Felicia looks horrified. She stammers, “But... you *were* mind-controlled. You didn’t have free will, not really. I mean, you might have killed them, but it wasn’t voluntary, not with Citizen Bold calling the shots, right?” Her eyes beg Colleen for reassurance.

Colleen doesn’t have any to give. “They’re dead by my hand. It hardly matters what motivated me to do it. Maybe Brian and his cop friends wouldn’t be able to make a murder charge stick. But I still gotta live with the fact that I was the last thing those people saw. That’s why I can’t be what everyone wants me to be. I can’t be a victim. I can’t be a hero.”

Felicia sets her spoon carefully next to her bowl and looks at Colleen with a steady, hard gaze. “No. That’s why you *have* to be a hero. You’ve got things in your past you aren’t proud of. I have no idea if saving other people could make up for it, but it sure can’t hurt, can it? You didn’t, you couldn’t, risk your own life then. You can now. Don’t let the chance to help people who need it pass you by again, Colleen.”

Colleen snorts. “Easy for you to say, Baby Legacy. You have no idea...”

“I have no idea what? No idea what it’s like to have people expect huge, impossible things from you? No idea what it’s like to be scared? To lose people? To doubt myself? Colleen, I’m eighteen and I’ve felt like that for seventeen years. I *know* it isn’t easy. But it’s worth it.”

Colleen doesn’t answer. Instead she stares into her ice cream bowl, swirling her spoon in the melted remains. Felicia interprets this as a sign of acquiescence. “So, is Citizen Matter the hero going to put her name in for duty?” Felicia asks sassily.

Colleen looks up. “No. God no. That’s... no. It’s a supervillain name. Not going to use a supervillain name.”

Felicia was initially worried when Colleen corrected her but relaxes. “Yeah, that probably won’t work out. What would you use?”

Colleen thinks. She remembers something from one of the physics textbooks that would be perfect. “String,” she says confidently. “I’ll call myself ‘String’.”

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Maia had been at work⎯paying work⎯when the first call came out. No problem, really. She’d just said she couldn’t make it and someone else took the call. They’ve got a big project wrapping up in the next few days and it’s all hands on deck. She works until late in the night, but when the numbers start swimming on her computer, she knows she won’t get anything more productive done for a while.

She is about to head back to her penthouse apartment when the second call comes in. It is a robo-call from Tachyon’s communicator⎯only activated when the wearer loses consciousness. Three more come in quick succession.

“Oh. Shit.”

To Maia’s personal staff’s credit, they are very flexible (and ask few questions) and when she announces that she won’t be coming home after all, but make sure that her studio in the Slaughterhouse District⎯a recently reclaimed industrial neighborhood, very chic⎯has breakfast ready at 6 AM, they take the change in stride.

Maia changes into her Wraith costume, straps on her utility belt, and slips out through one of her office’s other exits, the one that leads right to the roof. The winter night is cold, and she can see her breath.

She races across the city to Pike Industrial, verifying that the heroes’ signals are still coming from the plant. If Maia has a weakness, it’s her ego. The idea that she might need to get help⎯that something that managed to knock out four superheroes might have an easy time with her⎯doesn’t even cross her mind. She’s prepared for anything, why worry? Okay, so preparing for anything is a sort of worry, but she never thinks that she could come across something beyond her capacities. And besides, those heroic idiots ran into a situation without intel (as per usual) and she’s gonna at least scope out what’s going on.

Half an hour later, she perches on a building overlooking the compound. Everything looks calm and quiet from the outside. Of course with Pike Industrial, looks can be deceiving. She needs to get closer. She draws her grappling hook and aims it at the opposite roof. As she prepares to jump off the roof, someone grabs her by the arm.

She reacts quickly, twisting the person’s wrist around and pressing a knife against her attacker’s throat.

“That’s twice in a row now, Wraith.” Ex-Patriette is grinning irreverently. She clicks her tongue. “Sloppy.”

Maia groans and lowers her knife. “Dammit, Ex-Patriette. What do you want?”

She peers over Maia’s shoulder at the plant. “I’ve been watching it. The plant I mean. A group of someones broke in earlier.” Ex-Patriette has a personal theory on whom, but she doesn’t share it.

“And they just incapacitated four heroes. So if you’ll excuse me.”

“No, that bunch left and a giant rat thing, oozing glowing green sludge, slipped in through the hole they made. Other side of the building.”

Maia exhales. “Plague Rat. Right.” She smiles with forced cheerfulness. “Okay then, thanks for the tip.”

“You go in there, you’ll get killed too.”

“You volunteering to help out?” Maia can’t keep the sarcasm out of her voice.

“I might have a reason to poke around, sure. But you really need Colleen.”

“Colleen is a metahuman. That does not mean she’s a superhero.”

“Gee, you *still* underestimate her, after all that? Colleen can negate toxic chemicals by touching them. You don’t go in with her, you’re dead.” Ex-Patriette has no reason not to be sarcastic.

Maia bristles. “I’m not underestimating her. I’m protecting her. She’s a civilian. She hasn’t had any training....”

Ex-Patriette starts laughing. “Are you fucking kidding me? A Citizen hasn’t had training? She knows like thirty ways to kill you with*out* using her powers. Don’t worry about Colleen.”

“Oh, so you’re an expert on Citizen training programs? Care to elaborate?”

“Don’t get bitchy with me, Maia. Call her fast or your buddies *will* be dead.”

Maia begrudgingly realizes that Ex-Patriette is right. She puts in the call to Ms. Twain.

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The longest thirty minutes of Wraith’s life follow. Luckily, the plant seems quiet. At least she *thinks* it’s lucky. It could be very, very bad. Her only real consolation is that Ex-Patriette seems more interested in cleaning her guns than talking while they wait.

Eventually, a white figure approaches them from the direction of Megalopolis. Wraith swears violently as Felicia, with Colleen in tow, lands next to her.

“Felicia. Go. Home.” Wraith makes her eyes burn in angry disapproval.

“I know, I know. Dad would flip. I just brought Colleen. Couldn’t get here any faster than traveling with me.”

Colleen has her hair braided in a single massive braid tied off with a black ribbon. She’s wearing a tight long-sleeve workout jacket, capri-length running pants, and running shoes⎯all black. Then, in a nod to anonymity, she put eyeblack on her face, all around her eyes. Surprisingly, the look is effective. Wraith nods approvingly.

On the other hand, Colleen looks like a deer in the headlights. She glances around, taking in the scene like she isn’t entirely sure she isn’t dreaming. Then she sees Ex-Patriette.

“Aman... Citizen...”

“Ex-Patriette,” interrupts and corrects Ex-Patriette smoothly. Her smoothness is ruffled when Colleen embraces her in an honest-to-goodness bear hug. Now it’s Ex-Patriette’s turn to look like a deer in the headlights. She staggers slightly before stiffly returning the hug⎯still, looking as disconcerted as if she were being asked to hug a tiger.

Colleen is actually sobbing a bit. “We thought you were dead! Oh, I’m so so glad to see you.”

You could knock Maia and Felicia over with a feather. Ooooh boy, that *is* interesting, thinks Wraith. But, a discussion for another time.

“Yeah, it’s good to see you too, Matter.” Ex-Patriette manages to choke out.

Colleen releases her and steps back. “Actually, I don’t want people to call me Citizen Matter any more.” Ex-Patriette thinks that’s completely understandable. Colleen continues, “So, call me String.” She looks to Wraith for confirmation.

“Like ‘Theory’? Perfect. Right. Ex-Patriette, String, we need to get in there and find our team and deal with the threat. Young Legacy, you have a calculus problem set.” The first two nod with a determined air. Felicia looked hopeful, then deflated.

Without another word, Ex-Patriette passes her shotgun over the rope of Wraith’s grappling hook. Wraith mutters something about how hard it is to find the right kind of rope but detaches it from her gun and ties it off. Ex-Patriette slides across, landing with a graceful somersault just inside the compound perimeter.

Colleen takes a deep breath, unzips her jacket, slings it over the rope, and follows suit. It’s not that she’s afraid of falling⎯that would be impossible. She’s afraid that she’ll get shot at or something while she’s dangling mid-air. It’s a very large gap, very exposed. She makes it and bounces slightly onto the ground. Wraith is right behind her.

Wraith retrieves her hook. “Alright guys, let’s keep an eye out for a way in.... Guys?”

She looks around. Her two teammates (can she call them that?) are staring at the wall around the corner. The outer wall of the facility has a hole in it, about ten feet high and eight feet across. Green ooze drips from the edges of the hole and pool in the rubble.

“Well, there’s our way in,” quips Ex-Patriette.

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They search the facility floor by floor for an hour. While there are clearly signs of violence on some levels, the entire building appears to be deserted. They’re back in the reception area. Ex-Patriette is annoyed that she didn’t see any sign of where the Citizens broke in or of what they took. She’s also annoyed that she’s somehow getting dragged into the Citizens again. When this is over, all debts to Colleen Mosley are discharged, she swears to herself.

Wraith is leaning over a computer, typing furiously. “We’ve checked *every* floor, and there’s no sign of them,” Wraith finally has to admit.

Colleen hugs herself. This place is cold and creepy. “What about the basement?”

Wraith shakes her head. “There is no basement. We’re too close to the water.”

Ex-Patriette rolls her eye. “Are you serious? You really think a place this shady in Rook City wouldn’t have a basement?”

“Where they store their dangerous waste products.” Wraith starts out sarcastically, but the truth slaps her across the face. “Of *course* they do. And it doesn’t show up on the schematic because that’s where they store their dangerous waste products.”

Ex-Patriette shrugs nonchalantly. “If I was a giant mutated rat man, I might be interested in toxic waste. Now we just gotta find the entrance to the damn thing.”

Wraith goes back to the computer and mutters about architectural schematics.

Colleen whistles part of the *1812 Overture* and there’s an enormous CRASH. Wraith jumps, and Ex-Patriette draws a pistol, pointing it at the source of the noise.

Where Colleen had been standing, there is now a large hole. She pulls herself out. “Found it,” she calls out.

She lowers the other two to the basement. The floor is oozy and Colleen doesn’t even want to think about its source. She’s walking behind the others. Wraith is grimly trudging forward, but Ex-Patriette notices the stickiness of the floor and glares at the ooze with distaste.

The basement is actually a long, narrow tunnel. The sound of scurrying echoes ominously. Colleen puts the source of the noise in the same category as the source of the ooze⎯things to think about never.

Something brushes past her ankles, and Colleen squeals. The other two stop and turn around. Colleen looks down and instantly regrets it. A swarm of rats are racing from behind them toward the source of the noise. They seem to be more interested in running than in bothering the three heroes, though. Still, Colleen cringes. Wraith and Ex-Patriette just look annoyed.

“Well,” remarks Wraith drily, “we’re probably headed in the right direction. Keep moving.”

They round a bend and find four shapes covered in ooze. Wraith kneels next to one, cautiously touches the ooze, and yanks her hand away. “Don’t touch that, whatever it is, it’s corrosive.”

Colleen kneels next to Wraith and promptly ignores her by grabbing a handful. Wraith swears and winces. Ex-Patriette just smirks. Colleen pays no attention to either of them. She’s too busy squishing the ooze between her fingers, letting it run out of her fist.

A cloudy liquid drips onto the ground. Wraith watches, fascinated. Colleen smiles at her shyly. “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the precipitant,” Colleen offers, waiting for approval.

Ex-Patriette groans behind them. Wraith shakes her head. “I’m not... I’m not dignifying that with a response. But, good job with the ooze. You know what it is?”

Colleen shakes her head as she leans over the oozy figure to clear him or her off. “I don’t recognize it. It’s got hydrogen and oxygen and.... nitrogen but other things in trace amounts and I would need time to work out the ratio to give you a formula. Until then, I can at least knock it into water, gases, and salts. Harmless stuff.”

Wraith is impressed. “You recognize elements by touch?”

Colleen shrugs. “Of course.” Ex-Patriette mouths “of course” to Wraith over Colleen’s shoulder exaggeratedly. Colleen clears the person’s face off. It’s Brian. He’s pale and unconscious, but breathing. Colleen quickly wipes the rest of the ooze off them and the others drag him out of the worst of the ooze. Colleen tries not to panic⎯Brian looks dead, even if he isn’t. As mad as she is, she really doesn’t want to lose Brian. Forcing herself to concentrate, she cleans everyone else off. All are in similar conditions, and Tyler has been dragged out of his suit. With the ooze gone, it’s clear that everyone has also been cut or scratched at by something with claws. The ooze might have been the final straw, but there had been a fight before they went down.

Colleen takes in the injuries. Something BIG made them. “Maybe we should just take them back,” she suggests nervously, looking at the other two women.

At that moment, something brown, furry, huge, and very angry fills Colleen’s vision. She screams and covers her face as sharp claws tear at her chest. Gunfire rings out: first the powerful blast of Ex-Patriette’s 9mm, then an unfamiliar sound that makes Wraith and Ex-Patriette look around wildly.

The second shot seems to get the Plague Rat’s attention. “You’ll want to step back, ma’am,” a man’s voice drawls. Colleen rolls out of the way as a man in a cowboy hat⎯are those chaps?! and a poncho?⎯levels a six-shooter at the monster. He fires off two more shots before the monster moves again.

“Chrono-Ranger! Where did YOU come from?!” asks Wraith as she dodges swiping claws.

“WHO CARES?” shouts Ex-Patriette as she unloads her shotgun into the monster. Chrono-Ranger doesn’t respond to either of them. He’s staring down the giant rat, seeping hatred and righteous fury.

The rat shakes off the bullets, as if it can’t even feel the damage. It rips through all four of them, leaving everyone bleeding and panting in pain.

It takes concentration to alter the fundamental forces of the universe, and when you’re being mauled by a rat man, concentration is something you don’t have to spare. Now, however, Colleen hits the rat with a powerful burst of electricity that leaves the air smelling like burnt hair⎯a scent that cuts through the other ambient smells of damp and mold to create a veritable olfactory bouquet. The rat twitches in agony for a few seconds before recovering.

Colleen then puts a hand across her stomach. She’s bleeding slightly. The rat either senses her weakness or wants a little revenge for the electrocution. Either way, it bites her right on the arm. Chrono-Ranger yells something and Colleen sways slightly.

Ooze seeps out of the bite wound. The rat looks almost pleased with itself. Ex-Patriette swears at it and shoots again, hitting it with incendiary rounds. Wraith runs to Colleen. The man in the hat also continues to shoot with a grim determination and barely concealed fury.

Colleen stares at her arm uncomprehendingly. Then the ooze starts dripping cloudy water onto the ground, and Colleen smiles. It only hurt when it bit her. She smirks at the rat and shows it the decidedly un-toxic wound.

That is the morale turning point of the battle. Wraith tosses bladed throwing stars at it, Ex-Patriette and Chrono-Ranger ventilate it, and Colleen slams it into the ceiling a few times. By the time it stops moving, all four are bleeding and exhausted, but alive.

Chrono-Ranger tips his hat to them. “Ladies.” Then he disappears in a swirl of time energy.

Colleen groans slightly. “I think I need stitches.” She lifts the four unconscious heroes off the ground and starts dragging them back to the hole she made. Ex-Patriette follows while Wraith boosts her communicator signal to make sure that there will be a medical team waiting for them. Then she calls her stockbroker and tells dump Pike Industrial if she has any left.

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Several hours later, Brian wakes up in Freedom Five HQ with some fresh stitches. This is surprising, because he had not thought he would wake up at all. He’s in the med-unit, lying on a bed and blinking into a bright light. Brian is getting tired of waking up in hospitals. A nurse asks him if he needs pain meds, and he shakes her off.

Strangely, he feels *much* less injured than he ought to. They got obliterated by that thing AND covered in toxic sludge. He doesn’t feel like a million bucks, sure, but he gets out of the bed without difficulty. The nurse sees him and nods⎯apparently he’s expected to be in fighting shape again because she doesn’t enforce the “stay in bed” rule.

Legacy meets him in the hallway (Brian can’t think of him as ‘Paul’). “Welcome back, Brian. We let you sleep because it seemed like you needed it.”

Brian rakes his hair. “Thanks. Uh, by the way, what happened?”

“Wraith, Ex-Patriette, Chrono-Ranger, and String bravely sortied against the enemy in an extraction mission.”

Brian is about to ask “Who?” but then he hears Colleen shout out, “Hey, Mr. Parsons, my uniform is done. Do you want to see it?”

Legacy smiles and turns around. Brian peers around him. At the other end of the hall, Colleen models a blue uniform with a squiggly white symbol on the chest. She looks proud of herself and the uniform.

“Looks great, String.” Legacy responds. He lowers his voice so only Brian can hear him. “I’ll leave you to it, then.” Then Legacy walks away, giving Colleen a high five as he passes.

They’re alone in the hallway now. Brian walks up to Colleen, half-expecting her to run. Instead, she gazes at him steadily.

“I just... wanted to apologize, Colleen. I hadn’t thought about how people ordering you around would make you feel. And thanks for coming to save us.”

Colleen maintains her steady gaze for long enough that Brian is about to apologize again, with more begging this time. Then she smiles a half-smile. “Apology accepted. I, well, I could use some forgiving too. And I’ve got things that I really ought to tell you....”

Brian puts a hand up. “I just got ripped to shreds by a giant rat. We can talk about that stuff later. Right now, I’d kinda like to kiss you and I’m wondering if you’d be interested....”

Colleen floats up a foot, so that she’s at Brian’s height, and kisses him hard.

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Envy is not a new feeling for Citizen Energy. When he realized that others could turn their powers on and off or otherwise function normally despite their afflictions, he became envious. And envy has been his constant companion ever since. But this feeling is new: jealousy.

Matter is *his*. It was bad enough to have the Citizens imply that someone else would have to lie with her when the time came for her to do her duty for the future of the Citizenry. At that time, no one was implicitly taking her away from him, and they were both interested in putting it off as long as possible.

Energy sneers at the couple through the closed circuit television he is inhabiting. He needs to die, this interloper.

A long-range radio signal gets his attention. Energy senses all wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum because he IS the electromagnetic spectrum.

“Energy. This is Citizen Dawn. A team was able to acquire the radioactive material. We are ready for Phase Two. Take Matter.”

Energy doesn’t respond. He never does. He never has to. He does as he’s ordered. He’ll take Matter. He’ll take Matter and eliminate the one who is trying to steal her. Then they’ll be together, inseparable.

1. A sample: “Radioactive” by Imagine Dragons, “Immigrant Song” the Karen O. cover, “The Chain” by Fleetwood Mac, “Gimme Shelter” by the Rolling Stones, “A Real Hero” by College, “Leaves” by Cheer Elephant [↑](#footnote-ref-1)