Nearly Witches

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Character: Callum Hunt, Havoc the Pupper, Tamara Rajavi, Aaron Stewart, Alastair Hunt, MASTER RUFUS AAYYY, Celia (Magisterium Series), Why dont we know celias last name what is this, Jasper deWinter, All their schoolmates are here too, Alex Strike, The Enemy Of Death, A Surplus Of Squirrels

Additional Tags: So there are mentions of fights and descriptions of fights but not any gore, superhero au, yeet, YOU KNOW IT MAN, IM SO HYPE FOR THIS, Call can talk to animals, I love Havoc so much, Im probably going to be updating these as I go??, anyway, Ableist Language, yknow that scene in the books where Jasper Says Stuff and Tamara Puddings him?, yeah essentially that happens, things are on fire now, too many Auto Repair Shops, Stabbing, one guy and five knives, he knows how to use them, he will stab anyone and everyone, or... get stabbed?, who knows - Freeform, vast butchering of the French language for my gay purposes, it's not vast but I can't help my Drama okay, stop me, i dare you, I know this isn't how injuries work!, all of the EMTs in my family are very dissappointed in me, I'm going to continue to pretend bruises and stabs work the way I say they do, Blood, light discussion of dead bodies, coffee abuse

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Nearly Witches

by multidimensionallifeform

Summary

In a city with three resident superheroes, everybody finds it a bit strange that crime is still rampant, but whatever.

Caped Justice is the favorite, all charming smiles and perfectly messy blond hair. Nobody's entirely sure what his superpower is, but he stops crime and saves lives, and on top of it all seems like a well rounded young man.

Convict appeared out of nowhere one night, and hasn't stopped saving lives since. She's graceful and beautiful and uses her water powers to annihilate anybody who tries to disrupt the peace of the city.

Radar... only really works at night. He can talk to animals, but it seems he'd rather not talk to
his fellow humans. He always seems to stop crimes that the other heroes don't even know is happening. He's the dependable one- if a crime is being committed he and his doggy partner will show up to stop it.

Well, they're more effective than the cops and seem to be interesting kids. Let's see how this plays out.

Notes

Hype!! Hype hype!!

I'll be real with you- this probably isn't the best. Let me know if it is (eyes the kudos/comment buttons), but I'm having a lot of fun writing it. Besides, gotta love these guys.

I don't own anything except the plot- characters go to Cassandra Clare and Holly Black (as you all know, but might as well mention it).

In case it's not clear- hero #1 is Tamara and hero #2 is Aaron.

And... I think that's it?? Alrighty then. Hope you enjoy!!!
Chapter 1

It was a dark and stormy night, and quite frankly, Call was mad about it.

It wasn’t just dark, it wasn’t just stormy, no, it was dark and stormy. The universe (or whatever criminal he was hunting down) was obviously out to get him.

To be fair, during a power outage in the middle of a lightning storm was the best time to commit a crime, so Call couldn’t blame the criminal, but hey here’s an idea, don’t break the law maybe.

Call was mostly mad that Havoc would smell like wet dog later.

Speak of the devil, Havoc was trotting back to Call now, his tongue lolled out of his mouth and his fur soaked. He looked like an ordinary dog in this light.

Yeah, he’s definitely attempting to rob the bank. Emphasis on attempting. Poor guy can’t even figure out how to get the door open, Havoc told him.

Call sighed. Havoc did too.

“Do you think he’ll lose his nerve and go home if he can’t even get in, or will we have to chase him away?” Call asked Havoc. He didn’t bother whispering, the rain would cover the sound of his voice.

Havoc tilted his head to the side. Call had to wonder what he was hearing.

Your call. You’re the one that can usually tell, anyway. Isn’t that why we’re here in the first place?

Havoc had a good point.

“How about I wait at the corner and watch him? I can’t quite tell if this one’s gonna cut himself off or not,” Call proposed. Havoc shook his head. It was surreal, for a moment, to be talking to an oddly human wolf in the rain, but you know, superpowers.

Go to the roof, Havoc said. Call immediately started to protest, but Havoc bared his teeth, which was his way of saying, “shut up for a second”.

Listen. I’ll cover the corner so that if the chump goes in, I’ll be able to trap him. You need to go the roof so that when he does go in, you can trip the alarm by going in through the hatch at the top, also effectively putting you in the position to deal with him and giving other animals the quick route to get to him.

“How do you know there’s a hatch in the roof?”

We were in this bank earlier with your dad for like an hour, you unobservant pile of-

“Woah woah woah, this is a bank?”

Havoc sighed again. Call snickered.

You humans, always on your phones, Havoc joked. Call threw a pebble at him.

“Anyway, I’m a little annoyed that you come up with better plans than I do, but I’ll get over that. One thing, though- how am I supposed to get on the roof, Captain-Chief-Bossman?” Havoc rolled his eyes.
There’s a fire escape.

“Okay, that sounds reasonable, but one more thing. I just need to clarify- you want me to make a four meter drop into a building with tile flooring and then fight a criminal? Like, I can, but also, I can’t,” Call gestured to his leg.

_Solve both problems at once_, Havoc said, adopting his doggy smile. It looked a little menacing. _Don’t drop onto the tile- drop onto the criminal._

Call paused for a moment, thinking, before matching his partner’s smile.

_Don’t break a leg_, Havoc said as Call stood and started walking towards the side of the bank. Havoc was right, there was a fire escape.

“Don’t break anybody else’s,” Call responded.

As soon as Call reached the fire escape, he knew it would be a hard climb. Since it was dark and stormy (ugh), he couldn’t see a foot in front of him and the black-painted steel steps were slippery. Oh joy.

Not to mention his leg would be aching the whole way up.

Call sighed and pulled himself up the first stair. His foot slipped, he gripped the railing like a lifeline, and by the grace of God he didn’t fall.

He pulled himself up the next stair.

And the next.

And the next.

And the next.

By the time he got to the top, he was sweating (which was beyond uncomfortable in cold rain, but _whatever_) and aching (darn leg) and his heart was going bezerk from the amount of times he almost fell.

Call plunked to the ground and huffed out a long breath. _I must have great breath capacity from all the sighing that I do_, Call thought. He fell back so that he was laying on the roof, with rain pelting his face (to his annoyance).

_I don’t wanna move_, he thought, knowing he still had to go beat up a criminal.

Call heaved himself over, rolling onto his stomach. He glanced around the roof. He still couldn’t see anything.

_Havoc?_ Call shouted mentally. _Where’s that hatch you were talking about? I can’t see squat._

_It’s near the street facing side of the building, on the left_, Havoc responded readily. Call sent out his acknowledgement and started to army crawl over there.

_I can’t tell if this is the height of laziness or fitness_, Call thought as he dragged himself through a puddle.

When he was around the area Havoc had indicated, he glanced around to see if there was any sort of hatch.
That’s when something large and heavy attacked him.

Call instantly rolled away, then pushed himself into a crouch (ow) and whipped hair out of his eyes, looking around frantically for the attacker.

There was a dark figure in a lump on the ground in front of him, who quickly went through the same motions that Call had seconds prior. Then they were two silhouettes, poised to attack, facing each other in the rain.

Call wanted to say he could see the fiery glow of his opponent’s eyes, or the fierce set of his opponent’s mouth, or the danger etched into the lines of their face. Call, in reality, could not see anything except a vaguely darker thing in front of him that had raised fists.

“Who are you?” The figure barked.

“Who are you?” Call asked.

“I asked first.”

“I was here first.”

“Yeah, I know, but you shouldn’t have been, which is why I’m asking who you think you are.” The figure was getting fired up.

“Woah, you changed the question. Besides, what do you want from me, registration? I don’t need no freakin’ registration,” Call responded. He almost forgot somebody was trying to rob a bank right below him. His leg was killing him from crouching for so long.

Call? Are you okay?

“Yeah, well, you got in the way of my rounds, which isn’t very much appreciated. I’ve got things to do, people to save,” the figure said.

Call?

“Excuse me? You attacked me, I did nothing!”

Call, would you mind responding?

“I did no such thing! I tripped on you, cause you were in the way, fooling around.”

Seriously dude, talk to me.

“I was not- am not fooling around!”

Call, tell me you didn’t lose consciousness again.

“Oh yeah? Then what are you doing?”

Call, please.

“As it would happen-”

It was at that moment that Havoc started barking hysterically. Call heard a huge crash from the street, which got him to his feet instantly (ow ow ow).
He moved as quickly as he could to the edge of the roof, straining his eyes to try and see what was happening. The figure was next to him.

Somebody lunged into the bank (Call caught a glimpse of blond hair) just as they got to the end of the roof. Havoc, surprisingly, was faced away from the door of the bank. He was barking, hackles raised, at... seemingly nothing.

Call was unsettled.

His instincts flared.

Then Call was panicked.

_Havoc?

_Call! Took you long enough._ Havoc sounded concerned. Call felt his stomach drop.

_Later, Havoc said. Right now, we’ve got bigger problems. There’s another one coming in. How’s this guy feel?_

_Dangerous. Really, really dangerous._

Call saw Havoc’s hesitation.

_There are two other superheroes here,_ Call told him, hoping to help. A plan was forming in his head, but he needed to know what Havoc thought. They were partners for a reason.

_I can hold whoever this is off by myself, you take care of the guy in the bank. He actually managed to get through the door, it was pretty astounding to watch._

Call hesitated. Usually he listened to Havoc without question, but...

“What’s that dog growling at?” The figure asked. Call had forgotten about them.

_Be careful Havoc, I mean it._

_Loud and clear, Callum._

_Don’t call me that!_

Call turned to the figure. This would be fun.

“There’s somebody robbing the bank right now, which I was trying to stop before you attacked me,” Call told them. He figured they were a superhero from the way they were talking, but now it was time for them to do the work. With the new threat approaching that felt like death, this was getting serious fast.

“First of all, I didn’t attack you. Second, why didn’t you tell me this earlier? Let’s go foil this criminal’s plan so we can both turn in for the night and never see each other again,” the figure remarked. Call hummed in agreement and walked to the place that the hatch was supposed to be in. Surprisingly enough, it was easier to find now that he was on edge.

He knelt next to it and was about to pull it open, but he stopped himself.

“Don’t be surprised, there’s going to be another superhero down there too,” Call told the figure.
“Oh for crying out-”

Call wrenched the hatch open, and immediately a loud alarm started blaring. Red lights flashed inside the building (there must’ve been some sort of generator, which wasn’t surprising for a bank) and Call strained his eyes for a look at what was happening.

The figure jumped down the hatch without hesitation.

Call leaned down a bit further, then sighed, and moved to sit on the edge of the hatch. He waited for the criminal to stand directly beneath him (he could see two people who were obviously heroes and one that was obviously wearing all black), then slid off the roof and into the bank.

The euphoria of falling lasted for a second before he landed, thankfully, not on tile.

*Please tell me I didn’t land on one of the heroes,* Call thought a second before he looked down.

Below him was a crumpled form wearing all black. He pumped his fist internally (couldn’t look lame in front of other heroes), but could only celebrate for a moment before the criminal rolled and Call was thrown off.

Call quickly got back to his feet, and was pleased to see signs of pain and weariness from the criminal. And that sounds insensitive, but beating up bad guys was his *job,* okay?

“Nice one,” said a new voice, and Call assumed it was the hero not-from-the-roof. Hero the Second.

“Match it,” Call said, meaning “Let’s all fight good so we can get this over with cause I *still* do not have a good feeling about this.”

“Gladly,” hero #2 said, then leapt forward to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the criminal. Call only had a second to be impressed. He had things that he needed to do if they wanted to win this fight.

As hero #1 stepped forward to help #2, Call stepped back and started thinking fast.

What did he *really* feel from the unknown threat Havoc was holding off? The criminal in the bank didn’t seem very dangerous, so Call wasn’t worried about him. He needed to know what to do about Havoc’s hazard- small and agile or big and strong? Teeth or claws?

*Havoc, status?*

*These... don’t seem to be people.*

*Are they animals then?*

*I think they’re supposed to be.*

*How many of them are there?*

*Don’t worry, I can handle this.*

*How many of them, Havoc?*

...*I wouldn’t hesitate to call this an army.*

Call reeled from this new information. If he wasn’t scared before, he sure was now.
“Hey, do you plan on helping us?” #1 called. Call barely spared them a thought, he was thinking through his options. How many housepets were in the area? Wasn’t there are bear or two in the nearby woods? Why couldn’t he seem to remember?

“Can’t you take care of a novice like that yourself?” Call shouted back, still not thinking about it.

“He’s got a switchblade, you moron, now get over yourself and come help us!”

Call barely heard them.

“Uhh, little busy!” Call shouted back. He was still sorting through his mental list, thinking, thinking. How could they beat an army? Could they beat an army?

Maybe. Maybe they could.

Call stopped trying to sort through his list. If this was an army, they couldn’t be choosy. This was a call to everybody they could get.

Call took a deep breath. *Sorry in advance guys.*

**WAKE UP EVERYONE!** Call mentally projected- as loud and far as he possibly could. A few wild animals were probably very upset at him right now.

*I KNOW A LOT OF YOU DON’T KNOW ME AND A LOT OF YOU ARE MAD THAT I’M ASKING FOR A FAVOR AT SUCH AN HOUR, BUT THERE’S AN ARMY OF… MONSTERS, I ASSUME. HAVOC AND I NEED YOUR HELP.*

Call heard a bit of chatter coming back through, but he couldn’t quite make any of it out.

*IF YOU COULD COME TO THE BANK AND HELP US, I’D BE IN YOUR DEBT. THAT’S ALL.*

Call slipped out of the state of mind it took to project like that, and his ears started ringing. He was only slightly dizzy.

Promising like that to a bunch of wild animals… was not his best idea. Animals took debts very seriously. In fact, Call had no doubt in his mind that Havoc was trying to scold him right about now, and Call just couldn’t hear over the buzzing in his ears.

But, Call was getting a seriously bad feeling from the “army” outside. Like, really, really, really, really bad. And Havoc was fighting it all by himself.

Call’s hearing was clear up, and the sight he hadn’t noticed was gone was coming back, as well as some semblance of balance. He hadn’t ever tried to talk to that many animals at once before. He hadn’t even thought he could do it. Superpowers, man.

*Call! Call? Call-Callum? Cally! Call? Call. Callum! CALL?! Call...-UM!-all. CALL!*

A cacophony of voices were flying in and out of his head, and he couldn’t concentrate. The animals were all trying to respond, but he could only get the general jist of it; They were coming. They were all trying their best to come help him and Havoc.

He could only be relieved for a second before he felt his arms being wrenched behind his back and a blade put to his throat.
Right, of course, the bank robber. That guy.

“Oh, great. Little busy, huh? Thanks a lot,” #1 said sarcastically. The two superheroes were standing in front of him now, panting.

“Seriously guys? I honestly expected better. I mean, I don’t know who you are, but I’d assume if you were superheroes you could take down a guy who can’t even open a bank door,” Call responded. He had bigger things to worry about than a knife to his throat, when Havoc was out there with an army.

*Call! Did I just hear you say you have a knife to your throat?*

...Did Call project that thought?

Yes!

Is he accidentally projecting every thought he has?

*You are, yeah. I will come in there and fight that guy if I have to, army or not.*

Speaking of, how are you holding up? Call had to know. He was pretty sure that #1 or #2 or the robber was saying something, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care.

*I’m holding up. These guys don’t really know how to fight, and the reinforcements you called for should help.*

That’s good to hear.

*Okay, I’m glad that you’re reassured, now please get the knife away from your throat.*

If you insist.

Call dug around in his head for whatever was projecting his thoughts, but ended up just switching out of thought projection mode entirely. Which meant he couldn’t talk to any of the animals, but he didn’t want them knowing everything going through his head.

“You two,” the criminal said (his voice was high- was he nervous?), “Go unlock the safe and bring me every cent in there, or your partner gets it.”

Call snorted.

“We’re not partners,” #1 said coolly. Call was holding back a laugh.

“We’re also not going to let him “get it”, whatever that means,” #2 said. Seems that one actually had morals.

#2 started walking over to the counter and jumped it, and #1 followed huffily. Call was touched.

“Now that it’s just you and me,” Call said, “I can’t wait to get better acquainted.”

“Shu-”

The criminal didn’t get to finish his thought as Call promptly threw all his weight backwards and twisted his body violently, putting all his support onto his functioning leg and slamming them both off the wall and down to the floor.
The criminal had, of course, jerked the knife, but it only nicked his cheek, so Call was fine.

*That worked? Alright.*

Call rolled away from the criminal, who was pushing himself off the ground.

“See, this is your introduction to a hero that doesn’t fool around,” Call finished, standing with the criminal.

“The other two were just as cocky,” the criminal said. Call sighed.

“Yeah, and you ended up using a basic hostage situation against them since you didn’t want to fight anymore. You’re only making things worse for yourself buddy,” Call slid into his fighting stance, doing his best to balance his weight and keep the pain in his leg to a minimum.

“You see, you’ve made the mistake of bringing me into the game,” Call said, trying his best to be intimidating. It was probably working.

The criminal lunged towards him. Maybe the intimidation wasn’t working.

Call dodged, to the right of course, and pivoted around to face the criminal again. The criminal was wasting no time in coming after Call again, and suddenly Call realized what was so hard about fighting a person that had a switchblade.

One could take a punch. One could not so easily take a cut or a stab.

*Alright then, primary objective- get the blade away from the criminal.*

Call dodged around the criminal, effectively putting him behind the guy. Call then wasted no time in dropping down and slamming himself into the back of the criminal’s knees.

The criminal went crashing down as Call moved and got back to his feet. Before the criminal could get back up, Call stepped hard (*ow*) on his wrist. He let go of the blade immediately, and Call kicked it across the floor of the bank.

The criminal had gotten up, but that was fine, because now this was a fair fight.

The criminal, who now seemed to be having trouble using his right hand, took a step towards Call and threw a punch. See, this was definitely easier than a knife fight.

Call ducked under the criminal’s arm and smashed his shoulder into the criminal’s chest. The criminal made a small “oof?” sound as he and Call flew backwards. This would be childishly easy if Call’s leg wasn’t burning.

The criminal was moving his arm in, either to suffocate Call or hold him in one place, so Call dropped down again and took the opportunity to grab onto the criminal’s knees and pulling, (again) sending him to the ground.

Call sat on his chest and pinned his arms down.

“There are a lot of more effective ways to get money than robbing a bank. Getting a job, for example. Don’t do crime,” Call told the criminal through his heavy panting. Fights take a lot out of a guy, okay?

“It’s not that easy,” the criminal spat.
“No, probably not, and yet people do it anyway. Whose money do you think is in this bank?”

The criminal was about to respond, but that was when #1 and #2 came back. Call almost sighed in relief.

“Do either of you guys have rope?” He shouted. He heard hurried footsteps, then #1 and #2 each took one of the criminal’s wrists. Call got off him and pulled him up, then they forced his hands behind his back.

#1 produced a rope, his wrists were tied together tightly, and that was that.

Call wanted so badly to sit down, or lay down, or go home, but Havoc was still outside.

He felt a flash of pure panic when he realized Havoc hadn’t contacted him in a while, but quickly remembered that he’d shut off all communication systems (wow, that made him sound like a robot). He wondered how things were going out there.

The other two heroes were walking towards him now, but Call had to go outside and help Havoc and whatever other animals had shown up. Now that he wasn’t distracted with a fight, the overwhelming feeling of DANGER DANGER DANGER was back and Call was getting frantic, fast.

“How did you take him down all by yourself?” #1 asked indignantly. Call didn’t have time for this.

“Got the knife away from him. Obviously. How didn’t you two manage it?”

Call started to move towards the door, but #1 wasn’t done.

“No, I’m serious. This guy was crazy fast and crazy strong and had reflexes like I’ve never seen before. It wasn’t just the knife that was stopping us, you cocky neanderthal,” #1 was dumbfounded now. Call paused, his hand on the door handle.

“We were gone for no more than five seconds,” #2 said quietly. They sounded even more confused than #1.

“Not possible. That fight was at least 30.” Call’s tone was clipped. He needed to go help Havoc.

“Well, obviously something strange is happening. Since we all know the cops are going to take a while longer to show, let’s take this time to question everybody and figure out what’s going on here,” #1 said. There was conviction in their voice.

No. Call had to go. There was no two ways around it. Havoc.

Call shook his head and opened the door, and ignored the heroes’ shouts as he walked away. Or, he tried to. Somebody grabbed his wrist. Call thought he could hear the sound of a fight through the rain, but maybe it was just his imagination. He needed to go.

“What’s your name?” #2 asked him. Call could barely hear over his racing thoughts.

Call shrugged them off and walked (quickly as he could with his leg aching) in the direction he thought he heard the fight coming from. The other heroes could deal with everything he was leaving behind, and he never had to see any of them again. Havoc. Havoc was the one that mattered.

Call walked and walked, to the point that he thought he was going in the wrong direction. This was… pretty far away from the bank. And yet, ever so slightly through the pouring rain, he could
hear a horde of animals. Somewhere, somewhere.

He kept going, spinning in circles and straining his eyes and ears and growing short of breath.

When he finally came across the rumble in an obscure alley, he could hardly breathe.

Maybe that was due to his leg, or all the walking, but he was fairly sure he could fault it to the noxious scent in the air.

It was chaos.

Animals of all sizes were locked in vicious combat with dark… forms. Call could hardly see anything. Remember- it was dark and stormy.

Call spent a second searching for Havoc in the mess, but ended up ducking behind a trash can. He took a deep breath. Then he reopened his mental communication channel.

There was immediately a flood of voices and sounds and noises that gave him a headache. He couldn’t make out a word of it.

There was also… a darkness? A shroud. It was foreign, and fundamentally wrong, but Call tried his best to look past it and push down his panic.

Everyone is talking at once, Call projected, avoiding the shroud. The noise in his head increased instantly, then died down. A lot.

Animals were much more put together than humans.

Call!

That was-

Havoc! What’s happening? The sound of the animals fighting it out in the alley was bloodcurdling, and Call was terrified. He couldn’t even see the enemy. What had Havoc said? Monsters? An army?

These are monsters, Call. They’re too strong and too fast for us, I don’t know what to say. All of the birds that responded to your plea flew out, trying to lead them all off, but only about 75% of the monsters were actually drawn away. I don’t know their state as of now, my mental projection isn’t as good as yours.

Call started to withdraw from his and Havoc’s conversation so he could contact the birds, but-

That’s not all, though.

What else can there be? Call didn’t like where this was going.

This whole ‘hero’ thing tends to be a bit of a game to you, but you have to take this one seriously. These monsters- they’re lethal.

Yeah, okay-

I mean it Call. Be careful here. This is more than you think.

With that final comment, Havoc cut off contact with him. Call was sucked back into the present, with the fight going on around him, and the wild feeling of DANGER DANGER DANGER DANGER twisting his gut.
He decided to check on the birds before diving in on anything.

He scanned his mental map, and found there was a forest nearby. He threw a message out in the general direction of the forest, a quick inquiry.

Right when he felt the start of a response coming through, a form leaped out of the darkness and slammed into him.

*Led away. Safe now.*

Call rolled away from the… dog? It was a bit big to be a dog… *wolf*. Call rolled away from the wolf while it ran forward to attack him again.

Call found himself scared, more than usual. The wolf had hit him hard. This wasn’t a game.

The wolf reached him, stretched for him with clawed paws, and Call kicked it with his right leg. It whimpered, but didn’t stop advancing.

Call kicked it again, and again. It didn’t stop trying to maul him. The claws nicked his arms, his chest. Nothing deep- Call didn’t stop kicking. Now he was pushing at the wolf with his arms, trying to get it away from him.

Its eyes were stormy, swirling, wild. Fiery, a thousand colors. Call was scared. He was going to die.

The wolf pushed forward a little harder and Call’s arms gave out.

Call closed his eyes.

The furry mass was shoved away from him.

Call opened his eyes to see Havoc, snarling for a second before he jumped forward and attacked the other wolf viciously. Call had to look away.

All around him, in the alley, in the road, animals were fighting the wolf-monsters. It wasn’t pretty. Call felt a little sick, even. There were cats and dogs and badgers and bears and foxes and rabbits, none of which Call had expected to see here. There were mice in the corner gaining up on a wolf.

There was only one problem.

Looking around, Call knew they were fighting a losing battle.

These monsters were too strong, and there were too many. What would happen if the ones the birds led away came back? They were all doomed either way.

Call wanted to tell the animals to go home, then run himself. But then what would happen to the civilians?

*Stupid useless superpower, all I can do is get everyone to do things for me, or I’d be fighting just the same.*

*Stupid bum leg.*

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Another wolf leapt out of nowhere to attack him, and Call barely pushed this one away. He pushed, he kicked, he tripped, he punched.
It was a monster.

Call was running out of breath.

And the night went on like this, Call and the animals around him barely keeping the monsters at bay and barely keeping up with the pace. Losing battle or not, it seemed they would fight it.

Call was covered in sweat and blood and dirt, soaking wet from the pouring rain, covered in scratches and bruises, and felt his legs and lungs burning when the monster that was attacking him paused. Call, suddenly not being assaulted, looked around desperately for Havoc.

All the other monsters had paused too, and were looking in a single direction.

Call didn’t want to see what they were looking at, but he kind of had to look, didn’t he?

And when he did, what did he see except a human-like silhouette standing on the roof of the building they were next too? Of course. These were controlled monsters.

*An army’s gotta have a commander,* Call thought as the figure raised their arm.

The monsters all stiffened, only for a second, then they walked away.

That was it.

They just *walked away.*

Call and Havoc and all these other animals had spent the past, what, *half hour* fighting these things tooth and nail and *barely surviving* .

Call was tired, Call was hurt, Call could hardly breathe, but now he was *angry.*

*Call-* Havoc started. Call shut off mental communications again. Havoc wasn’t going to talk him out of this.

And so, despite it all, Call lugged himself off the ground and limped towards the rusty ladder of the side of the building.

His hands gripped the rungs, and he hauled himself off the ground. So what if it hurt? Everything hurt. So what if it was wet and raining? It had been for the past hour or two.

Up one rung. He could only use one leg to climb, but he would climb nonetheless.

Up the next. There wasn’t any breath in his lungs.

Up the next. He heard Havoc barking wildly.

Up.

Up.

Up.

Up.

The roof was splattered with puddles, and the rain seemed louder in the wide open space. Call could barely make out the human figure, but he *could* see through the dark so he *did.* At this point, next to
nothing was still *something*.

“Hey, jerkface!” Call shouted as loud as he possibly could, channeling all his anger into his voice.

The figure turned and looked at Call. Call couldn’t care less what they were looking at.

“Who,” Call said coldly, “do you think you are?”

Call heard sirens in the distance. He guessed the cops were finally showing up at the bank.

“Who am I?” The figure laughed. Call felt his stomach tug. Thunder echoed through the sky. The figure walked closer to Call, but he didn’t give up an inch.

They were a foot apart from each other, and Call could see their face in a flash of lighting. Or- a mask over their face.

The figure put a hand on Call’s shoulder.

**DANGER DANGER DANGER DANGER**

“Why, I’m the Enemy of Death, of course.”

--

Call may have cut off communications, but that couldn’t stop Havoc from being aware of his state of consciousness. So to say, Havoc knew the second Call passed out.

He immediately started to panic (and can you really blame him?), but what he didn’t expect was to see Call’s body flung off the roof.

It would be comical if this wasn’t a deadly situation.

Stupid, useless, dumb paws that can’t catch him.

Havoc frantically ran towards the spot where Call was falling, but knew that he ultimately would be able to do nothing. Couldn’t he try?

Stupid boy making stupid choices doing stupid things.

Havoc watched as Call fell, almost in slow motion. He wasn’t ready for this. Maybe he could run and lead the cops here?

Oh, no no no no no no no, please no.

Couldn’t he do something? He’d always been able to save Call, why not now? He had to.

Whatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhatdo -

A giant, hulking black bear reared up on her back legs, and caught Call in her front arms. The bear barely had the balance to do it, but she managed.

Havoc felt relief wash through him, and ran forward as the bear put Call down gently.
Thank you, Havoc told the bear. She nodded.

Everybody go home, Havoc told everyone in the alley. We’re done here. Thank you.

The animals filed out, and Havoc sat at Call’s side.

The cold rain in his face would wake him up soon enough.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Allllllright uhhh so hey let’s pretend it hasn’t been literal months yeah anyway. I spent, multiple all-nighters plotting this thing out? Hoooy boy do I have Plans. Strap in guys. Also get ready for MORE FREQUENT UPDATES I SWEAR I WON’T LEAVE YOU FOR THIS LONG EVER AGAIN IM SO SORRY ahem. Also, real quick: you’re all so kind. I keep getting notifications about comments and kudos on this fic and every time I see them I get so happy. Everybody is so awesome in the comments, whenever I need motivation to write I scroll through them, and by now I’ve read them so. many. times. You guys are the best. Thank you!!

Note the title of the fic is from that one panic at the disco song cause I listen to Vices every time I reread the books so,

Another Note did I mention I have a tumblr? Tired-pirate it's lit and all magisterium. Yay sideblogs.

That should be it? Okay?

*Jazz hands*

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Dog slobber is, arguably, the most disgusting substance in existence, and it was currently being coated all over Call’s face.

Call groaned and pushed Havoc away, though the very act of moving made his aching muscles burn. The pain was still better than getting licked awake by a wolf. Of course, his weak human attempts were feeble against the might of a determined wolf (meaning: Havoc continued to lick).

Arise, lazy human, thou hast school today.

Call groaned again, louder this time, and bopped Havoc on the nose.

“Where’s the snooze button?” He mumbled into his pillow, “I’m weak and have bruises the size of watermelons from last night, give me five more minutes.”

No rest for the weary. I’ve let you sleep in as long as possible.

Is a bed ever more comfortable than when you have to get out of it and face the world?

“Alright, no school today then,” Call said as he pulled his blanket up to his chin. He had (painfully) trudged home in the cold rain at roughly 2am last night, and was not up to existing today. Not to mention, bruises always hurt more the day after.

Havoc, of course, was having none of it. He huffed a mighty huff, then pushed Call out of bed. Call hit the ground with a thump and a whine (his entire body ached, being pushed off a bed didn’t feel too great). He never let go of his blanket, though. He could lose dignity, he could lose sleep, but his blanket would not be taken from him.
I wasn’t kidding when I said I let you sleep in as long as possible, Havoc said, joining Call on the floor and starting to harass him again. You have to be at school in ten minutes and it takes twelve minutes to get there on skateboard.

Call froze.

Despite all of his griping, he really did have to be at school today. There was a math test to deal with, and today was the last day for working on a science project that was about half done. Not to mention, make up work would be impossible, and he’d miss a lot of learning that one has to get straight from the teacher if one wants to understand anything.

So to say, he was doomed.

Call shot up and started changing out of his pajamas at record speed, moving through the pain. It wasn’t like it was going to hurt any less, and at a certain point he had to suck it up (though his dumb bum leg was stiff and stabbing with pain, but he couldn’t do very much about that, now could he?). Havoc was laughing at him, and Call shot him a quick look that he hoped conveyed “I have never hated you more than I do in this moment.”

Call raced out of his room with his outfit in disarray, but on his body, at least. Havoc pelted down the stairs ahead of him as Call grabbed his backpack. Call practically flew down the steps, only to lose his footing near the bottom. The world tipped and his stomach was in his throat, but he crashed into Havoc. Falling into a fluffy mass of dog was infinitely better than hardwood floors.

You’re welcome, Havoc remarked smugly as Call pushed himself up and trudged (speedily) down the hallway.

“I am not that predictable, you mangy mutt!” Call hollered through a mouthful of granola bar. Havoc lolled his tongue out of his mouth.

Call stormed into the garage, unsurprised to find his dad. His dad, however, was surprised to see him.

“Call, aren’t you supposed to be long gone by now…?” Alastair asked.

“I have eight minutes to be at school or I’m going to get ten points docked from my math test, which we both know I can’t afford. Can I get a ride?”

Alastair considered his mess of a son, who was panting in the doorway to the garage, wearing his shirt inside out, and hadn’t bothered to fix his supreme bedhead.

“Get in the car,” he said resolutely, grabbing his keys. Call smirked in relief before darting to the passenger seat of the Rolls Royce that was taking up most of the garage. Alastair punched the garage door opener before ducking into the driver’s seat.

Alastair started the ancient engine as the garage door rose, and made eye contact with his son.

“Let’s motor,” they said at the same time, and Alastair pulled out of the garage and down the driveway.

“You’ll have to remind me where your school is,” Alastair stated as he raced down streets in the general direction he thought they should be going. Call snorted.

“You think I know?” Call asked.
Alastair took a hand off the wheel specifically to facepalm.

“You skateboard to school every morning, and you don’t know how to get there?” Alastair asked.

“Nope,” Call said, popping the “P”. “I cut through the woods.”

Alastair sighed, then replaced his hand on the wheel.

“Then we’re going cold turkey.” Alastair said intensely. The Rolls Royce rumbled down the streets as fast as Alastair dared to push it. He scanned the horizon for Call’s school, looking for any hint that they were going in the correct direction. Call kept nervously checking the time.

“Dad!” Call exclaimed, suddenly. Alastair immediately slowed the car down, thinking Call had spotted something that he recognized was on the way to school.

“No, don’t slow down! We’re by the Mendy’s! This is the complete wrong side of town!”

Alastair gripped the steering wheel tighter.

“What do you suggest we do, then?”

They both sat as their time ticked away, thinking desperately.

“I know,” Call said suddenly. “The school is on Main Street, I remember that at least. If you drive down Main long enough, we’ll get there eventually.”

It sounded like a plan to Alastair, so he kicked the car back into gear and tore off down Main Street, away from the Mendy’s.

Call was right, once they had driven long enough on Main, the school came into view. Call was instantly relieved, but then he checked the time again.

He had a minute to get to class.

Call leaped from the car as soon as his dad pulled over to the curb. He shouted a quick “thanks” back to his dad before slamming the door shut and making his way towards the school building as fast as he could. If he thought his muscles ached before, now they were really on fire. He had to put up with it.

He made it into the school all right, the doors were still unlocked, but he still had yards of unforgiving hallways to traverse in thirty seconds.

He couldn’t run (darn leg), but he shuffle like Hell Hounds were after him, and shuffle he did. His heart was beating twenty times a second, which is how he counted down how much time he had until his demise.

The bell rang as he burst into his math classroom.

He stood, catching his breath inside the doorway. He could feel the blood pulsing through his body, and he was getting a headache from it all. His muscles and joints still ached, and his leg stung.

Mr. Lemuel was unamused.

“Late, Callum. Please take your seat,” he said, sounding bored. Call, feeling numb, shook his head.

“I’m not late,” he said between breaths. He had placed his foot inside of the classroom a moment
before the bell rang. He had been inside the classroom before the bell. He wasn’t late.

“My word is law, please take your seat,” Mr. Lemuel said again, with more force this time. As if that would work on Call.

“Sir, I was definitely inside the classroom before the bell rang,” Call tried again. He was barely gaining his breath back now, although everything still hurt (yes, he keeps pointing out how much everything hurts, but he’s not going to stop, because pain is terrible and he wants to complain about it).

“Don’t make me repeat myself again,” Mr. Lemuel said warningly.

“That sentence… doesn’t make grammatical sense. “Repeating again”, while possible, is redundant,” Call stated, knowing that correcting somebody on their grammar was the fastest way to frustrate them as well as condescend to them, therefore giving you the upper hand in an argument.

“Callum-”

“He really did,” piped a new voice. Call and Mr. Lemuel both looked towards the speaker.

“Come into class before the bell, I mean. I saw it,” Celia finished. She was looking Mr. Lemuel dead in the eye.

Mr. Lemuel said nothing as Celia stared him down and Call wheezed in the doorway. This went on for a second. Two. Three.

“All right,” Mr. Lemuel huffed. “You’ve made it this time, but don’t cut it this close again, understand?”

Call nodded.

“Good. Now, if you please, sit down,” Mr. Lemuel all but shouted. Call shot a smile to Celia, who grinned back at him, then trudged to his seat. When he plopped down on the hard, plastic chair, he knew instantly that he was in for a world of hurt.

This was going to be a long day.

The day got longer the moment Mr. Lemuel placed a thick math test in front of Call. Call ignored whatever Mr. Lemuel was saying, it never helped anyway, and started scanning the problems.

You’re kidding, Call thought, dread building. I know how to solve roughly two of these.

--

Call resumed his usual seat on the bleachers while his classmates scrambled to the locker rooms. He had a regularly scheduled brooding session that was supposed to start, but his head was still spinning with numbers.

He got through the test, but that’s the most he could say for it. Well. At least it was over.

Call took a few deep breaths to clear his mind, then settled into his regular brooding stance (hunched over, elbow on knee, hand on chin, bangs in face). Being the kid that had to sit out of PE made him stick out enough, but it also gave him a gross amount of restless energy. Dealing with it resulted in sneaking out at night and gradually becoming a superhero. Woohoo.

Although, today he was a bit glad for his seat in the bleachers. Doing twenty pushups with the kind
of bruises he had did not sound like a fun time. In fact, he could take this valuable free time to do some much-needed thinking.

What happened last night?

Call thought back to the ugly battle in the alley, the monstrous monster things. What were they? They looked wolvish, but then again, so does a lot of modern art. Oh, heck, was the whole thing a symbolistic dream? Wait, no, he had wicked scratches from their claws. Symbolism doesn’t make you bleed. Physically.

Now that I think about it, Havoc might know more about this than he’s letting off. He was pretty sure of himself last night. Call sighed. That, and he’s a wolf himself. Not that that means anything, but. Wolves don’t just show up in the middle of cities.

Whenever Call had asked Havoc questions about his origin, Havoc dodged having to answer. Call had long let that go. Maybe it was time to dig up the past.

Then, there was the question of the figure on the roof. Just thinking about the so called Enemy Of Death (dumb name, are they death’s enemy or are they made of death?) made his gut twist in that all too familiar fashion. Danger. Somebody was in danger. Somebody was dangerous.

The feeling got stronger. Call felt his blood rush when he realized. This wasn’t a memory of an encounter, something was going down, somewhere in the city. There was danger.

Usually if something happened during the day or while he was at school, Call would call the police and let them handle it. He had Deputy Charles’ personal number. However, after last night, Call wasn’t sure he wanted anybody else dealing with the crime in the city. It felt too dangerous for non-superheroes to take on, even if they had advanced weapons.

Call remembered the figure on the roof.

He felt the Enemy Of Death wasn’t something the cops could handle.

His gut wrenched, and Call took a deep breath while his heart started racing. He pushed up from his brooding position, stretched for effect, and shuffled out from the bleachers. When he approached the PE teacher, she looked concerned. He had never actually talked to her, so, this would be an interesting first-ish impression.

“Can I go to the nurse?” Call asked. “I have a bad case of the Mondays.”

The PE teacher’s expression dropped.

“Young man-” she started, scoldingly. Call’s Danger Sense (tm) got strong enough that he felt a little sick. He needed to move this along.

He doubled over and clutched his head. He wasn’t good at acting, but at least he was extraordinary at being melodramatic.

“Please Ma’am! The Mondays! I have the Mondays! I have to go to the nurse!” He let some desperation creep into his voice, and at least a little of the panic that was currently running his heart along at 120 beats per minute.

“Woah, wai-” now she sounded confused. Not what he was going for.

Call started to stand up straighter, then ended up toppling. He staggered and caught himself (a faked
sequence, he had toppled to his right and caught himself on his uninjured leg, not that anybody would notice). He never stopped clutching his head.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” he said weakly. That part was real. His stomach was lurching.

“Ugh, do you need an escort to the nurse?” the teacher asked.

“I- I think I’ll be fine. I just gotta go,” Call muttered before walking away. His pace was rushed, although the urgency behind it was different from what his PE teacher expected.

*There’s no way I pulled that off.* Call thought as he reached the door.

“Aaron, can you walk with Call to the nurse?”

*Okay, so I didn’t pull it off.*

Call didn’t slow down, but some kid rushed up to walk beside Call. Said kid, Aaron hopefully, looked like your classic jock. Call immediately didn’t like him, but then again, Call immediately doesn’t like a lot of people.

As soon as the gym door shut behind them, Aaron smirked.

“It’s Tuesday,” he said. He sounded… amused? Call responded by rolling his eyes.

“It seems my particular case of the Mondays is so serious that it rolled over to today. This could be fatal.” Call was desperately trying to think how he was going to ditch this guy and get out of school without being caught. He had no clue how he had mental space to be sarcastic, but maybe it was just second nature.

Were there any doors without cameras on them in this entire school? Call didn’t think so. Maybe he could climb through a window. Did this school have people watching the cameras 24/7 anyway? Maybe he could take the chance and just leave through a door.

“The nurse might have a hard time believing that,” Aaron remarked. Call, thinking deeply, completely ignored him.

“Why do you want to go to the nurse anyway? Were you getting antsy from sitting in the bleachers all block?” Aaron just never quit, did he?

“Something like that,” Call responded. The door out to the PE track was probably the least monitored, the one a threat is least likely to come from. Call would use that one, then. It was just down this hallway to the left.

“Why don’t you ever treat it like a second Study Hall?” Aaron asked.

“Mhmm,” Call agreed, because he wasn’t even listening at this point. His stomach was still lurching, and Call really wished he could move any faster than he was. He turned down the PE hallway, and found it blissfully empty. He was already planning his next move when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Call ducked away from the hand and turned around to see Aaron still standing at the hallway intersection. Left to the nurse, right to the door.

Aaron looked past Call to the door, then made eye contact. Quite suddenly, things felt very tense. Call would not have expected that. Aaron looked a little scary.
“This is how you define ‘something like that’?” Aaron asked. He was trying to keep a friendly smile on his face, and Call gave him points for effort, but it only added to the intimidation. This is what you call passive aggressive.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of the justice types,” Call said, tiredly, because he was tired.

Aaron’s smile twisted a little, giving Call the impression he had said something funny. Or ironic. Probably ironic.

“Call, let’s just go the nurse so she can give you an icepack and we can be on our ways,” Aaron reasoned. Was this kid serious? Call scoffed. Maybe he shouldn’t have, but he did. His chest gave a particular pang, something along the lines of There Is Seriously Danger Come On Dude on the scale.

Aaron, meanwhile, seemed to grow more affronted from the scoff. Call took this moment to wish that he weren’t shorter than everybody in existence, because Aaron towering over him right now was kind of intimidating. Only kind of.

“Is it tense in here or is it just me?” Call asked, trying to save the situation with his golden sense of humor. He was slowly backing towards the door. He needed to leave, fast, and get to the trouble.

“You aren’t going through that door, stop trying,” Aaron remarked. Call was startled. It had definitely gotten tense in here.

“I really don’t see how you’re going to stop me,” Call said. He seriously doubted Aaron would start a fight in the middle of the hallway. Even if he did, Aaron was going to lose said fight.

“I could tell a teacher,” Aaron said. That stopped Call in his tracks. He couldn’t get in trouble about this, his dad would crack down about sneaking out and he wouldn’t be able to prowl the streets every night.

“I don’t see why you care so much,” Call huffed. He felt himself scowling. Aaron was smirking from having obtained the upper hand.

“I care because there are some bad things out on the streets these days, and people shouldn’t be wandering outside all on their lonesome,” Aaron said smugly. It was Call’s turn to be affronted.

“I can read between the lines here, Aaron. Are you insinuating I’m trying to sneak out and wreak havoc?” Call asked. This was the height of irony. His stomach lurched again, simply to accentuate the situation, surely.

Aaron leaned against the wall, still managing to face Call despite it. He looked really cool too. Darn.

“I’m insinuating that anybody could be wreaking havoc, that’s all,” Aaron said. Call suspected that Aaron was lying through his teeth. His stomach (danger sense) took that moment to turn over, while all his hair stood on end.

Serious danger.

Call had to leave, immediately. He’d deal with the consequences later.

“Forget it,” Call said, trying to sound aloof and uncaring but in reality sounding a little weak. Nonetheless, he spun on his heel and walked briskly down the hallway. He heard Aaron shuffle behind him, then rapid footsteps.

Call reached the door and wrenched it open. He slipped through and slammed the thing shut. Call
knew there was no real way of barricading the door, so instead he sped his way to the woods that were right next to the school. He ducked into the thick shrubbery. These were the woods that he cut through everyday to get to school, so he had an immediate advantage over Aaron in that he knew the turf.

Call’s stomach turned over again, sharply, and he was reminded of the tense situation he was in. He needed to work fast, because people were in definite, bad danger at this point. He sorted through things in his head to get everything done efficiently.

Objective one, ditch Aaron.

Objective two, meet up with Havoc near scene of danger.

Objective three, stop danger.

Objective four, be back in time for third block science.

This would work, right? Totally.

Call was deep into the woods at this point, and when he looked over his shoulder, he judged that there was nobody anywhere near him. He’d managed objective one while he was still planning. Sweet. Making up for lost time here.

Objective two time.

Hey Havoc, Call sent through the mental channel. Havoc would likely scold him for this.

What are you doing, Call? Havoc responded. He sounded tired.

Danger, was all Call replied. He was too busy trying to chase down where the danger was to have an in-depth conversation at the moment. East side of town? Outside the Pizza Plaza? Roughly. Maybe. That seemed like the best bet.

His danger sense was never specific, okay?

Why don’t you call the cops like usual? Havoc asked. He sounded alarmed.

I don’t want them dealing with what we did last night, Call thought.

They’d probably be more qualified. You’re a kid and I’m a dog.

Weaponry wouldn’t affect the Enemy of Death, Call responded matter-of-factly. He was walking down a weird side street now, trying to look casual and like he definitely didn’t just break out of school.

That’s a dumb name, Havoc thought.

I know, right?

Havoc did the mental equivalent of an exasperated sigh. Where do I meet you?

Call gave a mental fist pump. He was in the park at this point. He half considered commandeering a skateboard so he could move faster.

Outside the dollar store, Call told Havoc. Havoc sighed again. Call got a quick dizzy spell. That was Hurry Up I’m Not Kidding Anymore on the danger scale. Uh oh.
Be there now-ish, Call told Havoc. Havoc didn’t bother to respond, but Call knew Havoc had heard him.

Call, meanwhile, was getting to the busy side of town. He had to walk down this block and one other to get to the East side of town, then he had to walk all the way to the dollar store (which was directly next to the Pizza Plaza).

His leg was already aching. He didn’t even want to move after brutally fighting and being pushed off a roof last night, but what could he do? He felt he was out of options here.

So he walked, and walked, and walked, all the while growing more and more antsy as the tension in his chest built. Maybe he should have called the police, if only for a ride.

Eventually, he was out behind the dollar store, and Havoc was there too, panting. Call was relieved to see him. He crouched down in front of Havoc and caught his breath.

So what’s our gameplan? Call asked, opting for mental over verbal communication right now. The danger was likely a few meters away, but only a few meters away. His danger sense was definitely doing the equivalent of what a smoke detector does, so they needed to get to work.

Can you tell me anything about the nature of the situation? Havoc asked. Call took a second to analyze everything he was being told by his senses.

They’re in the alley on the other side of the Pizza Plaza, Call thought to Havoc. There are a few wolf monster things there, and from the way my danger sense is going off, so’s the Enemy.

Havoc didn’t respond, he just looked over Call’s shoulder, in the direction of the scene.

What is it Havoc? Call asked. He was getting seriously nervous now.

I smell blood, Havoc thought. Call’s breath caught.

Let’s get closer and see what the scene looks like, Call suggested. They obviously needed to do something, but what? Call couldn’t fight the Enemy. Neither could Havoc. Nobody could, from the look of things.

Havoc and Call soundlessly inched around the dollar store to the alleyway. Call paused, listening acutely for any noise that could give away the Enemy’s position or objective. There was only a bit of cluttering from the other end of the alley. So, Call peeked around the edge of the wall, as did Havoc.

Call couldn’t see them very clearly, but it seemed that the Enemy had somebody cornered. Two wolf monsters were growling, seemingly posed for attack.

“Do you understand?” Said a voice that sounded a lot like the Enemy.

“What the hell, dude? I know you’re trying to intimidate me into submission, but you’re only provoking me into hating you more,” spoke a different voice that very much did not sound like the Enemy. Call had to admire the kid’s nerve. However, one of the monsters gave a growling bark, and Call’s danger sense gave him a kick in the gut. Maybe that wasn’t the best move.

A figure, Call assumed this one was the Enemy, slammed their hand into the wall. Call thought it was just an anticlimactic, dramatic tantrum until he heard cracking concrete. A sickly smell crept through the alley as a small cloud of dust rose.

We have to get him out of there, Call thought to Havoc. Havoc gave a short nod.
I’ll take care of the wolf monsters. You handle the extraction. Before Call could respond, Havoc leapt into the alley and ran straight for the monsters. While the Enemy and the wolves were momentarily distracted, Call moved silently around the corner and along the wall. The opposite wall had stopped crumbling, but Call could see the cracks spiderwebbing through it. At the epicenter of the cracks, Call’s eyes found on the kid he was saving.

Jasper.

Call internally groaned, but sped up his movements as his Danger sense gave a pointed pang. At this point, the Enemy had turned back to Jasper, supposedly assuming that the wolves could take on Havoc without much assistance. Call had to use a good old fashioned distraction, then.

He snuck silently until he was standing slightly to the Enemy’s right, directly behind them. Then he tapped lightly on the Enemy’s left shoulder.

When the Enemy whipped to the left, hands ready to attack, Call grabbed Jasper and pulled him behind a conveniently placed dumpster. From their position, the two should be virtually invisible to the Enemy. Hopefully. Also hopefully the Enemy wouldn’t look for them too thoroughly.

Jasper opened his mouth, and Call saw the gears turning in his head. Call couldn’t risk Jasper being an idiot and revealing them to the Enemy, so he slapped a hand over Jasper’s mouth, and gave him a pointed scowl. Jasper scowled back. Call sensed Havoc run out of the alley and heard the other two wolves follow him.

It was Call and Jasper against the Enemy.

“Where’d you- ugh!”

The dumpster they were hiding by gave a loud clang, and Call had to assume the Enemy had kicked it. This guy had a temper.

“How’d they get away so quickly?” The Enemy muttered, and Call’s breathing hitched. His danger sense was essentially screaming, but that wasn’t much help.

The alley was still, for only a moment.

Then the Enemy turned on their heel and walked after the monsters.

Call got his hand off Jasper’s face and wiped it on his pants, then told Havoc that the Enemy was coming and he needed to lose the tail (haha, get it, cause they’re wolves).

Jasper was staring at Call like he was a madman. Call sighed.

“Is something wrong?” He asked tiredly. Now that the danger was gone, the energy flew from Call’s body and all his muscles went back to their persistent mission of making Call’s life as painful as possible.

“I didn’t expect you of all people to pull a rescue like that, especially for me,” Jasper said.

“It’s my-” job. The rest of that sentence was job. However, it suddenly occurred to Call that he wasn’t in costume.

Oh no.

“Why aren’t you in school?” Jasper asked. He looked dangerously calculating. This was not good,
“I skipped,” Call said evenly.

“No, you didn’t,” Jasper responded, glaring at Call again. “That was a bit too convenient.”

Call’s danger sense was bleeping a bit, but he didn’t know if that was because of Jasper or because of Havoc. Either way, it didn’t bode well. Call stood up, brushing invisible dust off his clothes and looking into the distance to avoid Jasper’s scrutinizing.

“I have to be in science,” Call said dismissively. He did have to be in science. It was their last day to work on a project for a summative grade. Call started to walk out of the alley, leaving Jasper behind, and with full plans to save Havoc, when-

“Second block doesn’t end for another 50 minutes, Radar.”

Cold fear shot through Call. He didn’t like the tone in Jasper’s voice.

“As if,” Call said mockingly. His heart was racing.

“Don’t try to play this off, you have to be Radar. How else would you find me in an alley all the way across town when I was in danger? Who else has a giant dog that helps him take out bad guys? And, let’s face it, you’re a bit of a coward. You wouldn’t have been able to do that if you hadn’t faced this situation before.”

Jasper stood up and strolled towards Call, and everything about his manner (and his voice) seemed smug. Call scowled.

“That’s not proof,” he tried. Jasper was standing in front of Call now, and Call once again cursed the fact that he had to look up at everyone. Jasper had an eyebrow raised and a dumb smirk, and coupled with the small cut on his face he looked pretty… cool. And Intimidating. Call hated everything about this situation.

“Gotcha,” Jasper said, and Call huffed. That’s when Havoc came running up.

I managed to lose them. What’s going on? Shouldn’t you be heading back to school?

Call absentmindedly patted Havoc’s head, but he never broke eye contact with Jasper.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell,” Jasper said teasingly, still with that smirk. “Probably.”

You’re not in costume and we’re both idiots, Havoc said flatly.

That about sums it up, yeah, Call responded.

“You’d better not,” Call said darkly, hoping that he had some presence, seeing as he was a crime fighting superhero. Havoc gave a little growl to emphasize the point. This is why they were good partners.

Call saw some flicker of fear in Jasper’s expression, but he only scoffed at the two. It was good enough for Call.

Call pushed past Jasper and started walking back to school, Havoc trotting at his side. Jasper’s footsteps went off in a direction that was definitely not to school.

Call would ask, but it wasn’t any of his business.
As soon as Call got home, he threw his backpack off and collapsed on the nearest vaguely comfortable piece of furniture. Havoc stampeded down the stairs and jumped on Call, which, not gonna lie, was pretty painful.

*You’re acting like you didn’t just see me,* Call said while petting Havoc. Havoc licked his face.

*I’m sorry that I’m happy to see you home from the Torture Chamber and that we get to hang out for the next few hours,* Havoc responded, wagging his tail.

*What’s got you in such a good mood?* Call asked. He didn’t know that he was smiling fondly, but he was smiling fondly.

*I don’t know,* Havoc responded, curling up on Call. This was a bit awkward, seeing as Havoc was humongous. *It’s just that the Enemy doesn’t seem like as big of a threat after we survived today’s encounter, and now whatever fear or foreboding we had before is lesser or nonexistent. Havoc yawned. It’s pleasant. That and my favorite show is on. Can you turn on the TV?*

Call laughed and scruffed up the fur on Havoc’s head, then turned on the TV.

While the two contentedly watched Havoc’s reality show, Call thought about what Havoc had said. Call guessed Havoc was right. He felt a lot less scared. Hey, maybe things weren’t as bad as they both had made them out to be. And if Havoc thought this was reason enough to stop being cynical and sarcastic for a while so they could just happily watch TV, then they might as well.

Call found himself laughing at some of the poor humor, Havoc got strangely worked up about the contestants, and it was a really nice afternoon.

Call was absentmindedly patting Havoc when the screen fizzed, went black, and an entirely different image popped up. Call froze in shock. The figure on screen was all too familiar.

“Hello. My name is Constantine, but you would do well to refer to me as The Enemy Of Death. I have an announcement to make.”
It's really convenient that not having belt loops is the latest fashion amongst criminals and wrongdoers ^_(-ω-)_/¯

Also. Real quick. You guys. You're the coolest. Ever. I have read every comment at least 10 times at this point and I still can't help but smile at all of them, thanks a million, I mean that genuinely. If you left a comment, that message is for you- thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou.

I like this chapter a lot, but also hate it, so uhhhh enjoy (and hey, it only took two months, are you proud of me)

Target locked and located, Havoc said. They’re over here.

Call could hear him concentrating a whole roof away. Tracking people down, especially when they’re on the move, is a lot harder than it looks on TV. Sheesh. The last thing Call’d heard from the TV had hit him hard enough that it was still noisily rattling around in his head.

“Hello. My name is Constantine, but you would do well to refer to me as The Enemy Of Death. I have an announcement to make.

You see this glass vial? No, it’s not a virus that’ll make you all sick, you see, that’s already been released on the city. This? This is the antidote. Don’t bother trying to recreate it, I can promise you won’t be able to. This vial holds the only thing that can stop the virus. And if the virus isn’t stopped? It’ll just keep getting stronger. It never stops.

Yes, it is fatal, to answer your question. Not to mention more contagious than I care to express.

Now, the reason for all this fuss is quite simple. We want the city. Hand over the mayor, and we hand over the antidote. Remain pigheaded, and watch your brothers and neighbors fall victim to our plague.

Your choice, Magista.”

As much as Call didn’t want to admit it, the city was in crisis. At this point, they could mark Constantine as a supervillain. Which meant Magista needed its superheroes.

All three of them.

Four if you count Havoc.

So Call, albeit slowly, made his way over the rooftops. This sounds a lot cooler than it really was, as he was mostly just climbing flimsy ladders and making jumps that had his heart leaping, even if they
were only two feet. Havoc, on the other hand, was having the time of his life with this.

Why would anyone think it’s reasonable to travel by rooftop?

Eventually, after much sniffing and jumping, Call and Havoc found themselves standing on top of a bakery at sunset, staring down Magista’s resident superheroes: Convict and Caped Justice.

Call couldn’t think of lamer names if he tried.

“Identify yourself,” Caped Justice stated. Looking back, Call didn’t know how he didn’t immediately recognize Caped Justice at the bank. He’s got signature dumb blond hair, not to mention a blue mask and cape. Hence the name. He was kind of the face of the city, and Call was pretty sure Caped Justice had a billboard somewhere. He was literally their poster boy.

At least he fought crime well.

“I’m Radar,” Call answered evenly, putting a hand on Havoc’s scruff. Nobody really remembered Radar for his face, partially cause he had it hidden behind a mask as well, but people found it hard to forget the giant wolf that ran around with him.

Call was acutely aware of the reputation he had built for himself in the city, and quite frankly, he was proud of it. Unlike Caped Justice and Convict, his costume was just a gray sweatshirt with faded black letters and a mask. Apparently, when people can’t see your entire face, they find it way harder to recognize you. It’s worked so far. The only person that knew his identity was Jasper.

Call was trying not to think about that.

Radar was known for being just as scruffy as his wolf, not only in appearance (his hair was a mess), but also when it came to communication. He never talked, never got a partner, and was always gruff when people approached him.

That’s the thing- Radar was gruff, sarcastic, vaguely uncaring, and only worked at night. However, most importantly to Call, the people knew him as dependable. Equipped with his danger sense, if there was crime in the city, Radar could show up to stop it (or, when Radar was busy, his dog could). The city trusted Radar. Even if he didn’t exchange words with people after he saved them, he always saved them in the first place.

It was a pretty sweet deal.

“I’m assuming you’re here because of the broadcast,” Convict noted briskly. She was the star of the city, right along with Caped Justice. For good reason. She easily had the coolest superpower ever, and used it to mercilessly take down criminals. She could control water. She would break it out from pipes in the walls and turn it into mist, draw it from the air and make a whip, or freeze it around a criminal’s foot when they have the audacity to step in a puddle. The possibilities were endless, and she was genius enough to exploit all of them.

Her dumb name was based more on her costume than her power, and it took Call a sadly long amount of time to piece that together. Costume-wise, she had a cloak. It was dark blue, so dark that it looked black. The cloak was swisher than any item of clothing had a right to be. When the hood was down, you could see she had a black masquerade-style mask, much like Call. She looked like a convict.

“What else would I be here for?” Call asked, and Havoc snorted. Call knew he was laughing, but the other heroes tensed at the action, seemingly about to fight something.
“He only attacks criminals and his own tail, I doubt you’ve got much to worry about,” Call quipped, “although, Convict.”

“Yes, we all see the hilarious contradiction between my name and my profession, Sonar,” Convict retorted. Caped Justice gave her a Look that Call probably shouldn’t have picked up on, but definitely did.

Did you see that? He asked Havoc. Havoc flicked his right ear. Yes.

“It’s Radar,” Call felt the need to say.

“I’m well aware,” came the response.

This was why he always worked alone. Call sighed.

“The broadcast,” Caped Justice jumped in, “what about it?”

“Well uh, what are we going to do about it?” Call asked. Yeah, that was a great way to propose a partnership, real smooth, Call.

“We?” Convict asked disdainfully.

“Yes, we,” Call responded easily, “the city needs its heroes, and that includes us.” Convict glanced at Havoc when Call said “us”. People usually found it weird that he treated animals like humans, but it wasn’t so weird when you remembered that Call could talk to even the tiniest spider.

“Are you proposing a partnership against this… Enemy of Death?” Caped Justice asked. He sounded painfully formal. Call’s brain felt like it was short circuiting.

“You betcha,” Call said. The only thing that stopped him from giving them fingerguns was Havoc sending him strong do not give them fingerguns vibes.

The words seemed to hang in the air for a moment, along with the warm smell wafting up from the bakery below them. There was some vague shouting in the distance, and the rumble of rush hour traffic. It was odd to remember that the world was still spinning outside of this square of roof. The world didn’t realize how crucial this square of roof was.

“Fine,” Convict stated, just like that. “Welcome to the team.”

Caped Justice was gaping at her, and Call had to laugh at how much their dynamic reminded him of his and Havoc’s. Call, too, had a tendency to make rash decisions without consulting the other, and Havoc also made a habit of communicating his exasperation freely.

“Welcome to the team,” Caped Justice said, incredulously and genuinely. Somehow he made the combination work.

I didn’t think it’d be that easy, Call thought to Havoc.

The worst is yet to come, Havoc reminded him, you’ve still got the rest of this mess to sort out.

Way to be a Debby Downer.

I’m being a realist.

Negative Nancy.
Call.
Sad Sally.
Callum.
Rude Wally.

*Those two don’t even alliterate, Call.*

Wacked-out Wally?

*That’s… an improvement.*

*See! Now you’re being positive!*

“...Are you having a mental conversation with your wolf?” Caped Justice asked.

“No, we’re just gazing meaningfully into each other’s eyes,” Call quipped. Out of the corner of his vision, he might’ve seen Convict snicker at the comment.

“As much as I’d love to continue this battle of wits, we have work to do,” Caped Justice remarked. Call, sadly, had to agree.

“Let’s just... go over everything we know so far,” Convict proposed. She walked to the edge of the roof and sat down on it, hanging her feet off the edge. Caped Justice followed her, so Call and Havoc did too. Sitting in a row on the roof of the bakery and looking out on Magista at sunset seemed very surreal to Call. He felt something, but who knows what it was. That great, overtaking feeling of something.

“That guy at the bank last night, he has to have something to do with it,” Convict started. “Nothing’s a coincidence in this business, and he was too close to the incident and too hard to beat.”

“I really think you’re over exaggerating his skill level,” Call said. The other two heroes gave him a Look. They seemed to be really good at that.

“I just ha-” Call tried.

“Let’s save that conversation for later,” Caped Justice cut him off, eyeing the darkening horizon. “What else do we know?”

*Call, they don’t know about the Enemy’s wolf army, Havoc reminded him. They weren’t in the alley last night. They also don’t know that the Enemy wants something with Jasper.*

*Let’s keep the whole Jasper encounter between us for now, Call responded quickly. I don’t want them anywhere near him and his knowledge.*

*Is it that big of a deal?*

*Yes, it is.*

“After the bank thing last night, I ran into the Enemy of Death,” Call said suddenly into the pondering silence. Well, near silence. There was still shouting coming from the streets, not to mention the sirens and usual roll of engines.

The other two heroes were looking at him like he was a madman.
“Do tell,” Convict let out, and it dawned on Call that he had caught them off guard.

“It was in an alley, some ways away from the bank. He was leading an... an army of wolvish monsters. No, not like Havoc,” Call noted when he saw Convict’s eyes dart towards his best friend. “They were... vicious.” He half considered pulling down the collar of his sweatshirt so they could see the scratch marks littering his collarbone, but he didn’t want to scare them. “The wolves obeyed the Enemy mindlessly. He was definitely leading them into the city,” Call finished.

“Are you saying there’s an army of monster wolves stationed up somewhere in Magista?” Convict asked.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, yes.”

“What I’m worried about,” Caped Justice, who had been staring absently into the city, chimed in, “is the virus.”

Call took a moment to think about that. They knew nothing about the virus, only that it was a threat.

“If he could bully us with an army of monsters, why would he bother with a virus? Having two standalone offensive weapons makes no sense, unless the monsters are his defensive.”

“They’re not his defense, they’re his warriors,” Call noted, remembering the encounter with Jasper.

“There lies the problem,” Caped Justice replied, looking at Call now.

“There must be something special about that virus,” Convict said. The statement made Call freeze.

That was a terrifying prospect.

Just what had the Enemy released on the city?

In the darkened light, despite the growing shouts and jarring sirens, despite the sounds of Magista being loud and chaotic and panicked, there was a cold instant of silence, frozen by fear.

“We can’t do much with what we know right now,” Convict murmured. It thawed time’s frost.

“You’re right,” Caped Justice said, standing and wiping off invisible dust. “Let’s go home and think on what we know, then reconvene tomorrow, same time.”

“Same place?” Call asked, standing too. Convict and Havoc followed.

“You know it,” Caped Justice responded. He started walking towards a connecting roof.

Convict nodded at Call, then went after Caped Justice.

Call took a second to recollect his thoughts, when-

DANGER DANGER DANGER DANGER DANGER DA

Call’s instincts kicked in as he raced as fast as he could down the length of the roof, which was a lot slower than he would’ve liked, to the other heroes. He projected the feeling to Havoc, not having time for words. The danger was too immediate. Call was getting nausea from how hard and fast it had struck him.

Call launched himself at Convict and tackled her to the ground. Call’s head was ringing, either from the alarm or the fall.
“What the-” Convict was saying, fighting Call to try and roll away. He held fast. Havoc tackled Cape Justice up ahead.

Just as the two slammed into the concrete of the roof, something flew threw the air where they had been. It bit the wall of the high-rise building in front of them. A knife. Call, hearing footsteps behind them, instantly rolled off of Convict and held out a hand to haul her to her feet. She took it.

As soon as they were both standing, Call felt a stinging pain shoot through his left side, and he stumbled. He shouldn’t have pushed his leg like that. He shot his hand out to catch himself, and it landed on Havoc, who had run to his side.

You okay? Havoc asked. Call looked up, and forced focus. Convict and Caped Justice were both fighting… a blur. Call could barely see in the twilight.

Answer me, Call.

I’m fine, Call said insistently, willing his leg to stop throbbing. It was almost working.

You’re not fine, Havoc growled.

Doesn’t matter. We gotta help them. Call tried to step forward. It almost worked. Havoc moved when Call did, though, and Call never stopped leaning on him.

You already helped them, and it’s how you got injured, Havoc pushed.

Call watched as Caped Justice took a fall, and while he was down, the attacker kicked him in the stomach. A wave of water came out of seemingly nowhere and hit the attacker like a freight train, but it only barely seemed to phase them. It was enough that Caped Justice could get up, though.

Help doesn’t have limits, Havoc.

Call let go of the wolf and took a step forward, it was wobbly, and it was painful, but he could walk.

Call!

Don’t worry about me. Convict barely dodged the swipe of another blade, but couldn’t dodge the following punch. Caped Justice tried to knock the feet out from under the attacker, but only succeeded in kicking them and engaging them in another bout of hand-to-hand.

Worry about them, Call finished.

Havoc hesitated, growled, then bounded into the fight, all teeth and claws. Call watched him for a moment, then had to concentrate on breathing. His danger sense was manifesting itself in the wild beating of his heart now, which wasn’t helping the throbbing in his leg.

His alarm never stopped going off until he dealt with the source of it, so hopefully, it would all get worse and then it would get better, right?

Call took his painful steps, getting closer to the scuffle. The attacker threw Havoc off of their shoulder, pulled a complex wrestling move on Caped Justice that grounded him, then turned fully to fight Convict. The attacker had taken out the other two threats so they could face the serious threat, it seemed. Convict, even brandishing water around her like rings to a planet, couldn’t have much chance one on one against the guy that could take three on one.

Luckily, Call was still standing, directly behind the attacker at that.
Primary objective- get the blade away from the attacker.

The blade was in their right hand, glinting ominously. Call was relieved to see there wasn’t blood on it.

See if there are any others on them, Havoc thought weakly to Call. Call did a sweep with his eyes.

One in their right boot, two more in their belt, Call thought back to Havoc. The attacker was saying something to Convict, staring her down, but Call couldn’t bother to listen.

What kind of person even has that many knives? Havoc asked Call. He still wasn’t getting up.

The kind we should be concerned about, Call responded, putting pieces together in his head.

Quick as a whip, Call leaned down (thank God it was on his strong side) and pulled the knife out of the attacker’s boot. When the attacker reacted, swinging around knife-first, Call ducked under the swipe and cut their belt off. He threw the belt, knives still attached, behind him. Hopefully Havoc or Caped Justice caught it.

Just like that, the attacker had one knife, Call had one knife, and Convict was still standing.

It concerned Call that Havoc and Caped Justice weren’t getting up, but he couldn’t worry about that now.

The attacker tossed the one knife they had from hand to hand. They grinned. Call still couldn’t see their entire face.

“See, this is your introduction to a criminal that doesn’t fool around,” the attacker said, smugly. Call recognized those words. They were his own.

“Oh, nice to see you again, how are the kids?” Call said to cover his own confusion and panic. There were too many pieces, too many knives, too many things.

“You thought I was in jail, didn’t you?” The attacker asked. “Well, surprise.” Call really didn’t like the look on the attacker’s face.

The attacker flipped the knife around in his left hand.

“Is robbing banks not enough for you anymore?” Call asked, holding a fighting stance. He leaned heavily on his right side, completely ready to spring where he needed to in order to avoid that knife. He knew better than to glance over the attacker’s shoulder at Convict to see what she was doing, but he could see her moving out of the corner of his eye. He wished he knew what she was up to, but it was getting hard to see anything in the darkening light.

“It’s not the money I’m after,” the attacker responded.

With that, he lunged forward, brandishing the knife.

Call, panicking, used the knife in his hand to block the attack. He braced for the cut he knew was coming. Surprisingly, the two knives met at the hilt, crossing like swords in a pirate movie. Call didn’t have time for rushing relief, since he could see the burning hate and intense concentration in the attacker’s stare.

Looking into his eyes in that moment, Call was completely sure that he was going to die.

The attacker smirked.
“The Enemy of Death sends his regards,” he murmured, so quiet only Call could hear. The attacker’s glance darted to Call’s left leg, and Call had enough sense to push the small advantage. He changed the position he was holding the knife in to throw off the attacker’s grip, dropped the knife, and surged forward, directly into the attacker’s gut. The attacker was pushed back, into Convict.

Convict used the fact that the attacker was helplessly falling to her advantage and wrenched the knife out of this hand, finally leaving him without a real weapon. Right before Call and the attacker hit the ground, Call heard a growl behind him.

Call and Havoc didn’t need mental communication, sometimes.

Havoc leapt, and Call immediately rolled away from the attacker. Havoc landed on the attacker’s chest, almost knocking the air out of him, and Call was already with Caped Justice and Convict. Caped Justice was still struggling to get up, and Call was worried. His danger sense was ringing, vaguely.

“Where are you hurt?” Call asked, managing to sound calm, somehow. Convict was oddly out of it.

“Shoulder, ribs,” Caped Justice grunted. Crap. That was significant. Call glanced over his shoulder to where Havoc and the attacker were facing down. Havoc was strongly on the defensive, but he was still standing. Whatever had been ailing him before didn’t seem to be much trouble now.

It was sudden when Convict reached to Caped Justice and grabbed his shoulder, then set it back in place. Call flinched, and expected a scream, but heard nothing. When he looked back, Convict was doing the same to Caped Justice’s ribs. Call looked on in wonder as Caped Justice took a deep breath, then stood like it was no problem. Convict had clicked back into reality.

“What?” Call exclaimed. How was that possible? What had just happened?

“Later,” Convict said shortly, and Call rounded his thoughts back. Right. They had to focus on the fight, now that everyone was on their feet.

The other two heroes started towards the attacker, but Call put out his hands and stopped them. They looked at him incredulously, but Call stared them down.

Havoc knew they were ready to go back in, and he would give them an opening. Better taking an opportunity than going without one. So Call waited. Havoc snarled, then leapt. Call didn’t see where, a black wolf at night was hard to see, and the sun was well past set.

The attacker doubled over. This was it. Call let the other two go. They ran to either side of the attacker and each seized an arm. Hard. The attacker fought, but with Havoc, invisible and fearsome, still on him, he didn’t have a chance. The two heroes tugged the attacker’s arms behind him.

Call walked up, and kicked the attacker square in the back, as hard as he could. It hurt his foot, but with Havoc tugging, the attacker hit the ground. Havoc sat on him. The second the attacker was secured, Call felt the energy drain from his body.

“Who do you work for?” Caped Justice asked sharply. It was a little bit terrifying.

The attacker said nothing.

“What do you want with us?” Caped Justice tried again, a little rougher. Havoc growled, and it was a nice touch.

“Who are you?” Caped Justice near-shouted. That one got a response. A laugh.
“Your worst nightmare,” the attacker rumbled. Call was tired of this guy. He walked around the ensemble, so that he was standing in front of the attacker, then crouched down. To Hell with his leg, at this point it just felt numb. Havoc, understanding Call’s intention, jumped off of the attacker’s back to stand behind Call. Call grabbed the attacker by the hair, and forced his head up.

“Got a name, worst nightmare?” Call asked, flashing a frightening smile. Havoc raised his hackles. In the city’s night lights, Call could only imagine the effect. The attacker’s eyes dilated behind his mask. The only sound was shouts and sirens, until the attacker spoke.

“Call me Lightning.”

Call was about to ask another question, but suddenly Lightning threw Caped Justice and Convict off. The moment Lightning was free, he moved towards Call, a fight written on every sinew of his posture. Call, crouching, couldn’t move fast enough to defend himself, and the other two heroes had just had a hard acquaintance with the ground.

Luckily, they had Havoc.

Havoc pounced, a dark threat in the night, and sank his teeth into Lightning’s leg. Lightning stumbled, severely. Havoc let go almost immediately, he never liked hurting people, but the damage was done.

Lightning was kneeling. The smell of blood permeated the air. Everybody froze, and it seemed the only sound was Lightning’s panting breath.

“This isn’t over,” he said suddenly, and before anyone could do anything, he ran to the lip of the roof and jumped. Call didn’t fail to see Lightning’s heavy limp. There was no way he could get home in that condition.

_We should follow him_, Havoc thought hotly. He sounded a little frantic.

Call, sitting now, reached out and put a hand on Havoc’s scruffy flank.

Nobody said anything.

_Thanks for that_, Call thought gently to Havoc, for once not bothering to be sarcastic. If Lightning had caught Call on the ground like that, his ribs could’ve been broken. Speaking of-

“Caped Justice, how’re your ribs feeling? And your shoulder?” Call asked, jarringly breaking the silence. Caped Justice blinked a few times, looking like he was resorting his brain.

“They’re fine as they’ll ever be, thanks to Convict,” he responded. Call opened his mouth to ask, but Convict was a step ahead.

“I rework the bloodflow around the wound to numb it, set whatever needs to be set, then let the blood go and freeze some sweat to keep everything in place and numb. Caped Justice will either wait out the injury or go to a doctor with it, either way, it kept him going. I did it with your leg at the end there, when I noticed you hurt yourself in that initial tackle.” Convict sighed, dragging a hand down her face. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Thank you both for having my back there,” Call responded. They nodded at him. The four heroes sat silently then, facing each other. There didn’t seem to be anything to say, they were all too rattled and too tired. It was all they could do to breathe.

“Should we go after him?” Caped Justice asked wearily. Call sighed, looking in the direction
Lightning disappeared in.

“Not tonight,” Call said, putting pieces together in his head. Lightning was definitely working with the Enemy. He probably had some wolves on hand. The wolves weren’t a concern, they’d be helping Lightning, not coming after the heroes. However, if the heroes followed Lightning, they’d be up against the strongest enemy they’ve faced, and at least two monster wolves. It was a fight the heroes wouldn’t win.

Convict stood. “Still think we were over exaggerating his skill level, Radar?” She asked. Call sucked in a breath, then stood.

“Wholeheartedly,” he responded, failing to be genuine. Convict snickered.

“Then you, sir, are in for a big surprise next time he pops up,” she said.

“I love surprises,” Call said sarcastically. A hand clapped down on his shoulder. Call jumped, whipping around and bringing his fists up.

It was Caped Justice.

“Surprise,” Caped Justice remarked smugly. Call punched Caped Justice lightly on the uninjured shoulder.

“I just said I hated surprises, you jerk.”

Convict chuckled, and Caped Justice grinned lightly. Call found a smile growing on his face.

“Well, if we’re not following Lightning, I should be getting home,” Caped Justice said.

“Ditto,” Convict said. “Tomorrow?”

“Same time,” Caped Justice said, nodding.

“Same place,” Call finished. For the first time that night, there was a certain lightness between the three. Havoc wagged his tail.

They went their separate ways.

It was only once an aching and exhausted Call and Havoc had finally crept through the front door, purposefully avoided looking at the clock, and had fallen into bed, that Call wondered if anything had been done with the knives littering the bakery roof.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I Love Updating Things At A Reasonable Pace It's My Favorite Thing. Anyway, huge music rec, Almost Like Praying by Lin Manuel-Miranda is the epitome of music. Also, freakign, hoedown throwdown just came on on my playlist, so THAT TOO I GUESS. Okay. Every kudos/comment has made my day, week, year, motivated me not to slam dunk this in a trash can, ily, thank you,

On another note, a humorous, charming one, you do not want to go to this school, geez louise.

Alright, uh, enjoy?!

If Call had to choose between being locked in a room with either Aaron “self-righteous justice kid” Stewart, Jasper “shady twerphead that knows Call is Radar” deWinter, or the actual Enemy “supervillain with command over monster wolves” Of Death, Call would choose the Enemy with no hesitation.

Sadly, Call did not have this choice, and was instead stuck in an English classroom with none other than Aaron Stewart and Jasper deWinter.

Fate is trying to kill one bird with two stones, Call thought tiredly as he collapsed into his chair. Thankfully, Aaron sat at the far right of the room, and Jasper at the far left, and Call in the direct middle. It was the little things, sometimes.

The bell rang, and the flurried students settled. Call lounged back in his chair and pretended he was aloof and cool, not exhausted and overwhelmed. Hopefully it was working.

“Allright kids,” the teacher said, much too positive for the time of day. “I want you to write a story. Any story, about anything that isn’t idiotically inappropriate. I know you hear this all the time, but I’m begging you, be creative. Write outside your comfort zone. Make me laugh when I read these later, make me cry. You’ve got 45 minutes, starting now. Go!”

Call huffed a breath and bent over to grab his notebook from his backpack. Once he sat back up, he was keenly aware of the fact that he’d forgotten to grab his pencil. This felt like a good metaphor for how he felt at any given moment in time anymore.

Once Call retrieved a pencil, he stared at the blank paper on his desk, willing words to appear on it. His brain simply wasn’t functioning in the way that school needed it to. There were thoughts swirling around in his head, vague from exhaustion and scattered from stress. He had better things to be thinking about than a story for English class. Such as: what was special about the Enemy’s virus? What was the Enemy’s motive for releasing the virus on the city? What did the Enemy want with Jasper in the alley? Where was the Enemy keeping all these wolf monsters? Where did the Enemy get all these wolf monsters? How could they stop the virus, the monsters, and the Enemy? Where did Lightning fit in? He was working with the Enemy, Call could piece together that much, but why did he seem to be specifically seeking out the superheroes?
Call found that he was staring at his paper uselessly, tapping his pencil against the desk and biting his lip as he thought. In theory, he had a story to get written. In reality, he had a city to save.

The story could wait.

The key to finding out the plans of and therefore defeating any sort of enemy was finding out their motives, wasn’t it? That seemed logical. Find out what the Enemy wants, piece together how he plans to get it, thwart him. That was a solid plan. Call could do that. Call could not write a story, but Call could do that.

Well, for one thing, there was the Enemy at face value, the one with viruses and wolf armies that simply wanted control of the city. Call didn’t buy that. Power was a motivator sometimes, sure, but it was almost never the motivator. Call knew there were loose ends pointing to something more going down than anybody could figure. There was, as Caped Justice had reasoned, something special about that virus. There was Lightning, who seemed to be after the superheroes in some way. What did the Enemy want with the city’s superheroes? Did they pose a threat to him in some unknown way?

Then there was the encounter with Jasper. The Enemy had been in an alleyway, intimidating a highschooler. What business did he have being in an alley, intimidating a highschooler?

Maybe... Call could... ask Jasper...?

The idea took a second to form, but Call half planned to never talk to Jasper again, so he instantly balked at it. He looked up from his paper to glance at Jasper across the room. He wasn’t writing, instead talking quietly with Celia, who was sitting behind him. He was smirking, and Call didn’t like the look in his eye. Then again, when did Call ever like the look in his eye? Either way, he was probably up to something. He was always up to something. Why was he talking to Celia? Celia was the biggest gossip in school, if Jasper was telling her Call’s secret, then everybody would know before fourth block.

Fourth block.

Call felt his gaze become searing as he stared across the room at Jasper, thinking about all of the secrets he could be spilling. Call wanted Jasper to look up from his conversation, to see Call’s glare out of the corner of his eye, and to be so intimidated by the force of the glare alone that he never even thought of telling anyone about Call ever again.

Go on, look up, you slimy weasel, Call thought, willing Jasper, with all his might, to move his head.

When Jasper didn’t look away from Celia, Call gave up the ghost. He turned away from the two, putting the heels of his hands in his eyes and holding his head. He sighed. His brain slowed down from the manic pace of thought it’d been going at.

I can’t afford to overthink, or to get paranoid like that, Call thought. He rubbed his eyes a little. He picked up his head and glanced at the clock, blinking to bring his sight into focus. It had been all of five minutes since class started. He was supposed to be writing. He was not writing. This was agonizing, and Call definitively has not gotten enough sleep in a month.

Call felt an itching at the corner of his vision, something pulling his gaze, so he turned to see what had caught his subconscious attention. When he looked, though, all he found was rows of kids writing, or looking at their phones, or staring off into space. Behind them, a few colorful inspirational posters hung on the wall. Nothing that would catch his eye.

His paper was still blank, so Call turned back to it, figuring he should start writing. Maybe he could write a story about a totally normal kid with a totally normal life, if only for a change of pace. Or he
could write a story about a pianist that didn’t know how to play piano. Or he could write a story about a naked mole rat, just doing what naked mole rats do. Or he could write a story about a kid saving a city.

Speaking of. Call could find reasonable conclusions for everything the Enemy was doing, all of it fit together like sparse puzzle pieces in his brain. Sure, the puzzle wasn’t solved, but every piece was definitely part of the same puzzle and would fit together eventually, and Call could be confident in that. Except for one piece. One piece that didn’t quite fit with the rest of the puzzle, didn’t quite connect to the rest of the scene, in Call’s brain.

*Jasper deWinter. What does the Enemy want with you?*

Focussing on his blank paper and thinking hard, Call almost didn’t notice when he felt that tingling at the edge of his vision again. He looked up, sharper this time, eyes searching more frantically. He was a superhero, he was pretty good at quickly and thoroughly analyzing a situation, he only had to utilize that skill in an English classroom as opposed to in the heat of the moment on a rooftop.

Call was met with much the same sight as earlier, however, he’d caught a single detail that he wasn’t supposed to, and it made all the difference. He’d seen, for a millisecond of a millisecond, Aaron Stewart turn his head towards his paper. The kid looked as occupied as ever now, scribbling frantically, but Call had seen enough.

Aaron had been staring.

Call looked away from Aaron and back to his own paper, and seconds later, he felt the tingling come back. He couldn’t tell from looking out of the corner of his eye, Stewart was being so subtle. Call gave it a few more seconds before looking up again, and since he was looking for it this time, he saw Stewart’s head very obviously turning away. Quickly, but not quickly enough. Call stared at Aaron, waiting for him to attempt his staring again so the two would make eye contact and Call could raise a smug yet condescending yet cocky yet threatening eyebrow. Aaron never looked up, though.

Eventually, Call looked away, and he didn’t feel Aaron’s gaze for a while either. Stewart was good at what he did, it seemed, and it was getting under Call’s skin.

The clock read ten minutes since the block had started. Call had nothing but questions and a blank sheet of paper. He huffed, and started writing a story about a castle that was alive and a person that wasn’t. He could almost concentrate, he could almost get his brain ticking past the speed of sleep deprived, but too much of it was occupied on the fact that he was going to have to talk to Jasper.

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Call spent the first two minutes of study hall filling in random answers for the homework that was only graded for completion, and when that was done, he promptly took a nap on the desk. He needed it. Sadly, his blissful, dreaming paradise was catalyzed by the abrupt slamming shut of the classroom door. Call jerked awake, wiping a line of drool off his mouth and blinking himself awake. His brain felt minorly like it was made of snail glue.

Call glanced around the classroom, and found a seat very obviously empty. A very specific seat. A very specific Jasper deWinter’s seat.

**Only Jasper would slam a classroom door shut.**

Call’s brain, for the first time that day, snapped to full alertness. What was Jasper up to?

Call pushed himself out of his seat and walked over to the teacher’s desk. He grabbed a bathroom
pass and signed out, noting that Jasper’s name in the slot right above his own. Jasper was, allegedly, also going to the bathroom. Call knew for a fact that Jasper had ditched English for five minutes to go to the bathroom not an hour previous, which meant this bladderic emergency was built on a foundation of utter lies.

Call didn’t slam the door of the classroom as he left. He looked left and right down the hallway, hoping for some glance of Jasper. When there was no sign of him in either direction, Call sighed a little and resorted to using his superpower.

Hey, uh, has anybody seen any sign of a broody kid with a bad haircut? Call mentally projected down both hallways. There were usually at least a few flies around the school. Flies couldn’t communicate all that well, but Call could get buzzes of vague feeling from them sometimes, and something was better than nothing.

Speaking of, he got an itch of a confirmation coming from the left hallway, prompting him to send a quick, “thank you”, and power walk down the corridor.

Some movement caught the corner of Call’s eye when he was at the end of the hallway, so Call turned, and was just in time to see Jasper’s back disappear into the locker room. Call, not by his own volition, raised a single eyebrow. He questioned for a moment whether or not he should (or could) go in after Jasper, but Call realized that he didn't have a choice. Now that he knew that Jasper was definitely up to something, it was his… ahem… duty...

Call snickered. Okay, okay, different word.

Now that he knew Jasper was definitely up to something, and while Jasper still had answers to Call’s questions, it was Call’s obligation to go see what good ol’ Jasper was up to.

Call tried his best not to look suspicious as he walked up to the locker room door, even though the hallway was seemingly empty, and he probably only looked more suspicious now that he was trying, and he really ought to be better at this whole thing by now. When Call reached the door, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His brain was acting scrambled today. He needed it to be the opposite of scrambled. Put together, or something.

The door didn’t creak as it opened, which would have added to the mood, but probably not in a good way. Call slipped through the door, and found the locker room empty. At first glance, at least. There were still the bathrooms to investigate.

Call walked softly through the room, half expecting something to jump out at him. He wanted to pick up his fists in preparation for this seemingly inevitable fight, but he had to remember that this was not a horror video game and he would look like an idiot.

In the bathroom, all of the stall doors were open and revealed the stalls to be empty. A single sink hadn’t been shut off properly and was systematically loosing drop after drop. Call, being the do-gooder he was, shut it off entirely. Protect the environment, kids.

Maybe he flushed himself down the toilet like a dead fish and now he’s deep in the sewer system, Call thought somberly as he looked into a (thankfully clean) toilet bowl. Am I prepared to pull a full on Finding Nemo for Jasper deWinter? Spiritually turn myself into a middle aged clownfish? I’d get gray hairs. That’s it, we don’t need him.

Call left the stall in a huff, knowing somewhere inside him that Jasper didn’t flush himself down the toilet, but presently frustrated that he’d have to stage a Marlin-style rescue mission. Or presently frustrated that Jasper was this slippery and Call was essentially losing at hide and seek, when the
hider didn’t even know he was hiding. Or presently frustrated that he had to interact with Jasper in the first place. Or presently frustrated with the situation in general.

Mostly the Nemo thing, though.

As Call was staring introspectively (note: furiously) at his reflection in the marred public school mirror, he caught sight something over his shoulder that he hadn’t seen before. Something key. Something life changing.

There was a door in the bathroom.

Call whipped around, and sure enough, there was a whole entire door, just, installed, right there, in the wall.

“Well who put that there?!” Call asked nobody in particular, forgetting for a second that he was supposed to be subtle and would be in major trouble if he was found. The door had, in theory, been there, in the wall next to the stalls, for Call’s entire high school career. Call was more shocked by his own obliviousness than the mystery/discovery of an out-of-place door in the bathroom.

At least Nemo’s out of the equation, Call thought as he walked over to the door. It had a simple spin knob, which turned easily when Call tried it. Not locked.

He opened the door slowly, and this one didn’t creak either. Call expected to need a moment for his eyes to adjust, and was half hoping to find an elaborate cave system, or an elite VIP lounge. He was instead met with near-blinding daylight, assorted dumpsters in assorted states, the accompanying smell, the silhouette of none other than Jasper deWinter, and that accompanying smell.

Jasper was sitting on a closed (but well vandalized) dumpster, ramrod straight and tense. His gaze towards Call was owlish for a second, but when Call blinked it was all gone, and Jasper was the picture of lackadaisical.

“What are you doing here? Is there a secret lair inside one of these dumpsters that you have to thwart?” Jasper jeered. Call stepped through the door, letting it close behind him. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

“What do you want?” Jasper asked, defensive.

“What did the Enemy want with you?” Call demanded.

“Nothing you can or can’t prove.” Jasper ran a hand through his hair, messing it up.

“You do realize you’re incriminating yourself,” Call said.

“Go back to class,” Jasper sneered. Call, for a moment, wished that he and Jasper could have one normal conversation, without vague or nonexistent answers.

“The same one you’re supposed to be in?” Call snipped back. Jasper huffed, looking away from Call and into the middle distance.

“I’ve got better things to be doing than sitting around in a classroom,” Jasper said. Call smirked.

“What, like sitting around in a literal trash heap?” He asked. Jasper scowled.

“I’m surprised you have the guts to insult me,” Jasper said. Something between them shifted.
“Are you—”

“Blackmailing you? Yeah, I am. Get off my back, Radar, or I might let a few things slip.” Jasper’s voice was biting, and taunting, and it tore into Call viciously. Call was tense, measuring his breathing, hands in his pockets clenched into fists as he glared at Jasper.

The problem was, Jasper wasn’t wrong. Even if Call had the superpowers, Jasper had the power in this situation. And that was infuriating.

Jasper, the smug piece of trash, pushed up his sleeve and checked his watch. A second passed, Jasper tugged his sleeve back down and hopped off the dumpster. He turned away from Call, walking nonchalantly towards the employee parking lot.

“Don’t even think,” Jasper said without turning around, “about following me.”

Jasper swung around the corner, and then he was out of sight. Call thought about following him, defiant as he was. There was probably a way he could do it without Jasper noticing.

But.

Call obviously didn’t know anything about Jasper. The Enemy was after him, for one thing, and it seemed that he regularly left school without a pass to… do something. Something. Something that involved other people, if Call had to guess, since Jasper couldn’t drive and he’d walked to the parking lot. He was getting rides.

As long as Call didn’t know everything about Jasper’s… situation, he couldn’t assume things about it, like whether or not he could trail Jasper without him knowing. It would only lead to disaster. There would be threats he didn’t account for, and that is a deathwish.

So Call turned around, tugged his hand out of his pocket, turned the doorknob, thanked whatever deity was listening when he found it unlocked, and walked back into the school. His brain was flooding with questions. He should’ve known that his plan to ‘just ask Jasper’ wouldn’t have worked out. It, quite honestly, only made things worse. Or… did he have more information now? Which meant he had more data, more to work with, more potentially question-answering details.

Call was dragged out of his question-flooded stupor with the sound of a toilet flushing and a creaking door opening.

One of the stalls had been occupied. Some kid had a bladder and now Call had to deal with the consequences. He really ought to be better at these sorts of things.

Since fate was cruel, none other than Aaron Stewart was the one that walked out of the stall. Call immediately groaned in frustration, as was his reaction to making eye contact with Aaron at any time ever. He couldn’t help it.

Aaron’s eyebrows shot up when he saw Call, and his mouth opened to start speaking, but Call swiftly decided that he couldn’t deal with this right now and pushed past Aaron, walking towards the locker room door.

_Catch you never_ , Call thought without much fanfare.

He heard hasty water running, then fast footsteps, then Aaron was standing between Call and the door and his arms were crossed and his expression was stern and Call was already completely over this.
Call glared up at Aaron. Call still hated being that he was shorter than Aaron. What happened to Stewart Little?

“Move,” Call said simply.

“What are you doing here?”

“How is that any of your business?” Call knew he was being prickly, he couldn’t help it. Aaron’s expression darkened, only a little, but it was enough. Call officially couldn’t be here anymore, not if he wanted to leave uninjured and unsuspicious. Well, as unsuspicious as he could be at this point.

Looking at Aaron, Call knew there was no chance of overpowering him. So Call had to surprise him. Call could do surprise.

Aaron opened his mouth to say something, again, but Call rolled his eyes up into his skull, swung his head, swayed on his feet, and let himself fall (to the right, because he wasn’t dumb enough to incapacitate himself). It was heartstopping, for a moment, as all trust falls were. Call braced himself for impact with the dirty concrete floor, but-

Aaron, predictably, stepped forward and caught him.

Call didn’t spare a moment, immediately blinking his eyes open. In the span of a millisecond, he took note of Aaron’s position (crouching over Call, cradling his head), and decided what to do before Aaron could react. Call grabbed Aaron’s shoulders and pulled him into a roll, dragging Aaron to the side and towards the ground.

Aaron, surprised, didn’t have the chance to counter. His back hit the floor, a little hard, whoops, and the moment Aaron was down Call pushed to his feet and sped to the door. Once Call was out of the locker room, he glanced around the hallway, his eyes landing on the equipment room door. As quietly as he could, Call hurried over to the door and slid through, pulling it shut behind him. Then Call found himself standing in darkness amongst gym gear.

It reeked.

He heard the locker room door open, and footsteps. The footsteps paused, for a long amount of time. Call didn’t know where Aaron was. Call didn’t know what Aaron was thinking. He could only hold his breath and hope.

Eventually, the footsteps stalked off down the hallway, presumably back to class. Call let out all the air he’d been holding in his lungs. He scrunched his eyes shut, shook his head a little, then took a deep breath. Okay. Okay.

Call pushed the door open and walked into the hallway, shoving his hands in his pockets. He strolled back towards his study hall, trying to look for all the world like he hadn’t just gotten in a fight. He’d start whistling a jaunty tune if he weren’t in the middle of a school with classes going on.

He made it back to study hall without an issue, quietly signed back in, and sat in his seat until the bell, following rabbit trails of questions through his own head.

Call regretted ever signing up for home ec. Why, oh why, did he think it would be an easy A? It was a mistake. His arms up to his elbows were covered in a bluish colored dough, and there was flour everywhere. Everywhere. He’d never escape the flour.
The teacher looked at him disapprovingly, disdainfully, and Call wondered what would prompt somebody to be a home ec teacher. He was standing, arms held away from his body, and very still. He felt like if he moved, a cloud of flour would poof up and make even more of a mess.

“Go wash up,” the teacher said, sounding tired. Call left, not needing any more prompting. He shuffled to the closest bathroom and scrubbed the dough off his arms, then pat the flour off his jeans as best as he could, and took off his shirt to shake the flour off of it. When his shirt was back on, he knocked his feet against the wall to get the flour off of his shoes. Then he stared at the white powdery mess on the floor, feeling extremely sorry for the janitors. They needed a raise. And some chocolate. Call wanted to go up to the nearest janitor and hug them. As Call was leaving the bathroom, he glanced into the mirror, and did a double take.

Right, his entire face and head was covered in flour. He’d forgotten.

Call got a paper towel wet and wiped off his face as best he could, though it wasn’t perfect. Then he ruffled the flour out of his hair, shaking his entire head. Again, he couldn’t get all of it out, and it stood out starkly against his black hair.

He was such a mess. He needed to stop doing this.

Call looked in the mirror, sighed as he knew he couldn’t improve the disarray his person was in, then walked out of the bathroom. Par for the course. He’d had enough excitement for one school day. He was also going to meet up with Convict and Caped Justice later, which would only stir up more excitement, inevitably, so he was due to have more than enough excitement that day. He needed no more, thank you very much, he was just going to walk back to class and do everything a normal, non-crime-fighting student would do.

“Fancy meeting you here, care to have a chat?” Aaron Stewart said, and Call just wanted to fall over and die. Instead, he stayed standing, and looked (up, still up, always up, why up) at Aaron, standing in front of him. That dark expression Aaron had had in the locker room was gone, replaced with the most passive aggressive smile Call had ever seen (which said a lot, knowing Call lived with Alastair).

Aaron grabbed Call by the shoulders and led him back into the empty bathroom, and even though Call tried to dig his heels in, he found himself stumbling into the bathroom. Darn leg. Darn Aaron.

Said darn Aaron stood in front of the door, again, and Call guessed if he tried falling again, Aaron wouldn’t be so quick to catch him. So, this conversation was bound to happen. Who knows, maybe Call could convince Aaron to get over the whole thing. Maybe. Call had to be charming, that’s all, he could do that.

“How’s your back?” Call asked, trying for a friendly smile that ended up looking more like a snicker. Surprise flickered over Aaron’s face.

“It, uh, hurts actually,” he stuttered.

Whoops, Call thought. He really hadn’t meant to hurt Aaron. Aaron took a deep breath through his nose, then pinned Call with his gaze. The mood in the room changed.

“How’s your back?” Call asked, trying for a friendly smile that ended up looking more like a snicker. Surprise flickered over Aaron’s face.

“It, uh, hurts actually,” he stuttered.

Whoops, Call thought. He really hadn’t meant to hurt Aaron. Aaron took a deep breath through his nose, then pinned Call with his gaze. The mood in the room changed.

“Ahhhh, Call, I’m tired of playing this game."

“You’re the one playing it! I’m not actively seeking you out,” Call said, raising his hands defensively. Aaron rolled his eyes.

“Allow me to rephrase. I’m tired of your games. Especially the ones where you end up slamming me
to the floor.” The glare that accompanied that statement burned through Call, so Call did what he did best and met Aaron’s glare with one of his own. Charming.

“I don’t know what you want from me, Aaron-” Call started.

“I want answers! Why were you sneaking out of school during class time? What were you doing?” Aaron said, his voice steadily raising.

“Oh, you got me, I was committing crimes,” Call said just as loudly, voice dripping sarcasm. “You’re such a hero, you’ve saved the city, hurrah hurrah.”

“Well, there’s enough happening around the city right now that I have to be at least suspicious!” Aaron said.

“Suspicious of what? Do you think I’m robbing banks during school hours?” Call half-shouted. He flinched in his head at that one, a bit too close to the mark on a recent crime there. “No, really. I might have even done a vandal. A whole entire vandal. I spray painted a dick on the side of an office building, call the police.”

“Did you actually?” Aaron asked, dead serious.

“No!” Call shouted, incredulous.

“Well-”

“You’re not the police, Aaron.” Aaron bristled at that. “I’m just skipping class, it’s not a big deal.” The lie felt sour and Call hated it, but at this point the Aaron thing had to be resolved so he could focus his energy on other things, like actually fighting crime and freely investigating leads. Not a dumb, suspicious high schooler.

Aaron was quiet for a moment, looking at Call. Call looked right back.

“You’re lying,” Aaron said simply.

“And you’re full of yourself,” Call replied. Aaron sighed, sliding a hand down his face.

“Call, please,”

“We’re not getting anywhere with this.”

“And whose fault is that?” Aaron shouted.

“Yours, for starting it in the first place!” Call shouted back. That’s when the door behind Aaron tried to open, only to hit Aaron in the back, causing him to flinch. Call flinched a little too, out of empathy. He still felt bad for hurting Aaron.

“Occupied!” Aaron shouted. “He’s holding me hostage!” Call shouted at the same time. Aaron glared at him for that one, but Call only grinned at him and shrugged innocently. He wasn’t trying to get Aaron in trouble, no, that would be preposterous.

The door fell shut, and Aaron let out a long, frustrated breath.

Then the door slammed open with the force of a battering ram, hitting Aaron so hard (in the back, no less) that he fell forward. He stumbled into Call, who tried his best to stay balanced, but he had all of
one functioning leg and steadying his own weight *combined* with the weight of a hurtling human being-

Let’s just say that both of them fell. Fell onto the dirty, flour covered bathroom floor. Call pushed himself up, looking to see who’d bulldozed through the door.

“Would you two *shut up*? If you’re going to have a fight, do it after school, not in the middle of the day in a *bathroom* of all places!” The girl standing in the doorway said.

“Who’re-” Aaron started.

“My name is Tamara, nice to make your acquaintance. What was all that shouting about?”

“None of your business,” Call and Aaron said at the same time. Neither of them had stood up yet, both of them looking up at Tamara. Tamara was inside the bathroom now, the door closed behind her. She glared down at both of them, a single eyebrow raised.

“It became my business the second you became a disruption to me. From the sound of things, you two aren’t going to be able to work this out by yourselves. So, start talking.”

Call bristled. He wasn’t telling either of them anything, and that was final. He couldn’t, without revealing his identity. Aaron wasn’t going to believe him no matter what he said, though.

“He’s skipping school to do potentially criminal things,” Aaron said, suddenly, madly. He sat up fully, scrunching up his face a little. He was fuming, Call could see it.

“He’s skipping school to do potentially criminal things,” Call mocked, using a dumb voice. He sat up too, and when they were both sitting, Aaron wasn’t an inch taller than Call. *Take that, sucker.*

“Shut *up,*” Tamara bit at Call, and Call huffed. “What do you mean by potentially criminal?” She sounded extremely suspicious, and Call almost threw his hands in the air. Why was everybody suddenly so wary of him?

*Oh, wait, I know, it’s because there’s a supervillain loose in Magista, of all things, I’d forgotten,* Call thought to himself in his exasperation.

“I *mean* he won’t tell me what he’s up to and he’s surprisingly athletic, more so than one would expect from somebody that sits out of PE,” Aaron responded, pinning Call with another glare. Between Aaron and Tamara, Call felt thoroughly like he was under attack.

“I won’t tell you what I’m up to because it’s not your business. I met you a day ago, dude,” Call responded, scowling.

“You realize there’s a crisis in the city right now, correct? Suspicious activity needs to be investigated,” Tamara said. Call couldn’t believe he’d gotten stuck between the only two justice freaks in the school. Regular, normal, sane students wouldn’t care about a single ditcher.

“What, are you going to search me? I don’t know how to prove to you that I’m not some Enemy of Doom,” Call huffed. Tamara, while keeping up her bravado, deflated the littlest bit. That was enough for Call. At this point, Tamara was the key to winning this continued argument. Call had to sway her. So he had to act like a clueless idiot, as though he had nothing to do with the city’s crisis. Call, luckily, was very good at acting like a clueless idiot.

“I guess we can’t search you, but you could at least admit to what you were doing while school hours,” Tamara said, watching him closely. Between Aaron and Tamara, Call was stifled. He knew
he wouldn’t get away with lying to them.

“...I went to... the Pizza Plaza across town,” Call admitted. Well, he wasn’t lying, he could say it with utmost confidence. He could feel shock rolling from Aaron in waves. Tamara snorted, which made Call smirk. It was kind of funny.

“And earlier today?” Aaron asked, incredulous. If people could be ruffled, Aaron was ruffled.

“I was taking a dump,” Call said, shrugging, grinning. Yes, he made the pun on purpose, even though nobody there could appreciate it. Maybe he’d tell it to Havoc later.

“You were definitely outside,” Aaron accused. Tamara hummed. Call sighed.

“What can I say? There’s better cell signal outside of the school,” Call said. This wasn’t a lie either. There was definitely better signal outside. He hadn’t been using that to his advantage, but, the other two didn’t need to know that.

“Oh my-” Aaron exclaimed.

“Are you kidding?” Tamara said.

“Do I look like I’m kidding?” Call responded, accentuating his statement with a gesture. When Tamara didn’t say anything, Call finally pushed himself up to a stand, brushing the flour from his clothes as best he could. Who invented flour anyway? It was a nightmare.

Aaron started to follow suit, but scrunched up his face a bit when he started to push himself up. Right, his back was probably very bruised at this point. Call, still sorry about that in the first place, held out a hand to pull Aaron to his feet. Aaron looked surprised, but took the offer hesitantly. Call braced himself and helped Aaron up, which seemed to lessen the strain on Aaron’s back. Hopefully.

This superhero habit of helping civilians is going to get me caught one of these days, Call thought to himself when Aaron was still giving him the side eye.

“You uh,” Call said in the awkward silence, “have a little something, uh, on your shirt.” Call didn’t know how to talk to Aaron when they weren’t attacking each other. And there was quite a bit of flour on his shirt.

“I, uh,” Aaron said, looking at his shirt now. He halfheartedly tried brushing some of the flour off.

“Does this mean the problem is resolved?” Tamara asked, after a second. Call and Aaron looked at her, then at each other.

“Yes,” Call said, optimistically.

“Maybe,” Aaron said at the same time, because he wasn’t a fool.

“What do you mean maybe?” Call asked. He ran a hand through his hair in his exasperation, spawning a cloud of airborne flour.

“I mean I’m taking you on your word, but I don’t know how reliable that is,” Aaron responded.

“I think that’s the best we can ask for,” Tamara remarked. The door behind her crepted open.

“Occupied!” They all shouted at the same time, and the door closed very quickly.

“But-” Call started.
“No buts,” Tamara cut in.

“And-” Aaron started.

“No dumb remarks,” Tamara cut in. “We’re leaving it at this: Aaron, Call is innocent until proven guilty. Don’t try to prove him guilty with anymore shouting matches, got it?”

“But-” Call and Aaron said at the same time.

“But nothing. We won’t reach a better solution than this until either Call tells us he’s the Enemy of Death, or you can prove he is, okay? His word is all we’ve got,” Tamara said. Call and Aaron sighed. She wasn’t wrong.

“So, do we have a deal?” Tamara asked.

“Deal,” Aaron said.

“Mmph,” Call said.

“Call?” Tamara gave him a Look. Call had to cave.

“Deal.”

“Splendid,” Tamara said, smirking.

“Can we all go back to class now?” Aaron asked. Immediately after he finished speaking, though, the fire alarm went off.

Call covered his ears while the three of them exchanged a concerned look, and they all raced out of the bathroom. Kids were flooding through the hallways to the nearest exit, so Call, Aaron, and Tamara followed the flow. The ringing alarm hurt Call’s ears, and he winced as they passed one.

“Go to your fourth block teacher!” the staff member holding open the door was shouting to the students. Call was confused, but then he remembered that it was near the end of the block when he’d left to go wash up. It would probably be fourth block by the time everybody got back inside.

Call scanned the crowd for his fourth block teacher. He was lucky Mr. Rufus was tall and imposing, because that also meant he was easy to find in a crowd. Aaron and Tamara left to go find their teachers, and Call glanced around until he could see his.

Mr. Rufus was standing on the far side of the sidewalk, directly in front of the doors, pretty hard to miss. Call trudged over, joining the congregation of fourth block history students around Mr. Rufus. To Call’s disdain, Jasper was present. Call wondered what time he’d gotten back to school. Call wondered what he’d done when he was gone.

Now that the alarms were quieter and Call could actually hear himself think, he realized something critical. There was more than one set of alarms going off. His stomach was sinking and his heart was beating in a way that spelled danger.

Suddenly Call’s brain was racing as he looked around, taking in the scene. Where was the danger? Was the school actually on fire, despite the lack of smoke? Well, he had an easy way to find out.

_Havoc? Is there a fire going on anywhere in the city?_ Havoc had long since learned how to identify the smell of smoke and burning.

_Like… a structure fire?_ Havoc asked immediately. Relief washed through Call only from the sound
of his voice. He needed to go home and rant to Havoc about the kind of day he’s had. After the current dilemma, of course.

Exactly, Call responded. Havoc took a second of radio silence.

No structure fires. Why?

The school’s fire alarm went off and I have a bad feeling about it. I’ll tell you everything later, Call thought as he scanned the scene. What was off? What could lead him to the danger?

Don’t forget to punch with your knuckles, Havoc thought.

Of course, I’m not some amateur, Call responded, and cut off communication. He took a deep breath, then looked around some more. What was wrong with the picture? Kids were on their phones. Teachers didn’t look particularly scared, but a little confused. The lunch ladies were playing basketball on the nearby court, but that wasn’t out of the ordinary. Mr. Rufus was scowling, which also wasn’t-

Wait.

That wasn’t his usual scowl. The slope of his eyebrow was off. He was staring at the attendance sheet, then shifting his eyes to his crowd of students, seeming to flick through them, then he turned back to his attendance sheet.

Now that was interesting.

Call looked around. He didn’t know his class well enough to see who was missing, but it was something he could file away for later.

Before long, the teachers started shouting, and the kids started migrating back into the school. One of the lunch ladies landed a slam dunk, and there was rampant cheering from a corner of students. From what Call could hear through all the murmuring noise, they were supposed to get their stuff and go to fourth block. Call got in and out of his home ec classroom as fast as he could to avoid the wrath of his teacher, then power walked through the crowded hallway to the nearby history class. He was one of the first people there.

Call collapsed into his chair, causing a cloud of flour to poof up, which he did his best to pretend didn’t happen. The classroom was quiet, containing only three students at the moment. Call, as per usual, wasn’t talking to anyone, instead spinning a pencil as he sat quietly. One of the others was sitting on her phone. The last was, weirdly enough, talking to Ms. Rufus. Or, it looked like he was getting scolded by Mr. Rufus. The kid’s cheeks were red and his breathing was heavy as Mr. Rufus talked to him in a low voice, and Call wondered if this had to do with the attendance chart thing.

It took some time, but everybody filed in and class started. Mr. Rufus introduced a project and assigned them groups. Call was partnered with Celia and some new kid named Drew. Celia came over to Call and said they could all meet up at her house to work on the project, and asked for his number so they could organize, which Call gave her without question. He’d gladly let her take responsibility if it meant he didn’t have to, for once.

“Hey, did you hear about the fire ‘drill’?” Celia asked Call while he was putting his number into her phone, using air quotes around the word, “drill”.

“I mean, I definitely heard the drill,” Call remarked, trying to remember the next digit of his own number. It was either a 9 or an 8, but he kept mixing his own up with his dad’s.
“Well, apparently, some kid pulled the alarm,” Celia whispered. Call raised his eyebrows, typing an 8. That, that was suspicious activity right there.

Celia thanked him once he’d put his number in her phone and walked across the classroom, presumably to find Drew. Call thought things over at his desk. Somebody was trying to get everybody out of the school. But who, and why? Those were always the questions, weren’t they. Who? Why?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

PhEW this is certainly a chapter. Imma be real with you guys. I straight monologued their speech in my room to make sure it was dramatic and also moving enough. Also I love this chapter, and I love literally all of you, thank you for existing, every kudos has made my life, every comment has made my eternity,

oh frick oh dang, things are starting to get real.

enjoy!! (or else)

It was part of the oddity of Magista that there was a forest in the middle of the city. Well, not the middle, but it certainly wasn’t the fringe.

Next to the high school, there was a massive park. It was the place every dog dreamed of, every biker cycled through, every photographer framed. The park was similar to the courtyard of a castle, Call had decided long ago, between the winding paths, cool fountains, and stylish benches. It seemed like the kind of place where the haughtiest of people got together to socialize and make themselves feel important. That, or, the kind of place that when everybody else got access to it, was a treasure trove of joy and activity. That’s what the park of Magista was.

If anybody got itchy for life outside of the city, all they had to do was go to the park. It felt nearly independent from the rest of the city, despite being in the thick of it. Next to the concrete and brick, the trees were welcome, and the park was full to bursting with them. Trees were scant in some areas, nonexistent in others (these, “others,” were the fields. There were two in the entire park, and they were hotspots for sledgers and romantics). The thickest concentration of trees, however, was on the edge of the park close to the school. It was the forest.

Call trudged lengthwise down this forest every day, which eventually spilled him out onto the bustling road of the city again. Technically, he could get to and from school faster if he took the roads instead, since he couldn’t exactly skateboard through the forest, but he didn’t tell anyone that, and nobody bothered to ask.

Call liked the forest, and that’s all there was to it. Maybe it was the privacy.

The terrain was dirty and dusty and covered in unpruned underbrush, but Call had long since learned how to navigate the rocks and fallen trees. He could do it pretty much without thinking now, which was all the better, because he needed as much time to think about the Enemy that he could get. It was definitely a predicament. The whole thing was a predicament. Everything was a mess of predicaments. Including the fire drill, apparently.

At least the whole thing with Aaron had been resolved. That was one less predicament.

A headache started in Call’s temples, and he brushed it aside as he took a wide step over a rock. It would fade, eventually.

Jasper was Call’s primary concern. At this point, it was a definite fact that Jasper was in some way
involved. If Jasper weren’t involved, he’d never have gotten tangled up with the Enemy’s wolves. That was a surefire sign of the Enemy wanting something with you, Call had gathered. So Jasper was involved. So Call had to find a way to deal with Jasper, of all people.

The trees thinned out and Call walked out onto the sidewalk, which was bustling with a casual crowd. Nobody took notice of Call hopping on his skateboard and taking off down the walk. Call had to carefully maneuver through the throngs of people, head racing with thought and pounding with pain.

Push. Lean left to avoid a stroller.

Why was the Enemy threatening Jasper?


Was Jasper somehow a threat to the Enemy?


If Jasper and the Enemy were on different sides, then, the enemy of your enemy is your friend. Why was Jasper running from Call, when he knew Call was Radar?

Cut the corner. Avoid the cars. Push.

Was Jasper in league with the Enemy? He couldn’t be. If he were, Call would be long dead, for his superhero status.


Maybe Jasper and the Enemy were plotting something and Jasper wasn’t letting it on?


Jasper was a lot of things. Jasper wasn’t evil. He couldn't be evil. He couldn’t be in cahoots with the Enemy.

Push. Glide.

Was Jasper in cahoots with the Enemy?

Call’s rhythm stuttered when his head ache evolved to a head stabbingpains. A wave of nausea hit him like a bus, which is never good when on a skateboard. A teetering Call stepped off the board and went to lean against the nearest wall, at the mouth of an alley. He held his head in his hands, but somehow felt like his brain was swimming, and also on a rollercoaster.

Are these the effects of the Enemy’s virus? Call thought, distantly. Am I sick?

Call kept his breathing even, keeping his eyes closed and holding his head still. He almost found it weird that nobody was kindly holding his shoulder and calling him son and asking if he felt all right, as bypassing citizens were wont to do. He knew this was the lesser busy side of town and people were still at work, but still.

With another pang of pain, Call decided he didn’t quite have brainpower to spare on thoughts like that.

Having lost his sense of clarity in his swimming head, the sudden, distinct growl shot through his
reverie like a bullet. Everything felt shocked for a moment, and then it all shattered, falling to pieces, leaving two absolute things in Call’s reeling mind: the growl, and a thought.

*It was my danger sense of course it was my danger sense I should have recognized my danger sense.*

Call opened his eyes, finding the sidewalk empty of people. His brain wasn’t processing all too well, although he needed it to be. Two of the Enemy’s monster wolves were standing on the sidewalk ahead of him, crouching, staring, and most vividly, growling, growling, growling.

It was his danger sense, the whole time it was his danger sense, and now that the danger was here, the alarms wore off. Call hadn’t recognized it, though, because it *never* comes on that strong.

Call decided he had better things to be worrying about than his malfunctioning superpower when wolf number one took a step forward.

The wolves started running at Call, approaching with all of the inevitability and power of an ocean tide on a sandcastle, with substantially more claws. Call knew from Havoc that wolves could outrun his skateboard, so that option was out. His superpower wouldn’t be much help either, all the animals in the area consisted of a few rabbits and mice. Havoc was a good four minute sprint away from Call at this point. Four minutes was too long. Four minutes was endlessly long.

Before Call could even think through his panic, the wolves were on him. Wolf number one leapt, and then number two, and Call immediately stepped to the side, losing his balance but getting out of range of the hounds. Call stumbled when the sidewalk he was standing on dipped into a curb that he had forgotten was there in his panic. He fell onto the street. He knew, distantly, that he needed a plan, but his brain was scrambling as much as he was as he pushed himself back to his feet.

The problem with fighting animals was their superior reflexes. The wolves had already hit the ground and were on him as soon as he was upright.

Call barely thought before picking up his skateboard and swinging it as hard as he could at the closest wolf. While that gave the wolf pause, wolf number one leaped again, teeth bared, going for his throat. Call flinched away, scrunching his eyes shut and throwing up the board like a pathetic shield, as was human in the face of a wolf maw.

The teeth didn’t come, though. There was a thud, and growling, and Call snapped his eyes open, his gaze shooting over the scene in front of him.

The two wolves were in a heap, yipping and scrambling to untangle from each other, and Caped Justice.

Frickin’ Caped Justice.

“Did you push-” Call started, shocked by the situation.

“The wolf out of the air and into the other one? Yeah.” Caped Justice responded, and Call honestly couldn’t believe this guy. Caped Justice was grinning like a maniac, fear glinting in his eyes like madness, standing braced to fight the still sprawled wolves, and panting. Call, despite himself, grinned a little too, fear leaving him at a loss to judge his own emotional reactions.

“My hero,” Call said, and the irony of the statement wasn’t lost on him.

Caped Justice looked like he was about to respond, but the wolves managed to get back on their feet,
and suddenly it wasn’t time for conversation anymore.

“Get out of here,” Caped Justice said, sliding into a defensive stance as the wolves crouched, snarling.

Yeah, right, Call thought. *Caped Justice can’t handle those things on his own. Admittedly, neither can I, but together, maybe we’ll get lucky.*

“Scram, dude!” Caped Justice tried when the wolves crept one step closer, and both Call and Caped Justice took one step back.

“You sure you can handle this on your own?” Call asked, trying to make his voice shake, trying to sound like a nervous-has-never-faced-danger-before-civilian. Wolf number one snapped its jaws, and it made Caped Justice jump a little. The wolves continued stalking forward. The boys continued falling back.

“I’ll be fine,” Caped Justice said after a moment, and Call didn’t buy it for a second. He smirked.

“You hesitated.”

“And you aren’t combat trained.”

“I’m better than nothing.”

Caped Justice opened his mouth to respond to that, but wolf number two shot towards Caped Justice, teeth bared. Caped Justice promptly jumped out of it’s way, then dove into a tackle, shoving wolf two to the ground. The two started to wrestle.

That was all well and good, sure, but what Caped Justice didn’t see was wolf number one about to pounce on him. Call, instead of thinking things through, grabbed a stone off the ground and lobbed it at the wolf. Its head whipped around, razor gaze settling on Call, and fear tore through him.

Call was suddenly and inarguably faced with the truth that the two of them had no chance against the wolves. Whatever confidence he had previously had disappeared.

Wolf number one sprang towards Call, and before he could react, his danger sense flared again in the form of another pounding headache. When the pain faded, leaving confusion and panic in its wake, Call found himself on his back, the wolf pinning him to the ground.

It bared its teeth, claws digging into his shoulders, and Call had never felt true fear until this moment. His arms wouldn’t be able to push the wolf off, so Call brought his right leg into his chest and kicked the wolf in the stomach as hard as he could. The wolf whimpered as it tilted off Call, curling in on its stomach a little. Call pushed himself up, wincing at the pain in his shoulder.

Caped Justice appeared at Call’s side, and for a second Call thought it was to try to convince him to leave again. Before either could speak a word, though, the two wolves stood shoulder to shoulder again, growling and backing Call and Caped Justice against a wall.

“Got any deus ex machina, superhero?” Call asked, mind reeling. Why had his danger sense flared? Why was his superpower acting so weird around the wolves?

“It doesn’t work like that,” Caped Justice said, eyes darting around. “We have to run.”

“I can't exactly run, buddy,” Call said, gesturing to his leg. The headache was fading, though the stabbing pain in his shoulder wasn't. This wasn’t looking good.
Call wished Caped Justice would superhero them out of there, but he knew all too well that superheroes were only human, and Caped Justice was just as stuck as Call was right then.

“Then I guess we have to drive them off somehow,” Caped Justice said grimly.

“What scares off monster wolf dog things?” Call asked, maybe a little harshly due to his state of panic. He thought about Havoc while Caped Justice picked a few rocks off the ground and started throwing them at the wolves. Call thought about all of the ways that Havoc reacted to things as Caped Justice gave him a few rocks, and told him to aim for the eyes.

Call threw the rocks, and he knew they wouldn't deter the wolves. They wouldn't deter Havoc. Really, the only time Havoc didn't act like a superior, fearless, distinguished creature was when he saw a squirrel.

Oh. Oh.

*Any squirrels out there that want to tease a few wolves?* Call broadcasted to the animals in the area. He and Caped Justice were out of rocks. *They won't catch you, but they're about to catch us. You know how it is.*

“Get behind me, Call,” Caped Justice said when the wolves took a taunting step forward. Call didn't move, he was concentrating on talking to the squirrels, so Caped Justice moved a little in front of him.

*Been a while since you've asked me to risk my life for you,* came a response to Call. He recognized the voice. Ella, a squirrel that had a particular liking for peanut butter.

*Not that long, surely,* Call responded. *We're on the road off Renley.*

As Ella sent him assurance she was on her way, wolf number one jumped. Caped Justice pulled Call to the ground and they landed hard, but the wolf went over them, so that was a plus.

Call pushed himself to his feet as soon as the wolf wasn't in the air anymore, but Caped Justice was having a hard time getting up. Call could see pain written in his body language, so he grabbed Caped Justice’s arm and pulled.

Once they were standing, they were faced with the fact that they were now surrounded by the wolves. Call moved so he and Caped Justice were back to back. Ella was getting closer every second. They could hold out.

The wolf in Call’s line of sight darted forward, and Call stepped out of the way, pulling Caped Justice with him. The wolf backed back into the circling position, and Caped Justice breathed a thanks.

“Don't worry about it,” Call murmured back. His head pounded. His shoulder burned. The wolves growled.

A faint skittering noise on a nearby gutter caught Call’s dazed attention, and sure enough, like a shining ray of hope, Ella was perched on the gutter.

*You have no idea how happy I am to see you,* Call thought to her, and her tail twitched twice, the squirrel version of a laugh.

*I can get an idea from the picture here,* she remarked, and Call had to admit she had a point. He and Caped Justice must've looked like rotted corpses being circled by vultures.
Lead them away from us? Call asked. The hairs on the back of his neck rose as one of the wolves took a small step forward.

I don't know how to get their attention on me instead of you guys, Ella said. Call felt a minor surge of panic. The wolves circled. He didn't know what to do.

Could you push their attention onto me? Ella asked. Call thought it through. That sounded a bit out of the limits of his superpower, which was already acting up today.

I don't know…

Try. Better than getting eaten alive.

Call mustered his courage, gathered his thoughts, and sent a tenuous broadcast to the wolf in front of him, wolf number one. It wasn't a thought so much as a feeling, the urge to look at the squirrel on the gutter. The problem with the plan, though, was that Call was only talking to the wolf. Call wasn't compelling it to do anything. The wolf could ignore whatever was being said, that was easy enough.

Behind him, Caped Justice stiffened, then took a few steps to the side, dragging Call with him. A wolf darted past the point the two had been in. Call found himself breathless.

Caped Justice was saying something, but Call couldn't listen. He sent the urge to look at the squirrel to the wolves again, more forceful this time, putting assertion in the feeling. He shoved it at them, brute-forcing it into their minds. Their strangely blank minds, which felt like fog and mold. The thought, instead of bouncing away from their heads this time, sucked into them.

The wolves paused, blinked, then looked at Ella on the gutter.

There you go! She thought to a dazed Call. I’ll lead them off. You owe me peanut butter cookies.

With that, Ella scampered off, the wolves in close pursuit. Call, instead of relief, felt disgust and fear building in his stomach. He was not supposed to be able to mind control. That wasn’t supposed to be possible. He could telepathically communicate with animals, which was fine, but also meant he could telepathically communicate with humans. He’d tried it. And if he could telepathically control animals, that meant… that meant he could telepathically control humans.

The ground felt like it was falling out beneath him. He couldn’t be like Patriarch. He couldn’t. He couldn’t. He couldn’t he couldn’t he couldn’t he couldn’t he couldn’t-

Caped Justice took a deep breath, snapping Call out of his spiraling thoughts. He blinked. Now was not the time to think about this. Preferably never was the time to think about it, but now was definitely not the time to think about it, so Call decided he wouldn’t think about it.

“You good?” Caped Justice eventually asked Call. Call’s head had stopped reeling and hurting as soon as the wolves left, and his shoulder hurt less every moment. The cut couldn’t have been that deep, anyway.

Call nodded, shaken.

“Peachy,” he said. “Just clawsome.”

It took Call a second to realize exactly what he’d said, and another second to reevaluate all of his life’s decisions. Caped Justice, meanwhile, started snickering. Caped Justice’s snickering made Call laugh a little, and when Call laughed, Caped Justice couldn't help himself. Caped Justice burst into laughter, the uproarious, wheezing kind, and Call honestly didn't think it had been that funny.
Despite, Call laughed right along with Caped Justice, hard enough that he was grateful nobody was around right about then.

“That was the lamest thing I've ever heard,” Caped Justice gasped, and Call shoved him lightly.

“Then stop laughing!” Call said, unable to wipe the smile off his face.

“But the comedic timing,” Caped Justice said, wiping his mirthful eyes.

“Dude, come on, there's no way you're crying right now, that was the worst joke I've ever told,” Call said, inspecting his face. Caped Justice definitely laughed so hard he’d cried. Man. This guy must be great during stand up acts.

“Then I’d love to hear the best joke you've ever told,” Caped Justice quipped. He glanced down the alley, looking at the sky. “Come on, let me walk you home in case there are more wolves on your tail.”

Call bristled at the thought of spending so much time with Caped Justice out of costume, he felt like he was exposing himself enough as it was. General civilians wouldn't hold their own in a fight like that. General civilians weren't this comfortable around superheroes.

General civilians couldn't use mind control. Call’s stomach dropped to his feet and he shoved the thought out of his mind.

Caped Justice had a point though, Call didn't want to find himself alone if the wolves came back. He didn't even want to think about the implications of the wolves attacking him in the first place. He’d bring it up with Havoc.

Either way, when Caped Justice walked down the road, Call followed without protest. It would probably be fine.

“Wait till I tell my dad that a stranger followed me home,” Call remarked as they strolled down the sidewalk. He picked up his skateboard as they passed it, lying dormant near a bench.

“Wait till I tell my dad that I followed a stranger home,” Caped Justice said, and the comment made Call snicker.

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The Sun was setting and Call’s shoulder had stopped hurting by the time Caped Justice and Call made it to the Hunt house. Call stood on the front stairs, one hand resting on the doorknob as he looked at Caped Justice. They'd talked while walking, mostly about the annoying habits of teachers they had in common, and then about Havoc’s favorite reality show, turned out Caped Justice liked too. Call knew enough that he could hold an, apparently entertaining, conversation about it. Even standing there, Caped Justice glowing a little while he was backlit by the setting Sun, Call couldn't quite wipe a small grin off his face.

“See you around.” Caped Justice said, smiling at Call. Call took his hand off the doorknob to give Caped Justice fingerguns.

“Catch you later,” he said. Caped Justice huffed a laugh through his nose, held eye contact with Call maybe a second longer than he needed to, then turned on his heel and stalked off down the street.

Call dug his key out of his pocket and got through the door, relocking it behind him. He popped his head into the garage as he passed it, shouting a quick greeting to his dad.
The Hunt family lived in a thin, three-story building. The bottom level was mostly occupied by Alastair’s garage, and it was where he ran his Auto Parts and Repair business out of. Alastair’s Auto Repair. The second and third levels were the residential floors, where Call, and his dad, but mostly Call, spent their time.

A staircase later, Call found himself getting attacked by a wolf again, knocking him to the floor.

_You took longer than usual to get home_, Havoc informed Call from his position on Call’s chest. Call batted at Havoc until he jumped off and Call could sit up. As soon as Call was sitting, he mussed up the fur on Havoc’s back.

_I had a day and a half. I swear, everyone’s out to get me. That Aaron kid? Everything really came to a head with him. Oh, and wait till I tell you about Jasper._

_That doesn’t explain why you’re home late_, Havoc thought, walking over to the couch. Call’s Radar sweatshirt and his mask were lying in a ball on it, and Call was vaguely touched that Havoc had the foresight to save him a trip up and down the stairs.

_You’re not my dad_, Call thought as he trudged over to tug his costume on. Havoc growled.

Alright, alright, I had a run in with some wolves and Caped Justice showed up to help me. We handled it, and he insisted on walking me home, so I couldn’t skateboard. Happy? Call pulled the mask on, then grabbed some pen and paper to write his dad a note.

_Why didn’t you call me?_ Havoc asked.

You were too far away, and once Caped Justice showed up, you would have given away my identity in a heartbeat, Call responded, signing the note -- Walking Havoc, might or might not be home before dark, feel free to eat dinner w/o me, Call.

_Someday we’re going to have a serious conversation about your unwillingness to ask for help_, Havoc told Call while Call put the note on the table. Call elected to ignore the comment.

_Do you know why the wolves attacked you?_ Havoc asked after a moment. _Does the Enemy know who you are?_

Call turned the prospects of the question over in his mind as he and Havoc walked down the stairs. One conclusion was that the wolves were just out and about and got attracted to Call, his superpower was obviously affected by them, so they were probably affected by his superpower. Another would be that the wolves attacked random citizens, but Call figured they’d probably know about it by now if that was what was happening. There was also the chance that the Enemy knew who Call was, through Jasper. Jasper. The predicament.

_It could be that Jasper is working with the Enemy and told him who I am_, Call thought to Havoc. He pulled his hood on and ducked his head as the two walked through the front door again, unlocked and relocked, and he looked like any city bumpkin walking his dog after school.

_Do you genuinely think Jasper is working with the Enemy? You have a danger sense for this sort of thing_, Havoc responded. Call wracked his brain. If Jasper associated with the Enemy, that would make him a threat, wouldn’t it? And his danger sense seemed to be mostly activated by nearby threats. So… Jasper would set off his danger sense if he was working with the Enemy, wouldn’t he?

_Jasper hasn’t set off my danger sense_, Call thought, slowly and carefully to Havoc, thinking through the words as he said them.
Then we have nothing to worry about from him, Havoc said. The wolves must’ve been drawn to your superpower.

Call hadn’t mentioned the way that his superpower reacted to the wolves to Havoc yet, but he wrote it off.

Probably. I hope so. That option is the easiest to account for.

Call and Havoc strolled through the maze of streets for a while, letting the sun dip through the sky and the silence permeate. The bakery was about a five minute walk from the garage.

Did I hear you say Caped Justice insisted on walking you home? Havoc asked, and there was something jolly in his tone that threw Call off.

Yeah, so if the wolves came back I would have backup, Call said. Havoc’s ears twitched.

Right, he said, and something in his dumb doggy expression or his slightly condescending tone tuned Call in on what he was implying. Suddenly his face started burning.

It’s not like that, Call said, and Havoc’s ears twitched again. He was laughing at Call.

You are very bad at lying to me, Havoc said, and Call scruffed up the fur on Havoc’s head.

I don’t even know him, stop seeing things that aren’t there, Call said, pretending he wasn’t blushing to the tips of his ears. He needed to get that under control. It was ruining his image.

Hormones do weird things in intense situations, Havoc pushed.

So do wolves, apparently.

You’re trying to change the subject.

There’s not a subject to be changed. I don’t like him.

Havoc huffed. They turned another corner, and the crowd didn’t look twice at the kid and his dog.

Fine, fine, you don’t like him, Havoc said, I believe you. But does he like you?

No!

Are you sure?

Yes! We have had maybe one and a half conversations.

So there’s not even potential?

There’s not even potential. He does like that one reality show though.

The one with the island?

Mhm.

Marry him.

While Call was still sputtering and Havoc was still laughing, the bakery came into view, and if Call squinted, he could see two figures sitting on top of it in the dimming sunlight. Call, not for the first time, wished he had the power to fly, before he and Havoc squeezed around to the back of the
building. To Call’s (and his leg’s) grandiose trepidation, he and Havoc scaled the fire escape to the bakery roof.

Caped Justice shot Call a smile when he turned around, and Call had to calm his beating heart. He attributed it to climbing the fire escape.

*I don’t like him. I honestly don’t. Havoc is delusional. I don’t like him and he doesn’t like me.*

Reassured by his thoughts, Call returned Caped Justice’s smile. Havoc was just eager, and weird.

“Havoc says hi,” Call said as he sat on the lip of the roof, next to Convict. Havoc hadn’t said hi, but he transmitted his assent to Call, so nobody had to know. Convict glanced at Call, grinning.

“Do you say hi too?” she asked. Caped Justice sat down on her other side, and Havoc sat next to Call.

“Nah,” Call said.

“Well, hi Havoc. Radar, you can go, we don’t need you,” Convict said, causing Caped Justice and Call to laugh, and Havoc to wag his tail. Below them, the bakery door opened and closed, the vague chime of the bell inside ringing somewhere in the backs of their ears. If there were sirens across the city, if there was the shift of unease in the air, they tried to ignore it.

“It’s the hour of need,” Call responded, although he lacked the playful tone he’d had a second ago. “You sort of do.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Did anybody see anything out of the ordinary since yesterday? Figure anything else out?” Convict asked.

“I had an encounter with some wolves today,” Caped Justice said, and Call felt his shoulder pound like a heartbeat. He’d forgotten to dress that. It had probably scabbed at that point.

“And I noted some odd behavior from students,” Call said, trying to keep the topic moving. Convict scratched the concrete of the roof with her pointer finger. She looked deep in thought.

“We need to consolidate all of the information we have,” she said. “It'll organize our thoughts better. It can't be just me that feels like there are too many loose ends.”

“We should make a conspiracy board,” Call suggested.

“Like, with red thread?” Caped Justice asked.

“Exactly.”

“Does anyone have red thread?” Convict asked.

“No, but I do have pen and paper,” Caped Justice said, and Call deflated. The idea was great while it lasted.

“Leave it to you to carry those things around,” Convict said while Caped Justice pulled a pocket notebook and a pen out of his jacket pocket.

“Hey, don't bash it when we’re about to save the world with it. This is precisely why I carry it around,” Caped Justice said. He passed the pen and the notebook to Convict, so both he and Call
could look over Convict’s shoulder and see what she was writing.

“Okay,” Convict said, clicking the pen open and flipping to a blank page. “what do we know so far?”

“The Enemy of Death has an army of mind controlled monster wolves somewhere in the city,” Call started. Convict scribbled down the words as he said them. Her handwriting at its sloppiest still looked cleaner than Call’s at its neatest, so he figured it was good that she was writing.

“What else?”

“The Enemy wants control of the city via the mayor,” Caped Justice said, and Convict wrote it down.

“The-”

“He-”

Caped Justice and Call stumbled over their words, exchanging a glance.

“You first,” Caped Justice said, giving him a short grin as an apology. Call nodded.

“There’s something special about the virus, because it’s obsolete next to the monster wolves,” Call said. Convict nodded, circling it after she wrote it down.

“I’ll circle things that don’t have answers and we have to pursue further,” she explained, and both Call and Caped Justice nodded.

“The Enemy has wolves patrolling the streets, or something like that,” Caped Justice said, and Call felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

“When I was walking home from school today, I came across two wolves attacking a civilian,” Caped Justice said.

Don’t give any tells, Havoc told Call. You’re looking a little stiff.

Call forced his muscles to relax, because Havoc was right, he should not be affected by this story.

“We drove them off, he’s fine, but it’s something to note,” Caped Justice finished. There was a half smile on his face, and he wouldn’t quite look at Call or Convict. Convict’s mouth was set in a grim line as she wrote that one down.

“Is there any reason they would’ve attacked that civilian?” Convict asked.

“I’ve also come across wolves attacking a civilian,” Call cut in. He didn’t want that conversation to continue. “The Enemy was there too. Havoc managed to scare them off.”

Convict and Caped Justice were looking at Call like he’d told them the Earth was flat, and he had to admit it sounded a little extraordinary. A run in with the Enemy himself.

“Was the Enemy saying anything?” Convict asked, tapping the pen against the paper.

“He was threatening the kid, but their language was so vague that I didn’t know what about,” Call said. Convict clicked her tongue and wrote it down.

“Enemy and wolves interacting with civilians for seemingly no reason, comma, threatening,” she
said as she wrote. “What else?”

“The fire drill at school today was staged,” Call said.

“What?” Caped Justice asked.

“Yeah. My danger sense went off during the drill, and then I found out that somebody had pulled the fire alarm, so it’s all suspicious activity,” Call said.

“Why would the Enemy stage a fire drill?” Caped Justice asked while Convict wrote it down.

“To get the school empty,” Convict responded. “Who knows what he did after, but he got the school empty.”

They were quiet as Convict scribbled an arrow and a conclusion.

“Anything else?” She asked.

*Lightning*, Havoc said, and Call couldn't believe he forgot.

“Lightning is working with the Enemy,” Call said. Once again, Caped Justice and Convict looked at him like he'd said the moon was a giant egg, like he was spouting incredible nonsense.

“Care to elaborate on that?” Convict said. She tapped the pen against the notepad again, and the writing on the notepad was getting hard to see in the quickly dimming light.

“Last night, he told me the Enemy sends his regards,” Call said, “probably as an intimidation tactic. I don't think the Enemy actually sends his regards. But I have no doubt in my mind that they're working together.”

“Are you sure he wasn't just saying that?” Convict asked, and Caped Justice nodded behind her.

“He showed up in the city the same day he Enemy did,” Call said. “That's not a coincidence.”

Convict blew a long breath out through her nose and wrote Lightning down.

“Do we know what Lightning’s deal is?” Caped Justice asked as Convict circled the name on the paper.

“Well, he's not after money, and he's attacked us twice,” Call said. That was about all he knew. Convict jotted it down.

“Is that it?” She asked. “Do we have any suspects?”

“Jasper deWinter,” Call said immediately. “He's been acting suspiciously for the past few days. Like, really suspiciously.” Convict looked at Call for a bit, then wrote Jasper’s name down carefully under a SUSPECTS column.

“Ca-” Caped Justice said, but he cut himself off.

“What?” Convict asked, looking at Caped Justice. Caped Justice had a confused expression on his face.

“...no one, nevermind. He just got off my suspect list, actually.”

“Alright,” Convict said, flipping the notebook shut and clicking the pen closed. She handed them
both back to Caped Justice and stood up, Call and Caped Justice following suit. The Sun was officially below the horizon, and it was quickly shifting to night time.

“It feels too early to part ways, and we haven't really gotten anything done,” Caped Justice said, eyes moving over the horizon.

“Unless anybody else has any ideas,” Convict started, continuing when Call, Caped Justice, and Havoc all shook their heads, “I say we should go to the TV studio.”

“Why?” Call asked. It was a reasonable question.

“Well,” Convict said, “the Enemy sent us a message. We ought to return the favor.”

TV studio cameras looked like really elaborate robots that rich inventors would have sitting in their basement, covered in a moth eaten tarp and dust. Call wasn't expecting that, but he was faced with the reality as he stared one down.

Superhero privileges had gotten them into the studio with an opportunity to broadcast easily. It only took a few convincing words from Convict and a charming smile from Caped Justice. From the look in the receptionist’s eyes, he wasn't going to question Havoc’s presence inside the studio, and that was all the better.

On the way to the studio, the four had discussed what they planned for the future of the city, and they were all on the same terms. The Enemy was getting nothing, virus or not. Magista was not going to be browbeaten. They wanted the Enemy out of the city, and they weren't afraid of no virus. They'd work it out. But the city was taking a stand, and the four of them would be the heads of it.

They worked out a rough script, and Caped Justice called the mayor (of course he had the mayor’s phone number) to inform him of their plans. Mayor North agreed emphatically.

“I would sooner die than give the city over,” Mayor North had said.

“That’s great!” Caped Justice responded, looking like he was drowning. The mayor had been droning on for at least seven minutes now, and Call and Convict were snickering in the background.

“Die, you hear me? That scumbag will never get our city. I don't care about some virus.”

“No, really, I get it.”

Needless to say, everything was going according to plan. The TV studio was setting up a live broadcast for the superheroes, so they could rally the people of the city and let the Enemy know that he needed to hightail it out of there.

“Live in five,” an intern said, not looking up from a clipboard. The room was well lit and bustling with people of all types, the only ones standing still were Call, Convict, Caped Justice, and Havoc, who were fidgeting in the area in front of the cameras.

“So we all know what we’re going to say?” Caped Justice checked, and he was met with nods.

“Does anyone here have stage fright?” Convict asked, a little wickedly, a little nervously. Her eyes kept darting to the camera.

“I've never much enjoyed the spotlight,” Caped Justice admitted, and Call barked a laugh.

“Mayor North insisted,” he said, and that time, Convict chuckled too.

“Well, I get nervous in front of cameras, but not in front of crowds,” Convict said. It occurred to Call that that was a weird distinction, but he didn't say anything.

“I don't get particularly nervous about stuff like this,” Call said.

Don't do it, Havoc chimed, somewhere in his head.

“My buddy here, on the other hand…”

Call I swear to-

“Are you saying Havoc has stage fright?” Convict asked, and she sounded delighted. Call’s smug smile answered her question for her, and Caped Justice burst into laughter. Convict at least tried to keep from laughing about it.

You'd better lock your door when you sleep tonight, Havoc said. He growled a little, and Call suddenly found it very hard to keep a straight face.

You’ll get in anyway, Call responded, ruffling Havoc’s fur. Havoc growled louder.

You know I will.

Call laughed and gave Havoc a half-hug, standing up straight as the intern shouted.

“Live in one,” she said, and suddenly everything shifted to a different kind of desperation.

“Okay guys, we’ve got this,” Caped Justice said.

“Hell yeah we do, we’re literal superheroes,” Convict responded.

“Good luck high fives,” Call said, holding up his hands for high fives. To his surprise, the other two humored him, and they exchanged the highest of fives.

“I feel strangely prepared, now,” Caped Justice joked.

“Power of the high five, man,” Call said.

“Live in thirty,” the intern said. Everybody was getting in their places. Call put a reassuring hand on Havoc’s scruff.

“I feel like we need a team cheer or something, for before we do high stakes things like this,” Convict murmured, so only Caped Justice, Call, and Havoc would hear. Havoc barked. It was a quiet bark, but a bark nonetheless.

“That'll work,” Convict said, while Call and Caped Justice laughed.

“Five, four, three, two, live,” the intern said. The weight of the city’s eyes was beaming through the camera, and onto the superheroes. Caped Justice took a deep breath. Hatred of the spotlight or not, he was the billboard boy.

“Good evening, Magista, sorry to interrupt,” he said, a brilliant smile lighting his face. “Radar, Convict, and I have a few things to say, if you're willing to hear.”
Call and Convict took that opportunity to wave, and Havoc wagged his tail.

“So, you might have heard about a certain Enemy of Death. We certainly did. He proposed an ultimatum, demanding control of the city in exchange for crisis control. Still with me? Well, by all accounts, the Enemy of Death is a supervillain. So, we, as your super heroes, stand before you now to get some things cleared up.

“You see, we’ve talked with Mayor North, and came to a unanimous agreement. The Enemy will not gain control of the city, by any means. The mayor will not be handed over. If the Enemy attempts to take over by force, he will be met with resistance. Our resistance.”

“Our resistance,” Convict said, picking up after Caped Justice, “isn't just us, though. We’re nothing without you, all of you. We’re just three kids and a dog.” Havoc barked. Never let it be said he didn't have comedic timing.

“However, together, with your support, we are a force to be reckoned with. We have always been the center of history, but that is because we change history. We do that. You do that. We are not some helpless city to be taken over by a supervillain, we are a city of superheroes, and marchers, and fighters. Magista, tell me now, will you let yourself be walked all over by some Enemy of Death? Some random dude with an ego? Viruses have antidotes. And people have strength. Strength enough to hold out against an oppressor. Every day I see you, I walk among you, and I have seen more acts of strength and courage than I could tell. We are not a city of cowards.”

“I know that we won't stand to be bullied into submission,” Caped Justice said. “If anything, we’re going down swinging, but I somehow doubt we’ll go down at all. Together, Magista, we are powerful. And together, we will drive this supervillain out of our city!”

The people in the TV studio clapped and cheered, most likely because Caped Justice had said it with such conviction. Even Call felt a huge bubble of hope in his chest. These two were good.

But it was his turn.

“Oh, and, Constantine,” Call said, stepping forward. “Your name is Constantine, isn't it? We know you're watching. You may think we’re afraid of you, or that your little puppies scare us.”

At this, Havoc growled, and gosh Call loved his dog.

“But I have some news for you, buddy. You're gonna have to try harder than this if you want to take the city. Your pathetic attempts to establish power have only reinforced your obvious inability to beat us. If you think we're exaggerating, well, take the fact that we’re completely uninjured and telling you to your face that you're a coward as evidence.

“Welcome to Magista, here’s your introduction to a city that doesn't fool around. If you want control of the city, you're going to have to go through us first,” Call finished, and behind him, he heard Convict cracking her knuckles as Havoc raised his hackles.

“So, Enemy of Death, shove off,” Convict said.

“Or we’ll do it for you,” Caped Justice added. Havoc complimented the statement with a rather intimidating bark. It echoed through the studio, ringing with challenge.

“Magista will not fall under some bully,” Convict said, chin up, eyes burning. “We will stand.”

“We will fight,” Call said.
“We will win,” Caped Justice said.

A moment passed, then the cameras clicked off and the burning lights turned down. The assistants around the studio moved almost robotically, a dazed look in their eyes. They kept sneaking glances at the superheroes standing in a group.

“I feel good about that,” Caped Justice said. Call felt himself nodding. The rush of delayed and dying down adrenaline and satisfaction was swimming through him, and even he had to admit that was an awesome speech.

*You barked at all the right times,* he thought dazedly to Havoc as they left the studio, Caped Justice and Convict waving to people as they passed.

*I always do,* Havoc responded.

Night had fallen by the time the heroes were back outside, and the city was oddly quiet. Or, quieter. As quiet as cities get. The taste of panic that had been in the air was diminished, somewhat. Call felt a renewed sense of hope, determination, and it was an odd thing to feel.

*You're being quiet,* Havoc said to Call. The four were walking astride down the sidewalk, ignoring the sidelong glances they were being tossed. They weren't really talking. They weren't really going anywhere.

*I feel weird. Good weird. Really good weird,* Call responded. Havoc’s tail started wagging.

*You're not used to being this invested in something, are you?* Havoc asked.

*Nope.*

*You're not used to feeling this powerful and hopeful, are you?* Havoc asked.

*Nope.*

*You're not used to getting along this well with other people and having a sense of belonging, do you?*

*I don't have a sense of belonging with them!*

*Yes you do.*

As adamantly as he denied it, Call realized Havoc was right. He got on unsettlingly well with Caped Justice and Convict. He wasn't used to people laughing at his jokes. He wasn't used to people joking back. Usually, people didn't bother talking to him, and vice versa.

At the realization, and the subsequent emotions, Call had a rush of impulse. As soon as the thought occurred to him, he acted on it, because he really just had to.

“I'm sorry for walking out on you guys,” Call said, all in one breath as they took a turn down a nearly empty sidewalk. The few night time strollers on the street passed without looking up from their phones, and one of them was definitely playing Pokémon Go. “After the bank robbery.”

Convict smiled a little, and Call felt his heart pounding in his chest. He couldn't remember the last time he sincerely apologized. He couldn't remember the last time he emotionally put himself out there like this. He didn't know why he needed to, but he also knew exactly why he needed to and didn't want to admit it to himself.
For once, he wanted people to like him. It was a partnership he was open to, and he desperately
didn’t want to mess it up, he didn’t want them to have the wrong impression of him.

“It's fine, everyone gets scared from time to time,” Caped Justice said.

“I'll try not to hold it against you,” Convict said. Call blinked. He forgot they didn't know why he
left.

“I wasn't scared, I had to deal with the Enemy’s wolves, across town,” Call said. “Danger sense.
That why my name is Radar.”

Caped Justice looked considering.

“What’s this danger sense of yours anyway?” Convict asked. “You've mentioned it before. How
does it work?”

“I experience a physical reaction to nearby danger, or the potential of it,” Call explained. “The more
imminent or dangerous the danger, the more extreme my reaction to it. Sometimes it feels like a sixth
sense, where I just know, other times it manifests as stabbing headaches or nausea.”

“But I thought talking to animals was your superpower?” Caped Justice asked.

Commercially, all of the superheroes had a well-known power. But that was only commercial.
Convict could control water, but nobody put together that meant “in every form”. Caped Justice had
x-ray vision, but nobody knew that he had supervision too, and could see for miles across horizons.
Radar could talk to animals, but nobody knew about his danger sense.

Apparently he could control animals too, but he definitely was not thinking about that.

“It is,” Call said, “but I also have the danger sense. Two superpowers.”

“I didn't think that was possible,” Convict said.

“It's like that thing where people have two different colored eyes,” Call explained.

_Heterochromia_, Havoc told him.

“Heterochromia,” Call revised. “Rare as all hell, but it happens. At least, I figure. I don't know many
superhero scientists.”

Nobody knew any superhero scientists. Superpowers were a biological marvel, mostly because
scientists had been working for ages and still didn’t know how they worked. Random, powerful
abilities that defied the laws of physics. On top of that, they couldn’t perform many tests, because
“superpower cells” didn’t work when they were outside of the hero, and modern scientific equipment
couldn’t process what the cells were doing while they were still inside the body. The whole thing
was a hopeless cause. Everybody just made theories and hoped.

“I have to admit that’s… kind of cool,” Convict said.

“So that's how you knew about Lightning last night? And why you walked out after the bank
robbery?” Caped Justice asked.

“Yup. Danger sense. All of it. It's my radar.”

“So that's how you always know where the crime is,” Convict said. Call could see the puzzle pieces
clicking together in her brain.
“That, or I'm a really good guesser,” Call said. Convict and Caped Justice both snorted.

“Can I ask you guys a question?” Call asked after a moment.

“Shoot,” Caped Justice said, stopping and leaning against a wall. Convict promptly sat down, leaning her back against the wall too. Havoc sat, but Call stayed uncomfortably standing.

“How did your partnership start? I can't remember a time when you two weren't fighting crime together. It's always been “Caped Justice and Convict” splayed across the headlines,” Call said. Havoc’s tail stopped wagging absentmindedly.

*Where are you going with this?* Havoc asked. Curious, not upset.

*You know as well as I.*

*I don't know anything.*

*Exactly.*

Caped Justice leaned his head against the wall behind him, closing his eyes for a second.

“You tell the story better,” he said, and Convict nodded.

“I've known about my superpower from a young age,” she said, “but kept it hidden out of fear of the responsibility. I assume it was the same way for Caped Justice?” Convict looked at him for affirmation, and he gave a lousy thumbs up in response. She nodded. “Right. Besides, Magista already had superheroes taking care of things, so I figured I wouldn’t need to step on the scene.

“However, after La Rinconada, well, there weren’t exactly any heroes left taking care of things. I couldn’t watch the city deteriorate into even more chaos and hopelessness than it was already in after the whole ordeal. I put on a costume to disguise my identity and waited for an incident call on my police radio. Don’t ask how I got it,” Convict glared at Call, who had opened his mouth to ask, so he promptly shut it.

“I left for the scene as soon as the call came in, ready to make my debut as a superhero. This guy,” she jabbed her thumb towards Caped Justice, “was already there. I guess we were on the same wavelength on wanting to get out of the house. I don’t know. Either way, we handled the incident as epically as possible, and when we finished, I stood and introduced myself to the gathered bystanders as Convict. There was cheering, and the kid we saved asked Caped Justice who he was. He told the world he was Caped Justice, and once the crowd cleared and the news had had enough of us, I proposed a partnership. I wasn’t necessarily going in looking for a partner, but I knew I didn’t want to do this all alone, and he and I obviously worked well together. The rest is history.”

“Happy coincidences,” Call said, and they both nodded.

“What about you?” Caped Justice asked. “Why have you never had a partner? What's your story?”

“I went stir crazy,” Call said, shrugging. “It's that simple. My danger sense was driving me insane and I barely even knew what it was. I left the house to find out, and you know, never really went back. As for partners, well, I have my partner right here,” Call said, placing a hand on Havoc’s head. Havoc’s tail wagged across the ground. “A lot of people just see him as a dog, but he’s my best friend, really. Even without the superpowers, he's just as much of a superhero as I am. So he's my partner.” Convict was smiling at the two of them, which Call took as a good sign, but Caped Justice was staring at Call in a bit of a weird way. That seemed like a very, very bad sign.
“I know it sounds crazy…” Call mumbled, but Caped Justice shook his head.

“It’s… it’s not that, just, something else you said… surprised me, that’s all.” A small grin crawled onto Caped Justice’s face, but there was still something sparking in his eyes. While Call was busy trying to figure out what he’d said wrong, Convict spoke up.

“Would Havoc be okay if I pet him?” she asked.

“You can talk to him directly, he comprehends language as well as you do,” Call said. Convict immediately nodded.

“Hey, Havoc, would it be alright if I pet you?” she asked, holding eye contact with Havoc. Havoc tilted his head to the left and twitched his right ear.

“That’s a yes,” Call said. Convict smiled and moved forward to scratch Havoc’s ears.

“Are you saying you and Havoc can communicate without talking?” Caped Justice asked.

“He uses body language to give off basic signs, it’s easy enough. You learn it after a while,” Call said. “All animals do it in some form. Squirrel tails twitch twice when they’re laughing.” Havoc’s tail started wagging when Convict hit the special spot behind his ear.

“That’s really cool,” Convict said, smiling at Havoc. He barked lightly at her, doggy smiling.

“Yeah, that is honestly really cool, Radar’s dog has better communication skills than he does,” Caped Justice said.

Havoc’s ears started twitching, and Convict huffed a laugh.

“Shut up, you,” Call said, pointing to Havoc.

“What’d he tell you?” Caped Justice asked, humor in his tone.

“He’s laughing at me. See his ears twitch? That’s how you know.”

“That is so cool,” Convict said. Caped Justice just smiled happily, eyes fond.

*He’s flirting with you,* Havoc thought to Call. Call coughed.

*That doesn’t make sense, he thinks Call and Radar are two different people,* Call responded.

*Nevertheless, I’ll leave you two alone,* Havoc said, taunting in his voice.

*Havoc, don’t you dare.*

Havoc stood up, ran down the sidewalk, looked back at Convict, and wagged his tail.

_Tell her to follow me,_ Havoc said. _Trust me. You’ll steal his heart._

Call was doing no such thing anytime soon.

“Does he want me to follow him?” Convict asked, starting to stand up. No no no. Call was not letting Havoc have this. Call was not going to be alone with Caped Justice.

“Even better,” Call said, thinking fast, “he wants all of us to follow him.”

_Seriously, Call?_ Havoc echoed in his psyche. Call ignored him.
“Where are we going?” Caped Justice asked, pushing off the wall.

“Uh, nowhere in particular,” Call said.

“Then what-”

The idea occurred to Call and he didn't stop to think. Why would four friends be chasing each other around a city at 11 at night? There was only one, blatantly obvious answer.

“Tag! You’re it!” Call said, shoving Caped Justice and taking off down the street. His aching leg immediately started pinching. He'd pushed it enough for one day.

Caped Justice barked a laugh, then lunged at Convict. She twisted sharply and took off after Call, running past Havoc, who was hopping and barking happily, acting like any excited dog.

_Coward_, he thought to Call.

_You shouldn't be allowed to play tag, you have twice as many legs as the rest of us_, Call responded. _You're changing the subject._

Call was about to respond when Caped Justice whacked him on the shoulder and kept running past him, jogging to catch up with Convict.

“You don't know what you’ve just unleashed!” Call shouted after him.

“Oh yeah?” Caped Justice responded.

“I'm so scared,” Convict said, smiling. The smile slowly slid off her face as she watched Havoc pad up beside Call. Call couldn't help it, he smirked watching the realization in their eyes.

_You don't hate me enough to deny me this, do you?_ Call asked Havoc.

_I would be denying myself something, too_, Havoc responded. Call laughed.

_Give them hell_, he said, then placed his hand on Havoc’s head, effectively switching the “it” to the wolf.

Havoc gave a happy bark and darted towards Convict and Caped Justice, both of whom started running in opposite directions. Call stood, laughing, as Havoc chased the other two around the square.

It was a tried and true trick that they had developed from an early age. Call couldn't run, so Havoc would for him. They both enjoyed it, Call because he knew it was an infallible power move, and Havoc because he got to chase people without mercy. Win win.

“This isn't fair!” Convict shouted once Havoc slammed his shoulder into her and took off across the road. Call and Caped Justice were both wheezing from laughter.

“We’ll see who’s laughing in a minute,” Convict said, then she started running towards Call. Call turned on his heel and started half jogging away from her. He couldn’t find it in himself to be upset, even.

Call turned around at the shouting from behind him to see the aftermath of Caped Justice shoulder-checking Convict.
“Oops, I tripped,” he said, and winked at Call. Call and Convict laughed breathlessly, while Havoc jumped onto Caped Justice’s shoulders, knocking him to the ground. Havoc and Call both started across the street, Convict behind them.

“Superheroes playing tag,” Convict breathed out while Caped Justice was still standing back up. “Who would have thought?”

“Yeah,” Call agreed, smiling, and he knew it was his dopey, walls-down smile. Call, letting his walls down. “Who would have thought.”

“Tell you what,” Caped Justice shouted. “I’ll give you guys a five second head start. You’ll need it.”

“Radar, are you good at ice skating?” Convict asked in a rushed whisper.

“Five!”

“I’m good at skateboarding,” he responded.

“Four!”

“Good enough,” Convict said, smirking.

“Three!”

The ground beneath their feet, still damp from the rain early that morning, turned into a sheet of ice.

“Two!”

“Go go go!” Convict shouted, gliding down the road. Havoc skidded a little on the ice, and Call laughed at his unbalance. Call got a hang of the terrain quickly. Ice he could do. He slid down the road after Convict, whooping at the speed.

“One!” Caped Justice shouted, running after them.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

ohoho guess who has freetime now cause it's summer? not me but I'm TRyING. Also yeah, I know the fandom is p much dead at this point, but I'm sticking this thing out til the end, try me. I hope you enjoy the rest of the ride, but I also hope you enjoy specifically this portion of the ride.

Thanks again for all the kudos and comments!! Every time I see another kudos I grow Stronger. Soon I will be Unstoppable (and you guys are the best tysm)

This chapter lacks in Tamara, and I am so, so sorry, but it has a lot more ~other stuff~ so maybe you can find it in your hearts to forgive me?

uh, enjoy!

Jasper, across the room, was fuming.

It was third block Science, and Call’s plan was finally starting to work. He’d decided he needed to find out what was going on with Jasper, cause it was obviously something, so he came up with a brilliant strategy. Persistence. Provoke Jasper until he broke. In hindsight, heck, even in wording, it sounds like just about the dumbest thing in the world. It frames Call to look like one of those kids bugging their dad in the car about if they’re there yet. However, anyone can admit, the dad in the situation always has a breaking point, and sometimes, when people break, they slip up. Jasper might spill. Jasper might do anything, but he also might spill, and that was exactly what Call needed.

It was working, too. After a full day of provocation, Jasper was showing cracks in his dignified foundation. Call bugged him and irked him beyond sanity in math class, chewing his gum loudly and never stopping in his tirade of questions. Jasper recycled the same deflection techniques, Call always, always circled it back. Even he was surprised by how relentless he was being.

Eventually Mr. Lemuel sent them to the office for talking, which Jasper was enraged about. The secretary was busy with phone calls from panicked parents with sick children. The effect of the Enemy’s virus had really hit the city overnight, so everybody was home sick, including staff. The secretary was the only person in the office, the other workers supposedly also sick. When she saw Call and Jasper, she sighed and put down the phone, marking another x on a list full of x’s, which Call could only assume was an attendance record. It didn’t look too good. The secretary looked at them with tired eyes and asked if they were another case of talking in class. To their yes, she gave them a quick, customary lecture, then sent them back to class without bothering the principal.

As they were walking back to class, Jasper tried to slip away and leave school again, which was honestly a little ridiculous. Call was right there. Obviously he wasn’t going to let Jasper get away with that, which led to another long, intense bout of back and forth wordplay. In the end, a hall monitor came by and told them they had to go back to class, Jasper never got the opportunity to leave, and Call was definitely starting to get on his last nerve.

Math ended shortly after, and Call and Jasper didn’t see each other again until third block. Which was another opportunity to beat down Jasper’s patience.
Honestly, the whole plan was so focused around Jasper’s patience, as if nobody cared about Call’s patience anymore. Nobody understood how exhausted Call was, not only from bothering Jasper all day, but also from being around Jasper all day. This wasn’t easy work, annoying Jasper, but obviously somebody had to do it. For the good of the city.

Ms. Alma set up a lab for them to choose partners for and do after a small lecture. As soon as she said to pick partners, Call walked across the room to Jasper.

“Absolutely not, I already have a partner,” Jasper said when he saw Call.

“You aren’t exactly known for telling the truth, Jasper,” Call said. He glanced around for a second, and sure enough, Jasper definitely didn’t have a partner. About half the class was home with the virus, so there weren’t as many people to partner with. Everybody was essentially paired up already.

“He’s in the bathroom,” Jasper said, crossing his arms.

“Jasper! Call! Get to work!” Ms. Alma yelled at them from across the room. Jasper spluttered for a moment, but even he wasn’t dumb enough to think the “my partner’s in the bathroom” excuse would work on a teacher.

Call and Jasper grabbed the recording sheet and walked over to the last labspace that was open, the one by the door.

“I’m not telling you anything,” Jasper muttered, setting out the weights.

“That inherently puts you on the suspect list,” Call responded, switching on the light. “It’s a simple equation, Jasper, I thought you’d manage to do the math. Aren’t you supposed to be smart?”

“I’m not supposed to be anything,” Jasper growled, expression harsher than usual. “And I don’t care if I’m on your stupid suspect list. I know where my loyalties lie.”

“Are you insinuating that your loyalties lie against the Enemy? Cause you’re doing a pretty bad job of showing it.” Call poured some sand into a dish.

“My loyalties certainly don’t lie with you,” Jasper said. He honestly looked like he was about to snap the pencil in his hand.

“So they lie with the Enemy?”

“Sure! Just arrest me already!” Jasper’s voice raised dangerously, but Call didn’t need to glare at him to let him know he needed to quiet down, because an expression flicked across Jasper’s face and he twisted his mouth shut. It was enough.

“That response alone,” Call said, casually marking down another number, “is the reason I can’t arrest you. You aren’t telling me the full story. I don’t need you off the suspect list, I don’t need your loyalties, I need the information you know.”

“I won’t give it to you,” Jasper muttered, and the bite in his tone genuinely sent chills up Call’s arms. Yeah. Jasper was definitely reaching his breaking point.

“And why not?” Call asked.

“Why should I?” Jasper said immediately.

“Jasper, you are making this so much harder than it needs to be,” Call said, exasperation leaking into
his voice.

“You’re the one that won’t let this drop!” Jasper said, voice raising again.

“Jasper, quiet do-“

“Get off my case, Hunt! I have nothing more to say to you,” Jasper said, shouting now. Their classmates started staring. Ms. Alma raised an eyebrow. Call didn’t notice any of it. All he saw was Jasper deWinter, standing in front of him, looking as maniacal as a desperate, ratty lion.

It was weird. Call had been banking on Jasper’s snapping point, but he’d completely written off that he had one of his own. And Jasper having the guts to look Call in the eye and yell at him? Over a situation that was Jasper’s own dumb fault? After a day of stubbornness and ungrounded pride?

Well, Call snapped.

“You have plenty more to say to me, you’re just too much of a petty coward to say it,” Call spat.

“Have you lowered yourself to name calling now?” Jasper asked, sneering. The air in the room was taut with tension, like a tightrope over a waterfall that was begging to snap.

“Do you seriously believe your taunting deflection tactic still works? I know you aren’t telling me something!”

“Alright, want to hear it? I’m two steps ahead of you in this game, and maybe you could have caught up by now if it weren’t for that bum leg of yours.”

Call’s ears started ringing. His comeback was stuck in his throat. He felt a pit in his stomach, a sheer, cold one. He hated that.

He hated that phrase and he hated Jasper and he hated that he couldn’t even stick up for himself and he hated that nobody else was going to and he hated the Enemy of Death and he hated his dumb stupid leg and he hated this class and he hated Jasper he hated Jasper he hated Jasper and he hated the words he wasn’t saying.

Call blinked a few times. He distantly registered loud, angry voices, which was odd. Ms. Alma never stepped in on fights, and the other kids in their class definitely didn’t have guts to. He didn’t think they all turned around and continued with the lab after Jasper and him hashed it out, but he supposed they might’ve. It wasn’t like anybody cared.

A hand pushed his shoulder gently, and Call stumbled in the direction he was being led. His head was spinning, although he didn’t want it to be. He didn’t know why this was getting to him so badly. Kids had said it enough in middle school, he thought he’d been desensitized.

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Call was too lost in his own head to notice being led into an empty classroom, or the door closing behind him and the other person.

“You okay?” a kind voice asked, shaking Call out of his confused thoughts. Call blinked, tensing up when he realized he was in an empty room with a closed door and a stranger. It took him a second to recognize Tamara, the girl from the bathroom yesterday, looking at him warmly.

He didn’t necessarily know her very well, but he knew he could trust her. He knew she was reasonable, and well, she was already acting nicer than anyone else in his Science class. He’d forgotten they had Science together.
“I, yeah,” Call said. He was fine. He just needed a little break.

“I can’t believe he said that,” Tamara fumed, starting to pace. Call collapsed against a wall, sliding down until he was sitting. He watched Tamara pace.

“Nobody else seemed to care very much,” Call said. His brain was starting to cooperate again, he was coming up snarky.

“Then there’s no use wasting brainpower to worry about them,” Tamara said. She stopped pacing to face Call. “I’m serious, are you okay? Do you want to talk?”

Call blinked. He was rarely in the spotlight, especially from an emotional standpoint.

“I’m fine,” Call said. “Still reeling a little, and being hit by a strong wave of that emotion where I wish Jasper would fall in a pit.”

Tamara laughed humorlessly.

“Does the pit have spikes at the bottom?” she asked.

“Only dull ones, we’re not trying to kill him,” Call said.

“We’re not trying to kill him? Drat, what am I going to do with my time now that I’m not planning fatal revenge schemes?”

Call laughed, but the statement only confused him further.

“I thought you and Jasper were friends?” he said. Jasper and Tamara did hang out a lot, walking with each other in the hallways or chatting during freetime in the classes they had together. Now that Call thought about it, though, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen the two together.

“We’ve known each other since we were two,” Tamara said, shrugging. “He’s been acting different lately, though, you could probably tell. I don’t think he would’ve said what he said three months ago. He feels like a stranger.”

There was a second of terrifying silence, heavy and tense, so Call scrambled to come up with a joke.

“Well, he’s certainly strange,” Call said. It was the best he could do. Tamara sighed, a smile darting across her face before it was gone. She sat down across from Call, and it struck him how odd of a picture it was. He barely knew her name. They’d had one conversation before. Yet here they were, sitting with each other on the floor.

“This sucks,” Call said.

“As much as anything else,” Tamara responded.

“It’s maddening,” Call said. He was through the phase of shock, and now he was just angry.

“I know,” Tamara immediately responded, the upset in her voice enough to make Call feel cold for a second. “He’s so wrapped up in himself that he completely forgets about other people.”

“Yeah!” Call said. Someone else who truly felt the brunt of Jasper’s jerkiness, finally. “It’s like, in acting like he’s so above everyone else, he loses all of the traits that would actually make him a better person.”

“Gosh, right? It’s so upsetting. Even coming from one of his closest friends, he is an absolute
“He needs to get over himself for two seconds and open his eyes to how the world actually works.”

“He needs to change this pretentious attitude of his. It’s like he’s a middle schooler, for crying out loud.”

“Exactly. He just doesn’t listen.”

“He’s never listened! It’s just about the most infuriating thing in the world.”

“I’m over it. I’m so over his attitude,” Call said.

“I second that,” Tamara responded, slouching. She brushed her hair out of her face. The silence came back, but it wasn’t as heavy. It was like a cloud, drifting, light and understanding, between the two of them.

Call felt all right by the time he was walking into Latin class, a minute after the bell rang, as always. Where his chest had been heavy, where his blood had felt nervous, and where his limbs had felt tired before, he now felt more like himself. In control and energized, ready to take on whatever life was going to throw at him.

This new mood had everything to do with a baller pep talk Tamara had given him. Call didn’t know why he hadn’t tried to be friends with her yet. She was a delight, something he’d learned after they spent the rest of third block talking to each other (and hashing out motivational speeches) in that empty classroom.

It was fourth block now, though, so he slung off his backpack and sat in his usual spot, trying to ignore all of the empty seats, trying to forget the faces of the kids that were home sick. There weren’t assigned seats in this class, but everybody had the places where they exclusively sat. Once again, Call was lucky, and he was far away from both Jasper and Aaron.

He was mostly over Aaron. He figured it had all been taken care of in the bathroom yesterday, and didn’t particularly see a reason to deal with that kid ever again. They were in different social groups, they had beef, and, well, Call didn’t exactly know how to feel about him. He was nice, and smart, and kind of funny, but had also proved to be an annoyance. It was easier to cut him off than to sort through feelings, so there they were.

Jasper. Call felt like he could be over Jasper. Obviously Jasper had reached his breaking point, and it hadn’t quite achieved what Call had hoped it would. He wasn’t ready to forgive Jasper for what he said, and he didn’t figure he would ever have to be. Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn’t, but it didn’t matter either way, because he was going to avoid Jasper as much as he could, for the rest of forever. There wasn’t much more Call could get out of him. Maybe he could pass the “get information out of Jasper” job onto Caped Justice or Convict when they met up later. He obviously wasn’t qualified for the position.

But Call was over it. It didn’t do to dwell on dickwads. So he sat down, finished with caring about Aaron and Jasper and their idiocy, ready to go on with his day as an unbothered person.

Aaron sat down next to Call.

The world was testing him today.
“Hey,” Aaron said, smiling. Call had literally fallen off buildings before, had been in car chases, had been knocked down a city block by an explosion, and yet this was the strongest feeling of whiplash he’d ever experienced.

Why was Aaron talking to him? Since when did Aaron smile at him? Was this some kind of trick? Why did a cat so adamantly have his tongue?

“I, uh, isn’t that Erin’s seat?” Call eventually forced out.

“She’s sitting over there today,” Aaron said, pointing over his shoulder. Call looked, and sure enough, Erin was sitting with a few kids at the back, all of them chatting amicably.

“But why are you sitting here?” Call asked. Aaron deflated a little, although his smile stayed on lock.

“I sort of wanted to,” Aaron said. He was hiding something, he was definitely hiding something, but Call didn’t know what.

“I sort of thought you hated me,” Call responded. Aaron shrugged, glancing away for a second before looking back at Call.

“Hate’s a strong word. I was frustrated. I’m willing to try a second chance, though, you’ve always seemed like a cool guy.” The teacher started writing something on the board, so Aaron turned away to start copying it down. He was still grinning though, subtle and bright, and Call was, for lack of a better word, flabbergasted.

Mr. Tolbert started lecturing, talking about endings and commands, so Call couldn’t respond to Aaron. Which was a good thing. He needed to think.

Call believed in second chances. He didn’t know why Aaron was pursuing one, which immediately made this suspicious. He didn’t even know if he liked Aaron as a person. He seemed alright enough, sure, but he was barely on Call’s radar before last Tuesday.

When it came down to it, Call was wondering if this was a scheme, and he was wondering if Aaron was even a person he wanted to be friends with. He was cool, and had a smile that could honestly melt hearts, but Call had him pinned as an annoying kid that he had to stop caring about. For some reason, he hesitated to take Aaron off that list. People rarely leave that list. People rarely pursue second chances with Call.

Which brought him to the possibility of a trick. Maybe Aaron was trying to get Call to fess up to something or another. If it was a trick, though, it was poorly planned and wasn’t going to get him anywhere anyway. Call wasn’t in the wrong. He was sneaking out of school because he had to save the city, sorry.

It occurred to Call that it didn’t matter if it was a trick or not, Aaron wouldn’t be able to find out anything incriminating. The worst crime Call had under his belt was heisting a pet store to save a naked mole rat. He was a superhero, for crying out loud.

A shred of paper slid onto Call’s desk, smoothly and quietly. Call blinked himself out of his thoughts to glance at Aaron with the corner of his eye. He hadn’t had him pegged as the note passing type. Maybe he’d had him pegged wrong the whole time.

Call glanced at the teacher, who was busy droning, and read the note.

*So, up for second chances?*
Of course he was the type to write out the word “second” instead of saying 2nd.

Earlier Call had felt confident and ready to beat anything life decided to hit him with. He wasn’t ready to give up that attitude yet, so he was still riding it. He hadn’t expected this, for sure, but he could roll with it. He was confident, he was sure of himself, and, well, what did he have to lose? Aaron did seem cool, even if he was annoying.

I am if you are, bathroom boy.

Call slid the note back over to Aaron’s desk, not giving himself headspace to regret the decision. If life was gonna throw a friendship with Aaron at Call, then Call would catch it. Because why the hell not.

Requirement A of second chances: no more calling me bathroom boy.

Is flour boy any better?

Infinitesimally.

Scratch that, I’m gonna start calling you pocket dictionary.

And I’ll start calling you name tag.

Great, we’ve got our aliases, ready to start saving the city anonymously?

I was thinking we could start a newspaper advice column.

That sounds much more exciting.

Call slid the margin-filled paper back to Aaron, waiting until Mr. Tolbert wasn’t looking. Call would have to be careful. He had already written more this class than he had in the past three combined. Mr. Tolbert would be suspicious if he started acting like a good student and writing things down.

When it took an oddly long time for Aaron to write back, Call chanced a look at him. Aaron was staring at Call, a glint in his eye that Call didn’t recognize. When Call caught his gaze, Aaron didn’t look away, instead smiling sheepishly. Call raised an irritated eyebrow, then turned to write on the corner of the vocabulary worksheet they were referencing from.

Do I have something on my face?

Aaron skimmed the note, and Call could’ve sworn the tips of his ears were turning red. It was at that moment, though, that Mr. Tolbert finally stopped talking long enough to pay attention to what the class was doing.

“Callum? Could you answer question VI?” Mr. Tolbert asked. One would think, what, with Mr. Tolbert saying the Roman Numerals instead of the question numbers all year, that Call would learn how to use Roman Numerals. He never did. He was lost, searching the board for a question he wouldn’t know the answer to.

“Uh…” Call said.

“Change the -us ending to -ai,” Aaron muttered, so quiet Call couldn’t hear him, but loud enough that Call understood what he was saying.

“Change the -us ending to -ai,” Call said immediately. Mr. Tolbert hmphed and turned back to the board, writing down Call’s answer. Well, Aaron’s.
“Thank you,” Call sighed, slumping back in his seat, voice barely audible.

“Do you know this language at all?” Aaron asked, eyes never moving from the board, smiling slightly.

“Not even a little bit,” Call responded, and Aaron huffed a laugh through his nose. It should’ve annoyed Call, and if they weren’t trying the craziest second chance in the world, Call would’ve been annoyed by it. Yet, Call didn’t find it very annoying. He found it something, but it wasn’t annoying.

Call glanced at Aaron again, and saw he hadn’t been wrong earlier. Aaron’s ears were red, just a little. Call turned back to his paper. It must’ve been cold in the classroom, or something.

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The usual bustle of students flocking towards the door after the last bell was oddly tame, the crowds thinner and the rowdy kids acting subdued. If Call were anybody else, he’d question the superheroes’ and his decision to refuse the Enemy’s deal and, effectively, the antidote. However, he was his stubborn self, and he wasn’t going to go back on their words any time soon. He distracted himself by focusing on staying on his skateboard.

He weaved easily through the thin crowd, gliding down the sidewalk that went away from the buses and towards the woods. He was already thinking about what he was going to talk about with Convict and Caped Justice later.

Further down the empty sidewalk, along the section that hugged the school, there was a figure leaning coolly against the wall, looking like something out of a movie. Call knew it was Caped Justice, not because he could see, but because that was just his style.

Sure enough, as Call got closer, it became increasingly evident that it was Caped Justice, being dramatic. Call felt a brief moment of fear and confusion, wondering why Caped Justice was interacting with him as a civilian, scared that Jasper might’ve leaked his identity or Caped Justice had found it out himself. As he rolled over to Caped Justice, though, and found himself on the other side of a greeting smile, he remembered the wolf fight yesterday, and the walk home after, and how bright his hair had been in the setting Sun, which was an odd detail to remember. Either way, Call’s identity was still safe, as far as he knew. Caped Justice had reason enough to be there. Well, almost.

“Did you run home, put on a cape, and run back to school just to meet up with me? All in under five minutes no less?” Call asked in lieu of a greeting. He didn’t step off his skateboard yet, waiting to see exactly what Caped Justice wanted. Said Caped Justice raised an amused eyebrow at Call, but Call didn’t see what was funny.

“I keep my costume in my backpack, man,” Caped Justice said, and Call blinked. Why hadn’t he thought of that? Why hadn’t he been doing that, all this time?

“Well, it’s obvious now that you say it,” Call said, and Caped Justice laughed. “Can I ask why you’re leaning dramatically in the shadows of my path?”

“Which one of us is the dramatic one?” Caped Justice asked.

“It’s a perfectly reasonable way to phrase a sentence, now answer my question,” Call said, and Caped Justice held up his hands in surrender.

“I didn’t want yesterday’s incident to repeat itself, so I thought it might be a good idea to walk you home,” Caped Justice said.
Instead of responding with the assent that immediately occurred to him, Call held his tongue. There was something he knew for sure, and that was that it was a bad idea to spend time with Caped Justice as a civilian.

Call had spent two years trying to keep his civilian persona completely unassociated with superheroes, to the point that Call and Convict or Radar or Caped Justice would never occur in the same sentence. It was safe. It was smart. It was necessary. Spending time with Caped Justice would make Call not only suspicious, but it would make Call a target. Yesterday was a fluke, and he shouldn’t have let it happen. One time wasn’t going to hurt anybody, so Call could still consider himself safe. Two times. Two times was asking for trouble, two times was two times too many.

Caped Justice pushed himself off the wall and started walking down the sidewalk, the direction Call had been going. He glanced back when Call didn’t follow. A shadow of a smile was still on his face, a question in his stance, a pool of potential swimming over his shoulders and down to his fingertips, across his smile and all the way to his shoes. He was buzzing with the potential, although whether it was potential protection, or potential friendship, or potential laughter, or potential something, Call didn’t know. All he could say was that spending time with Caped Justice would fulfil the potential, one way or another, and Call, surprisingly, agonizingly, hopelessly wanted to see where it would go.

Every story ever has a protagonist that does something dumb for someone else’s smile. Call hated those stories. He thought they were very, very dumb. But Caped Justice was there, and Call was a few steps away, and for some reason, Call wanted to walk with him. It came into stark light in that moment that even though those stories were very, very dumb, well, Call was a very, very dumb person.

Call told himself that he stepped off his skateboard and started walking towards Caped Justice because he wanted the protection, and disregarded the target he was engraving on his own back. He ignored the fact that his eyes lingered on Caped Justice’s golden halo of hair (it still shone when the Sun hit it just right), lingered on his smile (it felt like something), and ignored the weird excitement he felt at the prospect of walking home with him. It was the protection. Call wanted the protection.

“Nice weather we’re having,” Caped Justice said as they strolled down the sidewalk, Call with his skateboard in hand. Protection from the wolves, Call reminded himself, and then it wasn’t a problem anymore. He wouldn’t keep thinking about it. Emotions and potentials were elusive, and Call didn’t have time to pin them down.

“I had this weird idea in my head that you were a good conversationalist, but that’s obviously not true. Wait til the newspapers hear,” Call responded.

“You wound me,” Caped Justice said.

“I wound your reputation,” Call said.

“Well, you don’t have to do it with such delight.”

“You’re lucky I’m not maniacally rubbing my hands together and cackling.”

“I’d agree, I am very lucky that you’re not doing that.”

They reached the point in the sidewalk where it swung off to the right towards the parking lot, but Call split and kept walking forward in order to reach the woods. When he stepped off the sidewalk and into the grass, though, Caped Justice didn’t follow.

“...Are you coming?” Call asked, looking back at him. Caped Justice was frozen on the sidewalk.
“Depends on where you’re going?” Caped Justice said. He glanced down the direction the sidewalk was headed, then back at Call.

“Home,” Call said, and gestured in the direction he was going, towards the woods.

“You live in the woods!?” Caped Justice said, which was made funnier by the fact that he’d been to Call’s house before.

“I cut through the woods,” Call responded. Caped Justice murmured a response, breaking eye contact with Call.

“Care to repeat that?”

“But it’s dirty,” Caped Justice said, louder this time. Call blinked a few times, and only then realized that Caped Justice’s entire outfit was impeccably free of both dirt and wrinkles, and his face was acne free to boot.

“I didn’t take you for a clean freak,” Call said, surprised.

“I’m not a clean freak, I just don’t like messes,” Caped Justice said.

“Well, it didn’t rain last night, so there won’t be any mud. You should be fine,” Call said. Caped Justice looked at Call, then looked at the woods, then looked at Call, then looked at the woods, then looked at Call, then shrugged and stepped off the sidewalk. There was hesitation written the slight bowing of his head, but he smiled confidently at Call, so they kept walking. The grass crunched under their feet in that way it does when it isn’t very well taken care of, and they trudged until they hit the tree line, pushed through the shrubbery, and found themselves within the forest.

The first immediate change Call always noticed was how different the air was. It was, if only slightly, fresher and cooler. He took a deep breath of forest air as Caped Justice looked around.

“You can’t see buildings through the trees,” he said, squinting a little.

“There aren’t buildings on the other side of them,” Call said. “The park is over there. To be specific, the rollerblading arena is the one right over there, and then once we go down a little we hit the park proper.”

“What grade did you get on the geography test, again?” Caped Justice asked, smirking, not taking his eyes off the treeline, still looking through them.

“A higher one than you did, apparently,” Call said, and Caped Justice laughed.

“Well, geography expert,” he said, finally looking back at Call again, “what direction is your house from here? I’m already turned around.”

“If you’re already turned around, wait until I blindfold you and spin you in circles. Then you’ll get really turned around.”

“Is that optional? The whole blindfolded circles thing,” Caped Justice said. Call started making his way through the woods, down his usual path past the fallen birch tree, and Caped Justice picked his careful way after Call.

“Absolutely not. And it’ll come when you least expect it,” Call said.

“Can we arrange for it to happen within 5-6 business days? I’m a busy man,” Caped Justice said.
Call snickered despite himself.

“Busy watching reality shows, right,” Call said. A light breeze brushed the leaves around them, filling the air with natural static for a moment.

“Busy saving the city,” Caped Justice corrected. “And for your information, I watch only one reality show, and that is-”

“Impracticable Archipelago Extravapalooza; Hot Air Balloon Edition, yes I know,” Call cut him off. He was only slightly smug about the fact that he could recite the full name without hesitating. Havoc had referred to the show by its full name for weeks on end until Call had it drilled into him, though, so it wasn’t exactly an accomplishment.

“I was gonna say Glee, but you’ve got me there,” Caped Justice said lightly as he stepped around a particularly gnarly thorn bush. The comment caught Call by such surprise that he started laughing, which in turn made Caped Justice laugh.

At that moment, though, Call started hearing something in the back of his head.

_CallisthatyouIneedhelppleasehelpmeIneedhelp_

Call paused in his tracks, replaying the words in his head until he understood them. This one had to be a squirrel. Ella was probably the most eloquent of all of squirrel kind, the rest usually sounded like a speeding record that barely knew English.

_Where are you?_ Call asked.

“Call? Are you okay?”

“Uh, fine,” Call responded without thinking, already too focused on helping whoever was asking for it. Was it Jack? It sounded a little like Jack.

_I'mbythemapletreewiththe_

Call immediately knew which maple tree Jack was by, it was a favorite among squirrels, and set out towards it without thinking.

“Call? Where are we going?” Caped Justice asked, scrambling after Call, carefully giving trees and rocks a wide berth.

“I thought I heard something over here.”

“I- okay,” Caped Justice stuttered, barely keeping up with Call’s brisk pace. Call couldn’t help it. Jack had seriously sounded like trouble.

The maple tree was down an unconventional path from where they were, through a patch of thistles and thick bushes, but Call pushed his way through the small field of thorns without stalling. Caped Justice wasn’t as resolute, eyeing the thick knee-high brush and the scattered vines covered in thorns, but he gritted his teeth and followed Call anyway, having apparently dedicated himself to sticking together. On the other side of the patch, Call could see the maple tree in front of them, slightly taller and slightly broader and slightly more imposing than the trees around them. It had a twisting system of branches that made the squirrels somewhat fond of it- running on it was fun.

Caped Justice was looking around, but Call could tell from the unfocused look in his eye that he didn’t know what he was looking for.
“Call? What did you think you heard?” Caped Justice asked.

“An animal,” Call murmured, not concentrating on Caped Justice.

_Jack? You here buddy?

“Can you get any more specific?” Caped Justice asked, gaze finally landing on Call. Call, however, was looking everywhere but at Caped Justice, searching for Jack.

_I’m on the ground,

Ground, he was on the ground, Call could tell as soon as Jack started talking to him. He immediately started looking around at the forest floor, trying to make out Jack’s form, cursing the wonders of camouflage.

“Call?”

Call’s eye caught on something near the base of the tree, furrier than any leaf or acorn had right to be. He rushed over, and sure enough, it was Jack, looking worse for wear but alive. He had three long scratches on his side. Call knelt down, and Caped Justice was already crouching next to him, looking over Jack and probably drawing the same conclusions.

“What happened to this little guy?” Caped Justice murmured.

_Owl-

“Owl, probably,” Call said, and Caped Justice’s eyes flashed up to glance at him while he spoke. “He’s lucky to be alive.”

Jack seemed to have run out of things to say once there weren’t any more questions to be answered, although Call couldn’t blame him. He got attacked by an owl. The only problem was, Call didn’t exactly know what to do.

Caped Justice picked Jack up gingerly, cradling him in the palms of his hands, not flinching despite the blood. This was the same guy that was hesitant to walk through some bushes.

“Do you have any tissues or anything?” Caped Justice asked, not taking his eyes off Jack as Call started rifling through his backpack, looking for tissues or anything similar.

“Would a flier for a school book fair work?” Call asked, pulling said rumpled flier out of his backpack.

“Not even a little bit,” Caped Justice responded. Call shoved the flier back and kept digging. He eventually came across an old sock that didn’t even smell.

“Would a sock work?” Call asked.

“Does it smell?” Caped Justice asked.

“Not even a little bit,” Caped Justice responded. That seemed to be good enough for Caped Justice, who nodded. Call pulled out the sock and tossed it to him, and Caped Justice caught it seamlessly, beginning use it to soak up the blood around Jack’s wound.

“Would a water bottle be too much to ask?” Caped Justice said, not looking up from his careful administrations.
“Course not,” Call replied, digging a water bottle out of his backpack. It was half full and would have to do. He set it next to Caped Justice, who was finishing up. Caped Justice promptly picked up the water bottle and poured some of it onto the sock, beginning to use it to clean the wound itself.

Jack took a deep breath, shuddering, and Caped Justice slowed down in his cleaning, making his movements even lighter and gentler than before, somehow. He started murmuring kindly to Jack, any number of nothings that might provide comfort as he cleaned the wound.

A different side of Caped Justice was showing, one that wasn’t a charismatic leader or a triumphant face of a revolution, even one that wasn’t a cheesy goofball. This was all caring and kindness, and it occurred to Call that most people would have just kept walking. Call never had the luxury, not when he could hear the pain so vividly, but Caped Justice wasn’t the type of person to just keep walking.

Maybe that’s why Call was so dazed, why his chest felt so warm. He couldn’t remember the last time he met a person that stopped walking to help. He couldn’t remember the last time a person truly cared enough, even about a squirrel. Ms. Alma sat by and watched as Jasper and Call fought, Alastair spent so much time in the garage that he didn’t notice his son getting injured and coming home at two in the morning every night, Celia never talked to him unless she’d run out of people to talk to. Nobody Call was surrounded by actually cared, not that much, but here Caped Justice was, walking him home to keep him safe from wolves, gingerly holding a squirrel and focusing so much energy into keeping him breathing, when he could have just kept walking.

It was shocking, to realize all of this while his friend (?) was holding a bloody squirrel directly next to Call.

Gradually, throughout Call’s long rabbit trail of a thought process, his chest felt warmer until it was almost suffocatingly prominent, catching his throat with feelings he didn’t have a name for and shocking oddly down his arms.

“Call,” Caped Justice eventually said, shaking Call out of his slight reverie that came from watching Caped Justice help Jack.

“Hm?” Call asked, and a short pulse of warmth flared right next to Call’s dumb heart. He would’ve taken further time to follow that train of thought, those causes and effects, why he felt a little choked up for a second at the sudden sound of Caped Justice’s voice, but there was work to be done now, conversations to be had and Jacks to heal.

“There’s a first aid kit in my backpack,” Caped Justice said, and Call nodded, pulling Caped Justice’s backpack over and digging through the folders until he found the small red pouch with the white cross sitting at the bottom.

It occurred to him that it would be easy enough to find out who Caped Justice was, just by glancing at the name at the top of a paper. There was a reason they kept their identities secret, though, and Call knew all too well that it was crushing when there was somebody who knew who they were behind the mask.

Call quelled his curiosity and picked out the first aid kit, passing it to Caped Justice and rezipping his backpack.

Call scooted back to his position sitting next to Caped Justice, watching as he finished his rough cleaning of the wound and pulled open the first aid kit.

“Shouldn’t we take him to the vet or something?” Call asked.
“No,” Caped Justice said. “He’s hurt, but not very badly. It’ll heal by itself, I just want to make sure it doesn’t get infected. He’s a wild squirrel, and should be able to survive without human intervention.”

Call considered both of these responses.

“I’m fairly sure I read on a vegan website once that if you find an injured squirrel you should always get professional help,” Call said.

“Then consider me a professional and stop worrying,” Caped Justice replied as he pulled a small wrap-around bandage out of the first aid kit. He doused it lightly in disinfectant, then slowly, carefully, pulled it around Jack and tied it lightly.

“He should be able to get that knot undone himself, but I’ll leave it to his discretion on when to do that,” Caped Justice said, pulling a baby wipe out of the kit and cleaning his hands of squirrel blood. “Squirrels are smart animals. He’ll figure it out. Either way, I wanted the wound covered to keep it a little bit cleaner until it scabs over. Whether or not the bandage stays on for long enough for the wound to scab cleanly is a variable, but he’s got a chance.”

Hey Jack, you know what a scab is, right? Call asked Jack.

Of course I do-

“You okay, Call? You’re zoning out me,” Caped Justice said, but Call wasn’t concentrating on him.

Don’t take the wrapping off until the wound scabs.

But it’s clunky-

Trust me on this one.

“Call?”

...if it were any other human I’d say no-

Aw, thanks buddy.

Thanks for saving my life-

Don’t mention it.

Jack slowly stood up, and while he looked weak, he was definitely standing, which was an improvement to stuck on the ground. He glanced at Call, then he glanced at Caped Justice, then he scrambled up the tree, immediately blending into the leaves.

Caped Justice looked after him and sighed, then looked back at Call.

“You back?” He asked.

“What do you mean?” Call asked, standing up.

“You spaced out just now,” Caped Justice said, also standing. “Were you rattled by mortality being shoved in your face?”
“Me? Rattled? Never,” Call said. Caped Justice flashed him a small smile, and something about it made Call’s heart skip. It was a small thing, and Call nearly wrote it off.

Nearly.

But the moment stuck in the back of his mind as he stood up, as Caped Justice followed, as they accidentally mixed up their backpacks for a second, as they started walking back towards Call’s house, as they kept talking and joking and Caped Justice kept smiling, smiling, smiling.

Call’s heart kept beating, beating, beating.

By the time they made it to Call’s front porch, the Sun was setting again, Caped Justice’s hair looked bright and golden again, and Call could use a thousand different words to describe everything he was feeling. Giddy, vibrant, confused. Disappointed that Caped Justice was about to leave. Some form of elated.

Caped Justice smiled again, and Call got the idea that it was his dopey, walls-down smile.

“See you around,” Caped Justice said.

“Catch you later,” Call responded, and there was no doubt in his mind that his smile matched Caped Justice’s.

They both turned away, Caped Justice going to the bakery to meet up with the other superheroes, seemingly unable to wipe the smile off his face, and Call going inside his house, eager to throw on his costume and also head to the bakery.

And if Call couldn’t wipe the smile off of his face either, well, that was just because he was having a good day. It had nothing to do with one person. Sure one person had helped the day be good, one person had made his heart skip in his chest, but that could easily be chalked up to pleasant surprise at how easy it was to talk to him.

Right. Nothing out of the ordinary was going on with Call’s feelings.

Late again, Havoc thought to Call as he climbed up the staircase out of the garage and into the living room. Call slung his backpack off and fell onto the closest couch, and Havoc sat in front of him on the floor.

“You sound like one of my teachers,” Call said, too tired to turn on his mental channel. He never realized how low he was on energy until he was melting into a couch.

“Who’re you talking to?” Alastair asked as he strolled into the connected kitchen, next to the living room. Call jumped out of his skin, turning around to see his father pulling some glasses out of a cabinet.

“Myself,” Call stuttered, his usual excuse for when he was caught. Havoc’s ears twitched as he laughed at Call, and Call bapped his smug snout.

“If you’re starting to sound like your own teachers, then we’ve got a problem,” Alastair joked, getting out plates now. “I vowed never to listen to a teacher again as soon as I got out of college.”

“It amazes me daily that you’re allowed to call yourself an adult,” Call remarked, and Alastair laughed.

Something was up. The feeling of adrenaline, of buzzing nerves and blown-out breath from being
surprised by Alastair wasn’t fading away like it usually did. Call got jumpscared enough times through his life, especially through his superhero career, that he knew how he reacted to them. His blown nerves were out of the ordinary, but he certainly wasn’t going to let his dad in on that.

Havoc, very pointedly, brought Call the sweatshirt and mask he used as a costume, both of which had been balled up on the other loveseat as they had been the day prior.

*Don’t you have places to be?* Havoc asked as he dropped the costume into Call’s lap, and Call sighed heavily before tugging on the sweatshirt.

“Hey, dad, I’m gonna go walk Havoc, I don’t know when I’ll be back,” Call said, standing up from the couch with a lot of regret, a lot of soreness from old bruises, and a lot of alarm still coursing through him. He shoved his mask in the sweatshirt pocket.

“I was actually thinking we could do family dinner tonight,” Alastair said, using a paper towel to pull a lasagna out of the oven. Oh.

“Oh,” Call said.

“Can you walk Havoc after dinner?” Alastair asked, and Call couldn’t say no, could he?

“Oh, sure,” Call said, taking a hesitant seat at the table where Alastair already had everything set up.

*Is being late just a hobby of yours?* Havoc asked, dutifully laying down at Call’s feet.

“Go ahead and serve yourself a slice,” Alastair said after placing a knife on the lasagna. “I’ve just got to wash my hands and then I’ll sit down with you.”

Call went ahead and cut out a piece for Alastair, giving him the corner, slightly burned part that he knew was his dad’s favorite. Alastair sat down as Call was picking another, smaller, piece out for himself. He wanted to eat quickly and be out of the house.

“Thank you,” Alastair said.

“Thanks for making dinner,” Call replied, already digging into his lasagna. “It’s really good.”

“It would probably be better if you chewed with your mouth shut,” Alastair said, pointing at Call with his fork.

“Interesting theory,” Call said, making sure it was through another mouthful.

“I am your father, show some finesse,” Alastair said, and maybe it was purposeful that he said it through a mouthful of food, but Call really, really doubted it.

“Listen, if I have to choose between speed and finesse, I’m choosing speed,” Call said, forking another few bites into his mouth.

“I obviously didn’t raise you right, finesse is always key,” Alastair said. He forked a single bite into his mouth. Why did old people eat so slowly?

“Finesse is always key,” Call mocked, making his voice gruffer and older. He shoved more lasagna into his mouth.

“Oh the special bond between a son and his father,” Alastair said.

“You bring up the whole father thing a lot in conversation, you know that?” Call asked, coming
down the last bites of his lasagna.

Alastair said something else, but Call’s concentration faded out for a moment, drowning under the onslaught of continued panicked reaction that still hadn’t gone away. He didn’t know why he wasn’t calming down, it wasn’t like he was in a fight. He was sitting down for dinner with his father. There was nothing to be on edge about.

Under the table, Havoc rammed his head into the side of Call’s (uninjured, because he wasn’t a monster) leg, causing him to jump a little (again).

*Say no,* Havoc said.

“No,” Call said, because he trusted Havoc implicitly.

“More leftovers, then,” Alastair said, shrugging and beginning to finish his lasagna. Call took the last bite of his.

*He asked if you wanted seconds,* Havoc explained. *So, spaceboy, where’d you go?*

*I’m just zoning out, my reactions are being weird,* Call said. Alastair mindlessly said something, and Call mindlessly responded.

*Define weird,* Havoc said.

*Heightened, panicked,* Call responded. He could feel his heart beating in his resting hands.

*Did you not just describe your danger sense?* Havoc asked.

Call took a long blink to drown in his own exasperation towards himself.

*I swear I’m getting worse at recognizing it,* Call thought to Havoc while Alastair downed the last of his water. *I just think it’s my body acting up or an out-of-place reaction.*

*You’re vastly oblivious sometimes,* Havoc responded, his tone tired.

*I’m vastly sleep deprived all of the time,* Call said.

*That’s only barely an excuse,* Havoc said, and he stood up. *Well, wrap up the dinner, we’ve apparently got some danger to thwart.*

“Thanks for sitting down with me, Call,” Alastair said. “This has been nice.”

“I agree,” Call said, standing up and taking his and Alastair’s plates to the sink. When he took Alastair’s plate, he officially took away his dad’s option to prolong the dinner. It made him look like a good son, though.

“We don’t do it enough, honestly,” Alastair said from somewhere behind Call. “You do know that I care, though, right?”

“Of course, dad,” Call said, although he hardly knew what he was saying through the curtain of his danger sense.

“Good, good,” Alastair said, and if Call had the concentration to be present, he would have heard the tinge in Alastair’s voice.

“I, uh, have to go walk Havoc now,” Call said.
“Okay,” Alastair responded, mouth quirked downward.

“Okay,” Call said, and left down the staircase, Havocpadding patiently at his heel.

_That was different than usual_, Havoc thought as the two of them left the house, Call putting on his mask and pulling up his hood, then ducking his head so he’d be at least a little inconspicuous.

_My entire day is being different than usual_, Call responded. His concentration was coming back, which was odd, but he could assume that the danger was something across town that had resolved itself.

_In a good or bad way?_ Havoc asked. Call huffed out through his nose, thinking about Jasper and Aaron and Caped Justice, and now his father.

_Both_, Call said.

His phone, still in his pocket, chimed a text tone, which was odd, because Call never texted anybody. He pulled it out quickly, glancing at the message.

_-Group with Celia and Drew, Apparently-_  
_Celia_: hey guys this is the history project group chat

_Drew, Apparently_: dope r we gonna meet up or smthn? cause im busy 2nite

_Celia_: i mean i was going to suggest we do something tonight but i guess not if you’re busy

_Celia_: what’re you up to tho?

_Drew, Apparently_: stuff.

_Celia_: way to be specific

_Drew, Apparently_: its none of ur business

_Celia_: geez, calm down, okay

_Celia_: call? have you got anything to say?

_You_: nope.

With that, Call muted the chat and put his phone back into his pocket, moving his eyes back to the sidewalk and his concentration back to meeting up with the other two superheroes at the bakery.

If the rest of his day had been any indication of a pattern, he was about to have a hell of a night.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I think it should be illegal for me to get writer's block when I already update so infrequently, come on, universe. So, hopefully, now that the dark miasma that haunts me from time to time has been banished back to it's original realm, I can maybe spend more time working on this maybe?? Don't hold me to that

Shoutout to TQSKatrap for lowkey predicting a few things that were happening in this chapter?? Wassup you cool kid?? Did you hack my outline for this and read it?? Hey readers, you, too, may develop psychic powers when you comment (REALLY ALL OF YOU THAT HAVE COMMENTED AO3 KEEPS CRASHING WHEN I TRY TO RESPOND BUT I LOVE YOU ALL, YOU LIL MYSTICS)

Last zesty comment before you go enjoy the chapter: will I ever come up with good superhero names? Who knows.

enojy!!

“It’s horrid.”

Call, Convict and Caped Justice were picking through the alleyways where Call and Havoc had first encountered the Enemy’s wolves, only a few nights ago. Despite all the rain in the area over the past couple of days, it still smelled of bile and conflict. Call could pick out scratch marks left on the walls that were wicked enough to be convincing evidence for any urban legend.

Call was recounting the events of that dark and stormy night to Convict and Caped Justice. He’d gotten as far as the moment he saw the figure on the roof and realized the wolf army was being mind controlled when Convict cut in, finally getting over the shock of the words she was hearing.

“It’s horrid,” she said, voice cold, face (or what Call could see of it around the mask), twisted. Caped Justice’s expression, behind her, matched it resentment for resentment.

“Hasn’t this city suffered enough at the hands of that abomination of a superpower?” Caped Justice asked, anger rolling his tone. Call’s lackluster attempt to agree with them caught in his throat, and he coughed to cover it. Neither of them even gave him a second glance, continuing to rake their gazes over the ruined alley instead.

“You look like you’re suffocating, what’s up? Havoc asked. Sweet, concerned Havoc.

Stubbed my toe, Call said. He didn’t know if it was convincing.

You’re so dumb, Havoc responded fondly. Convincing, then.

See, days ago, Call would have jumped into agreeing with his friends. He knew the story of their city as well, if not better than, the next guy. Ever since Parable lost his superpowers and Patriarch went insane trying to restore them, ever since his power of hypnosis turned to mind controlling, ever since La Rinconada, well, Magista didn’t take well to any form of mind control. Even back then, there had been a few protesting organizations against Parable and Patriarch’s shared and apparently
super ability to hypnotize, and their continued use of this power against their enemies. Against the
city’s enemies. But their voices were small against the outcry of gratitude coming from everybody
else.

Now, if anything, it was the opposite.

After La Rinconada and the deaths of Decline and Miri (and Auto’s subsequent disappearance),
Magista was a hub of outrage against mind control. It was the worst possible crime somebody could
do in this city, as the response to mind control anymore was so immediate, so passionate, so
ferocious. For good reason.

For good reason.

At least, that’s what Call would have said a few days ago.

Now, he remembered all too clearly the rush of feelings he had as he pushed his will into the foggy
head of a monster wolf. He remembered how desperate he had been to save himself and Caped
Justice, how scared he had been that they’d finally found an adversary they couldn’t handle, how
badly he’d wanted the wolf to turn and look at Ella, how vile the inside of the wolf’s head felt, how
he had shoved his way in, and the way all of the energy drained out of his limbs for a moment from
the effort it had taken.

He remembered the moment his thought became the wolf’s thought, how it was pushed away
fiercely, then pulled in magnetically, like the tide, just as unstoppable. Then, the thought lingered for
a moment, and it clicked into place.

Call had been replaying that one minute he’d mentally wrestled with the wolf so many times each
night, after Havoc and Alastair had gone to bed and Call had no right to be awake anymore. He’d
promised himself he wouldn’t think about it, but he couldn’t not think about it.

Two days ago, mind control had been evil, abominable, monstrous, horrid.

Tonight, it was Call. It was his power, his choice, what ran through the blood in his veins.

“Radar?” Caped Justice asked, snapping Call from his thoughts, forcing his focus back to the
superheroes and the alleyway. Call’s eyes immediately found Caped Justice’s, and Call blinked at the
anger he saw. The fury. Only half an hour previous, those eyes had looked at Call laughter-filled and
heartwarming.

“What happened after you saw the Enemy on the roof?” he asked, and Call realized he’d paused in
telling them the story.

“Well, I used the ladder there to climb onto the roof, because I wanted to punch this guy in the face,”
Call said, and Convict snorted. “Also because I figured the wolves would stop if their commander
stopped. When I got to the top of the roof, I couldn’t see anything very well, let alone the Enemy. I
asked him his name, called him a jerkface, run of the mill.”

“You’re going to get yourself killed one of these days,” Caped Justice noted from where he was
standing near the ladder. He was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, a look of concentration on
his face as he listened to Call.

“If you get killed for calling a super villain a jerkface, I will personally bring you back from the dead
to give you a high five,” Convict immediately told Call. Unlike Caped Justice, she was anything but
static and concentrated. She was investigating all over the alley, prodding slash marks and eyeing
stains, half listening to Call.
“Thank you, finally somebody who understands,” Call replied, and Convict gave him a smile in response. “Anyway. The Enemy was wearing a full mask, so I couldn’t see his face at all. He walked across the roof to me, told me his name, and put his hand on my shoulder. I immediately passed out. When I woke up, I was laying in the alley and I felt like I’d been pummeled by vicious racquetballs.”

“Did he throw you off the roof?” Convict asked, vaguely horrified.

Yes, Havoc said, it took years off my life.

“According to Havoc, yes,” Call said.

“And that’s the end of it?” Caped Justice asked, an emotion in his voice that Call couldn’t pinpoint. When Call glanced at him, he looked upset, the corners of his mouth tugged down and an angry set to his shoulders.

“Anticlimactic, I know, I only got thrown off a roof,” Call said. Convict snickered, but it lacked its usual humor, and Call’s focus fell more to the boiling look in her eye as she stared at the roof Call had been thrown off of.

Well what’s up with those two? Call asked Havoc, still watching Caped Justice and Convict as they steamed to themselves and apparently thought through Call’s story.

They’re mad at the Enemy for throwing you off a roof, Havoc responded, easy as that. Call blinked.

The Enemy is mind controlling an army of monsters and has set loose a potentially lethal virus on thousands of innocents, Call reminded Havoc, and they’re upset at him for throwing me off of a roof? It’s probably the least despicable thing he’s done all week.

That’s how relationships work. Havoc said, using his back paw to scratch under his ear. To the rest of the city, they’re superheroes, but to you, they’re friends. As soon as the Enemy throws you off a roof, it’s personal.

“I’m surprised you don’t have a concussion or anything,” Caped Justice muttered, scowling at the ground.

“A bear caught me,” Call responded offhandedly, paying more attention to his conversation with Havoc.

I don’t even know if we’re friends, Call told Havoc, glancing between Convict and Caped Justice again. I mean, they laugh at my jokes and I laugh at theirs and I look forward to seeing them every night and there was that one time we played tag but otherwise our relationship is strictly professional.

Dogs can’t roll their eyes (if Havoc could, his sass would become too powerful, so it’s probably for the best), but Havoc did the mental equivalent.

They’re your friends, Call, even if none of you realize it yet, Havoc said, and get used to it, because they seem like the type that’ll stick around for a while.

Call started thinking this over when a knot of unease curled in his gut. It spread like an ink stain, crawling up his throat and making his heart race with nerves.

This time, Call recognized his danger sense.
He quickly worked out where his sense was leading him (a few blocks down, on the corner of Pitch and East streets), and how dangerous the threat seemed to be (mild to moderate). He figured it was something he could handle quickly, then come back to the other two and work out what their plan was.

“Hey guys,” Call said, causing Caped Justice and Convict to look at him, “my danger sense is acting up, so if you don’t mind I’m just going to hop o-”

“No way, we’re coming with you,” Convict said, beginning to walk over to Call.

“We’re partners, remember?” Caped Justice added, pushing himself off the wall. “Besides, what if it’s the Enemy or one of his cronies?”

Call recalled all too well the swimming, severe reactions his danger sense gave him when the Enemy was up to something. What he was feeling now was nothing compared to that.

“It’s not the Enemy, I can tell,” Call said. “Seriously, it’s only a mild thing, I’ll probably burp on it and it’ll leave. It’s not too far away either, I’ll be right back,” Call said, emphasizing the last few words. Convict’s mouth twisted, and she sighed.

“Fine,” she said. “Caped Justice and I will finish our investigation here, see if we can’t find anything. You go take care of whatever it is.” Call smiled and turned on his heel, leaving before they could dupe him and follow.

“Take Havoc with you,” Caped Justice told the back of Call’s head, “and send him back to get us if you need backup.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Call said over his shoulder, and Havoc stood up to follow him.

Caped Justice’s eyes caught on Call’s for a second too long before they both turned around and set to their respective tasks.

“We’re headed to the corner of Pitch and East,” Call told Havoc, blinking but unable to shake that lingering moment with Caped Justice, thoughts staying frustratingly, swirlingly stagnant on it.

Call would have found that moment, not normal per se, but expected, if he weren’t in costume. For some reason, the relationship Call was building with Caped Justice had that nature to it, one of prolonged eye contact and unspoken words moments before turning backs and goodbyes. Call had come to terms with it.

With Radar, though? Caped Justice was friends with Radar, if that, and that was it. They played tag and fought crime. They didn’t have moments.

Was Caped Justice figuring out his identity?

They had about two and a half blocks to go before they reached the corner of Pitch and East, so Call shared his thoughts with Havoc. Havoc hmm’d.

_He’s probably drawing a few conclusions, if only subconsciously, Havoc thought. Recognizing a speech pattern, or your profile, or the way you walk._

“ Well, what do I do?” Call asked, a little panicked but not too panicked. To save face.

_Let him find out who you are and make an actual friend, for once, Havoc thought. Have him over for tea. Introduce him to your dad. Beat him in robot fights. The usual._
“Seriously, Havoc.”

*I’m being serious! You need a friend that isn’t an overgrown dog.*

“It’s too dangerous for us to know each other’s civilian identities, it could be used against us,” Call reminded him, and Havoc sighed a long sigh. They were still two blocks down from the corner.

*Yeah, I didn’t think that would work, but it was worth a shot.*

“Got any other ideas while you’re at it?”

*Do something distinctly un-Call-like. Tell him you hate coffee.*

“But I love coffee!”

*Call loves coffee. Radar loves justice. Particularly the caped variety.*

“Shut up, gross.” Call felt a blush creep up his neck, but his usual vehement disagreement to the concept lacked its passion. That was odd. If Call were arguing with himself in the mirror, he’d try saying it again, stronger this time, but he was arguing with Havoc, so he couldn’t.

What’s gross? The coffee?

“I hate this. You’re lucky I gave him my Coffee Is God’s One True Gift To Man speech earlier when we were walking home and this’ll actually work.”

*No, you’re lucky that this’ll work. I personally hope he puts two and two together and makes you guys friends four-ever.*

“That wasn’t even a little bit funny.”

*Tough crowd.*

Call and Havoc reached the corner, effectively bringing their conversation to a stop. The corner was unadorned with traffic lights, too far off the recognizable streets to deem a necessity for organization, and was shadowed with beaten storefronts down the length of both its streets. Lights shone through the stained windows, revealing everything from roaring business to pin drop silence, countryside stillness.

There were no immediate signs of danger.

Whatever they were after must’ve been on the move, and from what Call could gather (once he stopped and concentrated), the danger was now centered around the barber shop about one street down from where they were.

“Walking target,” Call mumbled, setting off towards the barber shop. Havoc sniffed the air, trying to get a sense of their prey. His tail stopped absentmindedly wagging.

*Hey Call, he thought, you’re not gonna like this.*

“Oh, do tell,” Call said, heart spinning at the sudden anticipation.

*We’re definitely in pursuit of a certain deWinter.*

Havoc was right, Call did not like this.
How do you know what he smells like? Call asked, switching to the mental channel as they started getting closer to the barber shop. He peered through the darkness, hoping for a glimpse of a shadow or a hint of movement.

I’ve met him before, insolent human, don’t question my ways.

There was a clatter of kicked rocks from the abandoned storefront two doors down, and Call felt the word bingo more than said it. The door to the storefront opened and shut, and in the time between Call had barely caught a glimpse of a familiar silhouette.

How perfectly dramatic.

Call and Havoc stalked over to the abandoned storefront, and Call felt strangely giddy. They were about to catch Jasper in the act, past a point of no return, and Jasper would be forced to fess up. The morning’s vices were forgotten in favor of the night’s victories.

Can you hear anything inside? Call asked, and Havoc snarled for a second.

Yeah, bad whistling. He’s trying to be jaunty I guess, but it just sounds like sad violin.

Noted.

Call waited a breath, pausing to fully consider the situation. There were no lights coming from inside, obviously, leaving any activity inside of the store in relative invisibility. There were boards over the windows, paint chipping off plaster, and the thinning fabric of the awning was held up by thin white poles that oozed the essence of a thing utterly temporary.

If there were ever a setting so fitting for a story, this building of degenerate plexiglass was the perfect place for his and dickwad’s saga to come to a climax.

Call pushed open the door and walked into the darkened building, kicking grit from the sidewalk in with his steps. Havoc stalked in behind him, and it was moments such as this, seeing the silhouette of Havoc as he strode confidently into a confrontation at Call’s hip, that Call was reminded that Havoc was a predator.

Dim light shone in from the street, so Call gave himself enough time to zero in on Jasper’s position before kicking the door shut behind him.

The light cut out.

Jasper had been, and Call assumed he still was, sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, head tilted to face the ceiling. He was holding a rock loosely in his right hand. Though there hadn’t been anything particularly interesting to the ceiling, Jasper’s eyes were glued to it, unblinking and unwavering and yet unfocused.

Of course, now the room was dark, so suddenly the possibilities as to what Jasper was doing were endless, à la Schrodinger.

“I don’t owe you an explanation,” Jasper said, his voice a defeated drum.

“I didn’t come here for one,” Call responded easily, and he somehow sounded more sinister than he meant to. The darkness of the room highlighted the darkness in his voice.

“Then leave,” Jasper said. “I’m tired of this game. Give it up.”
That wasn’t a request, Call could tell, nor a suggestion. Jasper was demanding it of Call, that he stop this. Of course Jasper could never ask for anything without making it a demand. Of course he expected Call to fold. Of course there was a leaking thread of danger behind his tone.

Danger.

Come to think of it, this was the first time Call’s danger sense had ever been set off by Jasper, which could mean any number of things. Maybe Jasper was only ever ditching class, and now was he actually doing something dangerous. Or maybe Jasper had never been a threat to Call, never genuinely wanted to hurt him, until tonight. Or maybe Jasper could hack Call’s superpower that he didn’t even know about and convince it that he wasn’t dangerous.

In the end, it was tonight that Jasper was dangerous, tonight that the two of them were alone in the dark of an abandoned building, tonight that Jasper was walking around town and holding rocks in his right hand and demanding that Call leave.

Call also figured it was tonight that Jasper would get what was coming to him.

“I didn’t come here for an explanation,” Call said, “because I came here for you.”

Jasper started saying something, but Havoc growled, loud and harsh, and Jasper immediately shut up, which was a surprise to everybody in the room. Call cleared his throat before he started talking again.

“I didn’t come here for whatever lies or insults you would tell me, and I didn’t come here for trickery, and I didn’t come here for camaraderie. I came here to stop you from whatever you’re about to do, not for the sake of our arguments, but for the sake of the city. I couldn’t care less about you, Jasper. Say whatever the hell you want. I gave you the chance to speak and be listened to, but that time has passed and whatever opportunity you had is officially crushed. So here we are. I’m done listening to you. All I’m here to do is react to whatever chaos you’re about to bring about, and if you get jailed for it, then I won’t say, ‘I told you so,’ just to save you whatever pride you may have left.”

A lot of things grow in the dark. Magic, moss, intention. Apparently, Call’s confidence.

Jasper didn’t say anything, and Call wouldn’t have listened to him if he had. He wasn’t here for an explanation, or for Jasper, or for proof. He was here for the danger, and he was gone with it. However, he couldn’t deny that if he somehow got proof or an explanation along the way, he’d start jumping for joy.

A shuffling noise of moving clothes and scattering gravel shook from where Jasper had been sitting. From the sound of the yawn, Jasper stood up and stretched. Call stayed frozen, fear growing in a way that made him think it was his danger sense which made him more afraid. Not that he dropped his cool exterior.

Things that grow in the dark: footsteps, corrupt smiles, silhouettes. Apparently, Call’s fear.

With a thump, thump, thump, which could have been Jasper’s footsteps or Call’s heartbeat, Jasper stalked closer and closer until he and Call were a foot away from each other. Not that they could see the other person.

Things that grow in the dark: presence, breath, tension. Apparently, Call’s frustration.

“Your confidence is made all the more ironic by how many pieces of the puzzle you’re missing,” Jasper said, in that tone that always rubbed Call the wrong way.
Havoc bristled.

The same arguments they’d been having all day stirred in Call’s head, *I’d have the full story if you told me, stop being so frustratingly vague, you obviously aren’t on the bad side so why are you so hesitant to prove your allegiance to the good side.* None of them worked the first time, or the second, or the third, or the fourth, or all day. *None* of them worked.

They were past the point of talking this out.

They were probably past that point a long time ago.

“Back off,” Call said. His danger sense was rolling his stomach, but the sudden, anger-filled energy that ran through him offset whatever upset his superpower was causing. He curled his hands into fists.

Despite the darkness, Call could see the, “or what?” on the tip of Jasper’s tongue. Jasper knew or what, though. They weren’t in school now, and there were perfectly few witnesses in an abandoned building.

Call was a superhero, and Jasper was powerless against him, that’s what.

Havoc tensed next to Call.

“Stop acting high and mighty, would you? Must I remind you of the blackmail?” Jasper said, his scowl clear in his voice.

Something came over Call, and he smiled. He smiled the way he smiled when they were interrogating Lightning, the way he smiled when they taunted the Enemy over broadcast, the way he smiled when Lightning held a knife to his throat and thought it would keep him there.

Call smiled, and he said, “who would believe you?”

The dark room felt like a vacuum, then, sucking all of the sound from the air and leaving a choked, tense quiet that they could only revel in as it filled the room to the corners.

“You act weird at school, and your dog is identical, and-” Jasper’s speech was dulled when he was losing. What an unfortunate tactic.

“I am a selfish, jerky, loner as far as they know,” Call said, appreciating, not for the first time, how well his reputation protected him. He never talked to people at school, and he made it clear that he didn’t care about them. Superheroes weren’t jerks, or at least they cared about other people, or at least they wouldn’t scowl at their peers when asked for homework answers. Call didn’t act like a generous, heroic person. If anything, he acted like the villain.

“The news outlets! They’d jump at any lead on your identities in a heartbeat,” Jasper said.

“Jasper,” Call responded, “I’m disabled. They wouldn’t believe you.”

It was true. Call doubted people would believe him if he told them. Everybody figured his disability kept him from doing things, or thought that because he couldn’t run or that his balance wasn’t always perfect that he couldn’t *do* stuff. Sure, it wasn’t easy, but he could still do stuff. Of course he could do stuff. He just needed to work at it a bit more.

Not that the news outlets would ever think that way.
Which essentially made Call untouchable.

Call could pinpoint the moment Jasper realized that, because Jasper shifted ever so slightly backwards. Call felt oddly giddy, between the amount of adrenaline he had and being hyped up on danger sense alarms, but he hardly ever won against Jasper. Havoc’s tail started slowly wagging.

That being said, Call could also pinpoint the exact moment that Jasper recollected himself back into his overbearing self, because the room got a degree cooler.

Maybe it was the wind.

It probably wasn’t.

“No matter,” Jasper said, his voice chilly. “A single rumor is enough in our school, you know that.”

Hell. He was right.

“...But now’s not the time for that,” Jasper continued. “I have things to do tonight. Important things. Things that aren’t dealing with the likes of you. So if you don’t mind—“

“No gonna happen,” Call immediately cut back. “You’re not going anywhere until I know you won’t pose a threat.”

“I’m not telling you anything.”

“Then I guess we’re about to have a long night,” Call growled back.

Circles.

As long as neither of them folded, all they were ever going to get from each other was circles, circles, and more hellish circles. They were stuck in their own cycle of uncooperation. Call was sick of it.

Call was sick of Jasper.

“I don’t know how often I have to tell you—” Call started.

“I don’t know how often I have to tell you that you don’t have the full story,” Jasper interrupted. His self-satisfied smile translated into his voice.

Frustration rose in Call’s throat, boiling. Havoc bumped his shoulder against Call’s leg, a warning, but Call hardly felt it.

“You’re such a bastard, you know that?” Call said.

“Say it to my face,” Jasper said. Call felt him lean a little closer, just to get in Call’s personal space.

“I already told you, back off!” Call spat, roughly pushing Jasper back. Jasper stumbled, exclaiming sounds but not words, while Call stood. His mind was reeling. He rarely took the first shot.

“Why, you—” Jasper huffed, and he stood up. Havoc barked loudly and jarringly, but it only served to disturb the room even more. Jasper took two quick steps closer to Call, and Call flinched on instinct more than on visual information.

It was still dark as sin inside the room, which was probably why Jasper missed, paired with Call’s flinch.
“Look, Jasper-” Call started, but before he could say any more, Jasper was already swinging again, aim guided by the sound of Call’s voice.

Dark as it was in the room, there was a burst of color when Jasper’s punch landed, vivid pain shooting through Call’s nose and cheekbone. Call’s thoughts started blurring together, shot and confused and stinging, ouch.

Call felt more than saw Havoc crouching, breaths away from leaping on Jasper. Through the muddling pounding in his head and general current lack of understanding of the situation, Call dug his hand into Havoc’s scruff, effectively holding him back. At the same time, Call started leaning on Havoc for support, his legs getting a little weak beneath him. He kept expecting the pain to fade, and it kept persisting.

At some point, Call realized Jasper was silent. Odd, for such a loudmouth that loved the sound of his own voice. Odd, for how loud everything sounded through the rushing in Call’s ears. Silence. Silence was a new concept. Silence might mean something.

“Alright, Jasper,” Call said, somehow managing to get his tongue working, if anything. “You’ve made your point. There’s no reason to be suspicious of you, you’re definitely not a threat, I should just let you go.”

Amazing, Havoc thought to Call, his concern leaking through with the words, you can get punched in the face and your sass only gets stronger. A true marvel.

“I…” Jasper said. Havoc snarled at him, low and deep and malicious, like a volcano.

“I have to go,” Jasper said again, this time his voice pitched higher. Well, anyone would be scared of being in the same room as a volcano.

“You’re not…” Call started to say, but he started tripping over his own words as his head pounded harder. He could hear Jasper leaving, feel Jasper moving past him, but he couldn’t summon the strength to move himself past where he was. He felt like he was rooted, into the ground and into Havoc, arms and legs the only things keeping him in control of the pain roaring through his head, and he couldn’t move, he couldn’t give that up.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Call slurred weakly as the door opened, as the door closed.

Are you okay? Havoc immediately asked, any previous malice gone into thin air.

We need to go after him, Call responded, slowly taking his weight off Havoc to stand on his own. The pain followed him, rising, pounding. Call took a shaky step.

Call, sit down, I don’t know what’s wrong but if you’re reacting like this you probably need medical attention, Havoc said, ever pragmatic. Didn’t Havoc understand, though? They had to go after Jasper. That was the whole reason they came out here.

Call went to tell this to Havoc, talk out the situation, change the subject, but with his attempt to focus his thoughts came another stab of pain behind his eyes. It hitched his breathing, for a second.

When Call could focus again, he was sitting on the ground, and Havoc was staring at him.

Wait here, Havoc said, I’ll be back with help.

Once again, Call could do nothing but sit and be in pain, his head too electrified with burning.
I mean it, don’t move, Havoc repeated, and then he was gone, sliding out the door (he learned how to open doors a long time ago) and padding down the street.

Call sat.

His head hurt.

Jasper hit hard.

--

No light accompanied the arrival of Convict and Caped Justice, which was all the better for Hurting Head McGee a.k.a Call. Havoc had led them down to where he was, and now they were kneeling in front of him, squinting through the darkness, trying to discern what was wrong. They kept asking questions, but Call’s tongue kept stumbling too much to answer.

His headache was subsiding, that was the good news. In the amount of time it had taken for Havoc to come back, the pain had gone from unbearable to barely bearable. Call didn’t want to ruin this vague peace, so he was hesitant to move, or speak, and just let the pain and blood rush through his head with every beat of his heart.

Ever, ever so slightly, the pain was fading, the stabbing becoming poking.

“Radar, what did this to you? We need to diagnose what’s wrong,” Convict said. Call considered answering, maybe he finally could, but a quick beat of his heart and burn of pain and he decided against it again, focusing on breathing.

“Do you think we should call an ambulance?” Caped Justice asked, panic lacing his tone worse than Havoc’s. Odd, because Call would have expected him to be the most composed.

Either way, probably the last thing Call wanted was to go to the hospital for a punch to the face, so he gathered all the breath in his body and all the will he had left in his limbs and said: “No.”

“Oh, thank God, you’re still being stubborn,” Convict said. Call couldn’t laugh, or respond, but he twitched a smile onto his mouth. The thought of expending energy was a less insurmountable one, now that he’d done it once.

“Does that mean you’re feeling better?” Caped Justice asked.

“Still hurts,” Call responded, mouth tasting bitter through the perception of pain. “Less.”

“Less, less, that’s good,” Caped Justice mumbled to himself, while Convict searched Call’s face again.

“Ah, you’re getting bruising around your eye,” Convict said. “Or, from what I can see around the mask.” That was where the pain was coming from, so Call was hardly surprised. “Did you get hit in the face?”

“Yes,” Call murmured. He got really, really hit in the face.

“Black eye, then,” Convict said, sitting back on her heels. “Ouch.”

“I’m pretty sure if you experience intense pain from a black eye, you’re supposed to immediately seek medical help,” Caped Justice said.

“I’m fine,” Call said. “Hurts less.”
“You already said.”

“Lesser than less.”

Caped Justice ran a hand through his hair while Convict stared at the ground.

“You know, I’m pretty sure I recall you saying you could burp on this danger and it would go away,” Convict said.

“There was 100% more punching than I anticipated,” Call said, the breadth of the sentence surprising him. He was getting his breath back, getting his head back. His thoughts were getting clearer and clearer, and a wave of relief crashed over him, as opposed to a wave of pain. Sure his head was still pounding, but now only as effectively as a maraca in a sea of drum beats. He could pull through.

“I think that was more than five syllables,” Caped Justice said.

“You think?” Call asked.

“Fast recovery,” Caped Justice responded, some worry still left in his tone.

“It’s because I iced the injury,” Convict hummed, pushing herself to her feet and stretching. “Froze some of the water vapor in here. Your mask will hold it in place well enough. As weird as it sounds, icing a black eye always helps significantly.”

Call blinked. Come to think of it, the relief around his throbbing eye was cold.

“You’re an angel,” Call said to Convict, completely and utterly sincere for once in his life.

“No problem,” Convict said. “You’d better ice that injury to high heaven once you get home, though.” She pointed at Call in an act of prosecution. There was nothing he could do but agree.

“Can you stand?” Caped Justice asked, sounding doubtful. Call blinked, then took gulp of air, and stood up.

For a second, everything was swimming, but then it all evened out, sturdy and nearly painless and unembellished with splashes of color. Havoc immediately trotted over to Call, tail wagging wildly as he pushed against Call’s side.

“Well, he’s excited,” Convict noted, laugh in her voice.

“Who wouldn’t be?” Call asked. “It’s good to have me back.”

“...isn’t that supposed to be our line?” Caped Justice asked, amused. Call could hear the worry evaporating out of him, out of the room. Good. They didn’t need any more of that.

“You hesitated on the cue. I’m improvising. Theater 101,” Call responded, brushing spare plaster dust off his clothes.

“Ahh, I forgot, we’re part of an epic drama,” Caped Justice quipped.

“All the world’s a stage, dearest Duke Senior. That’s theater 102,” Call quickly said. Briefly, he was afraid the joke was too nerdy and obscure, but Convict chuckled, so it was all right.

It was all right.

There was a moment of pause, then Caped Justice popped his knuckles and let out a long breath, and
Convict nodded to herself, once and quick and sharp, convinced of one thing or another. Whatever wavelength there was, they were both privy to it.

“So,” Caped Justice said flatly, and the entire tone of the room changed, from Shakespeare jokes to limelights and danger. Not directed at Call, necessarily. Directed at a phantom that was about to take shape. “What happened, exactly?”

Call started absentmindedly petting Havoc, thinking about his answer. The other two couldn’t know his identity, or that somebody else did. But they had to stop Jasper, didn’t they?

Even with that thought, the feeling of danger started curling around Call, particularly highlighted by the remnants of his headache. Danger, somewhere in the city. Jasper, somewhere in the city.

“Well,” Call said. “I’ve confirmed a suspect.”
Wind whistled louder than usual.

Traffic was busier here, a bright contrast to the near abandoned streets they had left behind. They were only two blocks away from Main Street, now, making it a lot harder to be inconspicuous, between the constant lights and thick crowds. The storefronts lit up with neon and flyers, and music sprouted from speakers, everywhere. People were coming and going in flocks, trying to give themselves a Thursday night to remember, probably.

Talk buzzed quieter than usual. With more and more people home with the virus. Everybody elected to ignore the heaviness in the air that filled the silence sick people used to chatter through. It was a weight, a danger, a silent threat hung over the roofs and lurking in the alleys in the form of a vial on a broadcast, a growl from a wolf, a spider-webbing, cracking wall.

Call found it was easier to bear when he was actively working on finding a solution to the virus.

Nights like this, environments like this, were the ultimate nemesis to superheroes. They couldn’t move through here unannounced and uninterrupted.

They had to be one with the shadows.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Radar,” Convict said. “We’ll blend right in with the crowd.”

“You are wearing freaking cloak!” Call responded. The three of them were staged in a thin alley between two buildings, nothing more than a quick, paper thin shadow space. It was so insignificant that eyes glanced right over it, making it a perfect place to have this argument.

“Everybody is too wrapped up in themselves to notice a cloak,” Convict said. “It won’t be a problem.”

“Okay,” Call said, “then maybe they’ll notice his bright red cape! Or, I don’t know, the huge wolf

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a mess and now its an artistic mess and I have mixed feelings of mostly love about it. This is when we're getting into some REAL PLOT STUFF guys. some REAL plot stuff. Someone also makes an appearance, basically, I'm hyped for you to read this. I worked RLLY RLLY HARD ON THIS because DANG it is LONG and I wanted everything to land. I think I pulled it off.

God Bless all you kudosers and commenters, those notifications make my day. Look. I haven't read golden tower yet (pls no spoilers) cause idk if I could HANDLE THAT so we're going to sit here and crank this stuff out despite. I love these kids and I love what this fic is becoming and and I love that you all love it too!! thank you endlessly for your support.

One day I will make a notes section that isn't three paragraphs.

Get HYPED, stuff's about to go down >;)))
that’s just following us around.”

“I doubt it,” Convict said.

“Should we really risk that, though?” Call asked. A blow in cover could be disastrous for the Jasper situation, at this point. They were too close to finding out what he was up to, they couldn’t let it crash on a lack of subterfuge. Plus, Call didn’t want another headache, not right as the last one was finally fully fading out.

“Well, where is your danger sense taking us, now? Is Jasper still on the move?” Caped Justice asked. Call glanced away from Convict to look at him, standing further into the alley than the both of them, and absentmindedly petting Havoc. The picture shook Call out of his argumentative headspace, causing him to take a deep breath to focus.

“We’re close, I think he’s stopped moving,” Call said.

“Can you pinpoint exactly where he is?” Convict asked, mouth pulled down at the edges. She wasn’t as invigorated as usual, or even as she had been at the beginning of the night. Call didn’t know how to address it, so he didn’t.

The wait that followed Convict’s question was expecting, so Call closed his eyes and concentrated, trying again to find where the danger was.

“No, it’s too fuzzy,” Call said as he opened his eyes. “They must be in a tunnel or something.”

A pause.

“Wait,” Caped Justice said, “wait, wait, wait, hold on, does your power work like cell phone reception?” the elated edge to his tone brought a smile onto Convict’s face. Call, even though he was getting teased, couldn’t keep a grin down either.

“To an extent,” he said, slowly, preparing for the comments.

“Does that mean if we take you out to the middle of the woods you’ll stop working?” Convict asked wickedly. Call snorted.

“The great outdoors is your kryptonite?” Caped Justice chimed in happily, already laughing through his statement.

“Don’t laugh too hard, we have to keep this under wraps,” Call said through his smile. “If anybody finds out then it’s a done deal for me.” Caped Justice swallowed his laughter, although the happy expression didn’t wipe itself from his face. “I wasn’t kidding about the tunnel thing, though. So if either of you two know about any tunnels near here, speak up. That’s probably where Jasper is.”

Mentioning Jasper drew their attention away from joking matters. Caped Justice’s smile slid off his face as he glanced at Call’s black eye. Convict looked at the ground. They both bit their lip, thinking too much. Call had to wonder if they knew how alike they were.

“You said he wasn’t on the move?” Caped Justice eventually asked.

“Affirmative,” Call said. His danger sense was being pretty clear on that, at least.

“Then it’s not the subway system,” Caped Justice responded, voice toning down as he fell back into concentrated thought.
The contemplative pause between them was filled with city chatter that still wasn’t as loud as it was supposed to be, wasn’t as loud as it would have been pre-virus. Sickening guilt sounded like silence. Undue hope sounded like the superheroes’ ticking, ticking thoughts.


Oval Avenue. Instead of putting a crosswalk on the road and creating more traffic, a pedestrian tunnel had been installed to go under the road. A sidewalk ran through the tunnel, traffic carried on merrily over their heads, all was good.

It was only two blocks away.

“As good a place as any,” Call said. Caped Justice nodded.

“So what’s the plan?” Convict asked, which was odd, because she was usually the one proposing plans. Caped Justice took it in stride.

“Does anybody know what the area surrounding the tunnel looks like?” he asked. When nobody piped up, he sighed and glared into the distance, down towards Oval Avenue. Oh, right, x-ray hawk vision. That was his power. Call forgot more often than not.

Caped Justice blinked a few times, then his eyes darted back over to Call and Convict, calculating.

“Directly next to the tunnel entrance there’s a copse of bushes that’s perfect for eavesdropping. The only problem is that there’s a street light shining directly on the bushes, which would make it very obvious if there were, for example, three superheroes and a wolf hiding in them. If the light went dark, we could hide out in the bushes and observe all the goings-on inside the tunnel, gain some real information on the entire situation, and work out any sort of attack from there. Sound good?”

“Golden,” Convict responded. “How’re we going to put the light out subtly, though?”

“Already on it,” Call butted in, and he was. Rats, nocturnal and skilled with electrical wiring as they were, were perfect cohorts for this situation. Call knew a few in the area, and was reaching out to each of them, seeing if any would be willing to start some shenanigans.

Eh, I’m always up for a round of late-night-meddling, Jules responded, and Call could hear the yawn in their voice, even mentally. Where was this?

“Got anything?” Caped Justice asked, but Call didn’t respond, he hardly even processed the comment, too focussed on keeping up with Jules.

Oval Avenue tunnel, the street light that has bushes under it. I need that thing out of business, Call responded.

How out of business are we talking? Jules asked.

Avoid any and all fires or legal cases, if you could, Call said.

You’re going soft, Jules said, teasing sharp despite their drowsiness.

I’d call it malleable, Call responded. When my company is made up of superheroes, it makes fires and legal cases harder to justify.

“I’ll admit that the silence worries me,” Caped Justice sighed, and Convict stared at the ground, humming a noise of agreement.
Ever plan on ditching the company, then? Jules asked. I always figured you were more of the vigilante type, anyway. Nobody cares when vigilantes start a fire or two.

Call was poised to respond, but he slowly started realizing...something. It wasn’t adding up in his head, some part of him could not comprehend the idea of ditching Convict and Caped Justice. No more bakery, no more subtle ribbing, no more odd staring into the distance and freezing roads, no more revolutionary hope they’d been riding off of since the broadcast. No more team. He’d adopted to the lifestyle so quickly, found himself so comfortable in it so suddenly, that the mere thought of ditching it instantly made him dearly upset, which was… ridiculous. They weren’t friends, as far as Call knew.

Call didn’t have friends.

This was a partnership.

These two didn’t care about him past that.

“Radar, I can’t tell if you’re spacing because of your superpower or if it’s your injury putting you out of commission again,” Caped Justice said, mostly to himself at this point, studying Call’s face. Call blinked, hearing Caped Justice now that he wasn’t talking to Jules. The contrast between what Caped Justice said and the thoughts he’d been thinking was stark in Call’s head.

It was sudden, and jarring, but the cork popped off the bottled message, he found the last elusive word in the wordsearch, the clouds parted, and the feeling that resulted blasted him so hard that his breath caught in his throat.

Oh, man.

He had friends.

Call was going to freckles from this sunlight shining through the newly parted clouds.

...think you can manage the street light? Call eventually asked Jules. Jules chuckled.

Softie.

Yeah, yeah, Call said, and the glee of the exasperated agreement outshined any of his past denials so much, he couldn’t help the small smile from crawling on his face. Eyes on the job, Jules.

That’s not how the phrase works, Cotton Ball. You can count on me to get it done, though.

“...Radar?”

Thanks, Jules, Call said.

Thank me when the city’s saved, Jules responded, and that was that.

“The light’ll be down by the time we get there,” Call said, and the smile still hadn’t quite fallen off his face. He found he didn’t want to fight it.

Seeing Call’s expression, the worry melted away from Caped Justice, replaced by a mirroring smile, just by reflex.

“Splendid,” Caped Justice said, which made Convict snort.

“What kind of conversationalists use the word splendid? You guys are such nerds,” she said, her
own grin creeping up on her.

“Don’t exclude yourself, you’re the one wearing a cloak,” Caped Justice said, elbowing her. She stuck her tongue out at him.

“No matter. Come on, we have places to be and no time for tomfoolery,” Convict said, edging out of the alley and into the street. As much as Call wanted to continue protesting their decision to walk through the street, he couldn’t resist the urge to poke fun at Convict. At his friend.

“So ’splendid’ is a word only nerds use, but ‘tomfoolery’ is totally cool?”

“All the skateboarders are using it as slang these days,” Convict said, walking onto the sidewalk proper. Caped Justice and Call and Havoc followed. “You wouldn’t know, because you’re a nerd and also not cool.”

“Low blow,” Call said, putting his hand dramatically against his chest. “Low blow.”

“If you think that’s low, you must suck at limbo,” Caped Justice said.

That statement, joking as it was, was an open invitation for the conversation to continue, but the four of them walked past six storefronts in (mostly) disbelieving silence.

“...guys?” Caped Justice eventually asked. Call was biting his tongue so hard he was sure it was about to start bleeding. Convict was taking long, long breaths. Havoc wasn’t even trying to be quiet, because he was a dog and only Call could understand him, so he’d been howling in laughter the whole way through.

“Guys,” Caped Justice said again, and Call lost it. His composure flew out the window when he barked a quick, explosive laugh. Convict snorted, and the two of them devolved into chuckles.

“For anyone who’s curious,” Call huffed, “Havoc is laughing too.”

“Why?” Caped Justice asked, sounding so genuinely baffled.

“It was just, that was such, a lame thing to say,” Call breathed. “Convict was right. You are the nerdiest person I know. This is a level beyond what I could have imagined.”

“Are limbo references not hip?” Caped Justice asked, a smile growing on his face as he caught on to the joke, and accepted his position as the butt of it.

“The next time I hear you say the word ‘hip’, I am quitting this team,” Convict snorted, and they all laughed.

“Is this real life?”

An echo of an, ‘I told you so,’ rang through Call’s head as the four of them turned towards the voice, a girl that looked elementary school age and like it was past her bedtime.

“Uh,” Caped Justice said, for once faced with a situation he wasn’t equipped to deal with.

“You guys are my heroes!” the girl said. “Literally!” She started bouncing up and down, the two women (her parents, Call hoped) standing behind her looking a mix of sheepish and awestruck. Honestly. The city was big, but it wasn’t that big, Call didn’t get why running into superheroes that haunted it nightly was such an occurrence. They were always around, guys.

“...oh yeah?” Convict asked, and her voice was a note softer than usual, than it had been. Her
posture melted, and Caped Justice’s demeanor mirrored hers. Call… didn’t get it. Did they do this usually? Did they enjoy these encounters? Call usually waved and walked away.

“Yeah! My moms used to read me newspaper stories about Miri and Decline and Auto and Patriarch and Parable and it was so cool and even though they’re gone now I can hear stories about you guys! And you guys are really really cool! Especially you,” she said, and pointed at Havoc. Havoc’s ears perked up.

“Leila, it’s rude to point,” one of the women said, and the girl (Leila, apparently) lowered her arm.

“What a coincidence, I also think I’m especially cool,” Convict said, her face breaking out in a cocky superhero smirk as she positioned her hands on her hips. “But do you want to know an awesome secret?”

Where was she taking this? Call didn’t understand what was happening.

“What?” Leila asked, and she leaned forward, eyes wide.

“It takes a pretty cool person to recognize another pretty cool person,” Convict stage-whispered, raising her eyebrows at Leila. Leila gasped excitedly, eyes darting between all of the superheroes and then turning around to her moms to see if they’d also heard and were also as excited. They smiled at her.

“Should I tell them?” Leila asked her moms, and they both looked up at each other and held a brief conversation of eye contact before darting their gazes back down to their daughter. One of them, the blonde one, looked over at the superheroes and smiled sheepishly again, while the dark haired one gave a gentle nod to Leila. Leila beamed, turning back to the superheroes.

“I really liked what you said when you showed up on TV,” Leila said, and the entirety of the broadcast scanned through the back of Call’s head as he tried to predict where she was taking this now.

“I had art class the next day, and I drew what you said onto a banner. I had to sharpen my colored pencils a lot. But the banner looked super awesome! When I showed it to my teacher she super duper liked it, and she hung it up on the wall! All the other kids in the class like it too.” Leila puffed out her chest as she finished speaking, eagerly looking between them for their reactions. Caped Justice and Convict both opened their mouths to say something, a certain happiness gleaming through their eyes. But Call, confused, lost Call, beat them to it.

“What was on the banner?” he asked, purely questioning. He blinked. What had they said? Why had a kid wanted to put it on a banner? Why did a teacher hang it in a classroom? Why were Convict and Caped Justice so overjoyed?

Leila turned her glowing gaze to Call, and he wasn’t prepared to receive the full brunt of it. Every inch of smile, every bounce in her stance, put Call a little further outside his comfort zone.

“‘Magista will not fall under some bully!’ Exclamation point and everything,” Leila said, voice laced with pride and eyes full of joy.

Inexplicably, Call smiled.

It was a gentle thing, slow, wonderstruck. Leila’s smile grew twofold at the sight of it.

“I, uh, um,” Call stammered, realizing he should probably respond.
“That’s the spirit!” Caped Justice interrupted, seamlessly saving Call, while Convict elbowed Call to get his head back in the game. “You know, you’re the exact kind of citizen we love to have at our side, holding down the fort in the city. You’re a value to the team, Leila.”

“That’s right! I love hearing what we’ve inspired in you, give me five,” Convict said, holding up her hand. Leila gave her an enthused high five.

These two were good.

_Hey, heartwarming as it is to see you awkwardly fumble through conversation with small children, check out your press conference crowd, would you?_ Havoc noted. Curse his condescending pragmatism.

Nonetheless, Call looked around them, past his focus on Leila and her mothers, and noticed a smattering of small groups stopped in their nights to look on and whisper and record on their phones. Laughing or staring, nudging or flipping out.

Yeah, it was around time they get out of there.

It was times like this that Call wished he could get over himself and use the side of his power that let him talk to other people in their heads. It felt ethically wrong, sure, which was why he limited himself to animals only, but it sure would be great to be able to have private conversations in public spaces, let Caped Justice and Convict know the new circumstances without drawing attention. Call’s mouth set in a line as he took in the situation. Distantly, he heard Leila talking some more, and he owed it to her to listen. He was a superhero, after all.

He tuned her out, investigating any possible way to subtly get out of there and back enroute to Oval Avenue. Duck into the alley on the other side of the sidewalk. Have Havoc pretend to chase something. Get a bunch of birds to rain poop down on their heads. Fake a sign from his danger sense. Create-

“Hey headliners!” came a voice, and attention on the street shifted to some hipster kid wearing glasses, smirking. They turned on their heel, showing that the back of their jacket had the words, ‘we will stand, we will fight, we will win,’ embroidered across it.

“Woah!” Leila said, and Caped Justice opened his mouth to say something, but then someone else piped up, an individual that had just been passing by.

“My girlfriend works at a Fuddos, y’know, the burger joint? Yeah, she’s been streaming you guys’ broadcast on loop on one of the work TVs since last night. Really got to her, yeah? Really got to a lot of people, I wager.” The individual shrugged, then turned and kept walking.

Instead of a weighty silence, a contemplative moment for the state of things like Call expected, a clamor started, more and more people.

“My sister got the virus-”

“Stuck on the wall-”

“Inspired my-”

“Wrote a-”

“Published the-”
“The Enemy-”

“Could never thank you enou-”

“Hey, hey, hey, guys, please,” Caped Justice started, putting his hands out in a placating gesture. It took a hot second, but the now substantial crowd quieted. A pause.

Leila spoke up.

“Magista will not fall under some bully!” she chimed, and her blonde mother immediately looked mortified.

“Kid’s right!” said a person who was wearing sunglasses, for some reason. “Magista will not fall under some bully!”

The chorus of agreement rang, cheering and shouting and pumping fists and echoing statements. Call, under different circumstances, would have felt himself drowning beneath the onslaught. Somehow, tonight, this inexplicable night he was having, he found himself reveling in it. Surrounded by passion of his own spurning, feeling shouts he had been the original voice of, looking out into a growing, growing crowd of so many different people and seeing the same emotion sweeping everybody away, his emotion sweeping everybody away. Seeing the strength of people in the throes of a revolution he was the headliner of.

He loved it.

He loved it, in a nearly childish way, in a way where he let himself get caught up in the moment and forget all of his worries about the situation. He stopped thinking about ditching out of there, and Jasper, and the dull way his head still pounded, and the void left in the business of the night by the virus. He forgot, and felt strength and emotion blossoming, molten and quick, into his chest for it.

Caped Justice and Convict were no different, looking over the people and smiling and forgetting and burning.

Revolution had a nice ring to it, Call decided, cheering along with the people.

...Don’t you think we should be busting Jasper right now? Havoc asked, buzzkill that he was.

Humor me? Call responded. Havoc sighed. Call didn’t feel bad, he knew Havoc wanted to do it.

Humans, Havoc thought to Call, and then he howled.

The crowd faltered for a moment, but ultimately the cheering got louder, matching if not encouraging Havoc’s continued howls.

It was pretty awesome.

Havoc gave it a few more moments, a few more life changing, invigorating, inexplicable moments, a few more moments of the night that were saturated with passion, before he stopped howling.

After all, they should be going after Jasper.

“That’s our cue!” Call said, and it was the first time that he’d spoken to so many civilians face to face while in costume. It was intense and its own form of lovely, and the crowd cheered. Convict and Caped Justice shook themselves, just the littlest bit, just enough for Call to know they were waking up, too.
“Salut!” Convict said, and the crowd cheered. Caped Justice bowed, and the crowd cheered.

The superheroes shared a look, ensuring that they were on the same page. Call wondered if he looked as overjoyed as the other two did.

They darted. Down the street, gracefully but purposefully. Places to be. People to see.

They had a fight to fight, now more than ever, the virus following them at their heels like a shadow, the city’s expectations looming over them like a hanging piano, ready to drop in a mess of discordant disappointment at any moment.

Nonetheless, the four kept running. Past stores, through crowds, trailing purpose along with them.

Eventually, finally, they made it to the path leading under Oval Avenue. They stopped a ways back from the tunnel, standing and panting on the fringes of the path, just out of reach of the last street light. Ahead of them, if they squinted, they could make out a small copse of bushes, a burned out street light, and the tunnel entrance, huge and gaping.

“How did you even manage to burn out the light, Radar?” Caped Justice asked, voice quiet, staring ahead of them.

“Ah, I got a hold of Jules. Rats are experts with electrics,” Call responded.

Thanks for that, he thought to Jules, and got a mental hum in acknowledgement.

“This is way easier than subtly trying to do it ourselves,” Caped Justice said. “That would’ve been a pain. Tell her I said thanks.”

“They,” Call said, already shooting off another quick, Caped Justice sends his thanks, to which he got another hum. Jules might as well have been sending back fingerguns. Call loved rats.

“They?” Caped Justice asked.

“Mice don’t follow the limitations of gender,” Call noted, shaking his head to clear it from the vague buzzing that he got when he talked mentally and verbally at the same time.

“I thought you said they were a rat?” Caped Justice asked. The ignorance of this guy.

“Rats and mice are basically brothers of each other, they consider themselves to be the same thing except one is more like the evil twin and the other is the good twin, must I really explain the entirety of the animal kingdom’s social ladder to you at this very moment? We’re, like, twenty meters away from catching a bad guy.”

“Ah, right,” Caped Justice said. “Jasper.”

“Hey, Caped Justice,” Convict suddenly said, “did you see what type of bushes we’re about to hide in when you were doing your hawk vision thing? Cause I’m allergic to holly bushes. Red berries?” Call blinked at the change in topic.

“I uh, think the bushes had red flowers on them,” Caped Justice said, eyes darting. “No berries.”

“Sweet,” Convict said, though her voice was grim. “Then let’s head in.”

Well, was there anything else to be said? The four crept along the path, staying out of the light, down towards the bushes, the tunnel entrance. The ground was still loose from the rain, so they slid a little in the mud as they made their way down the slight hill, but they managed to say inconspicuous.
The closer they got to the tunnel, the more Call felt like he had to throw up, which was a surefire sign from his danger sense that Jasper was in there. He’d feel more satisfied by that if his stomach wasn’t trying to crawl out of his throat.

The bushes were thick, and stationed perfectly next to the entrance of the tunnel. Soundlessly crawling into them was a trial and a half, but once the four of them were situated, they had found a perfect angle to stare into the tunnel, though anybody looking back at them would only see leaves and sticks. Call couldn’t deny feeling like Team Rocket.

In the tunnel, a silhouette leaned against the wall, hands shoved in pockets, head turned down, hair annoyingly spiky.

Alone.

Antsy.

Sinister.

Jasper.

Somewhere next to Call, Convict hissed a curse. Call didn’t ask. Caped Justice didn’t ask. They crouched in the bushes, and looked into the dim light of the tunnel, ears attuning to the rush of traffic above them.

Jasper stayed stationary for a while, staring at the ground. A few times, he popped his sleeve to look at his watch, then pushed his hand back into his pocket.

So there was someone else involved. By the looks of things, they were late, whoever, whatever they were.

Six circulations of the traffic light at the end of the street were burned through before there was any movement. Another silhouette moved down the sidewalk at the other end of the tunnel, stepping into the light for a mere moment as they walked closer to the entrance. The yellow light slid over their face, revealing, for a second, a mask, silver and threatening. Then the light was gone and the figure was in the tunnel, and the silhouette of Jasper pushed off the wall to stand square.

The Enemy.

Convict hissed another curse, harsher this time, and Call had to agree.

“You’d better not have brought your wolves this time,” Jasper growled. Call was reminded of the last time he had seen the Enemy and Jasper together, when the Enemy had made a wall collapse on Jasper, when Jasper found out Call’s secret.

I admire his immediate pompadour attitude, despite the fact he’s facing down a super villain, Havoc thought to Call. Havoc was crouching, not in a stealthy way, but in a ready way. Call could see the tension in his muscles, and the way his gaze was locked firmly on Jasper.

What’s up with you? Call asked.

“They were a simple precaution during our last encounter,” the Enemy said, somewhere, voice like venom. It echoed through the tunnel.

Jasper will not lay another hand on you, Havoc responded. I don’t care if it blows our cover, one wrong move in this direction and I’m taking him down. Call blinked.
“Your, ‘precaution,’ was probably the least convincing thing you could have tried on me. Really,” Jasper said, sounding for all the world like a bored king playing poker. Not that Call knew what that sounded like. “You know who my family is, right? I’ve been threatened enough times through my life that your cute dogs will hardly work on me. Give me logical reasoning, not brute force, or you’ll never have enough of my respect for me to be a valuable asset to you.”

Holy Hell, Jasper deWinter.

“Convince him of what?” Caped Justice murmured, so quiet the traffic nearly muted him. Convict heard, though, and Call. He was loud enough that the question stuck in their heads as they looked on, thinking, thinking. What did the Enemy want from Jasper?

“Don’t try to put yourself on equal ground with me using your past with your family,” the Enemy said.

“I’m a deWinter,” Jasper responded. “Our legacy is half our bite. You can’t deny I’ve made my point-- you can’t deny that I’m right. You’re just upset that your threats don’t work on me because of it.”

Call felt his heart racing, faster than a bullet, felt his skin prickling in a mix of his danger sense flying into hyperdrive from the proximity of the Enemy and fear at the situation. Not to mention total disbelief at the way that Jasper was playing his cards.

“Your braggadocio attitude will only get you so far with me, Jasper. I know your secrets. I know your vices,” the Enemy said. His voice was upsettingly velvety.

Anybody who wasn’t accustomed to finding themselves in conversations of power play such as this one wouldn’t have noticed the way that Jasper, ever so slightly, tensed. Call noticed. Convict noticed. Caped Justice noticed. The Enemy must have noticed. The Enemy must have grinned, because they could hear the smirk in his voice the next time he spoke.

“You know nothing,” Jasper sneered, unwavering despite. He had a bit left to grab onto, here. “That’s why you need me.”

“Ah, but I know enough, don’t I?” the Enemy said. “Your uncle, for example.”

“I’m pretty sure everybody knows about my uncle,” Jasper responded. His voice had a strained quality to it, but it didn’t lose any of its force. Call had no idea how Jasper was holding out this long.

“About the true legacy of the deWinter family? About the true nature of their fourth son, then?” the Enemy asked. Slowly, as he spoke, the Enemy walked further into the tunnel, until he was standing against the wall across from Jasper. The action reminded Call of a shark circling its prey. Most sharks just needed a solid punch in the nose to sort them back out again, though.

“That’s why you need me.”

“Common knowledge in certain circles,” Jasper said. He was cracking. Barely, but enough.

“How about that scar of yours, then. Anybody know about that?”

The way the Enemy sounded- his voice was like a waltz set in a minor key. It was complicated and twisted and sophisticated and it swept the ears of a room into its swells. There was nothing good about it. He didn’t need stance and violence to display power, he didn’t even need expression. He could lean against a wall and talk, and tear anybody to shreds, build anybody into empires, twist anybody into pawns. Frankly, it made Call’s ears ring with the danger of it. He figured that if he got any closer, he’d be put out of business just by proximity. Something about the Enemy rubbed Call’s danger sense the wrong way.
Call wasn’t entirely convinced the Enemy wasn’t a monster.

But those words, those smug, musical words, spoken like the glint off the edge of a blade. They struck a chord in Jasper, one that should’ve been left unsung. It was easy enough to tell, Jasper brought up his hand to hug his left shoulder, and when he opened his mouth to say something, his voice caught.

Silence built eerily and fatally, the Enemy comfortable in it, while Jasper stood and shivered. He was quiet. He didn’t move, didn’t speak. The moment hung.

A few things happened at once, then.

First, Convict started to stand up, in an attempt to crawl out of the bushes. Caped Justice immediately grabbed her arm and pulled her back down, holding fast even when she tried to yank out of his grasp. She turned to him, furious, and the two stared at each other, fighting through eye contact. Neither were stepping down.

Second, Jasper said something. Anything, really. It was quiet enough not to be audible to anyone except for the Enemy. But the Enemy laughed, a wicked thing. “That’s what I thought,” he said.

Third, Call got hit with a particularly stubborn wall of danger sense, to an alarming level. The nausea he was feeling doubled. Pain settled in his stomach. His heart ran the races. It was the worst case of fight or flight known to man, because Call had a duty not to do either.

_Havoc, are we missing something?_ Call asked, jaw clenched so hard it felt like it would crack.

_Something being…?_

_Cronies. Wolves. A carbon copy of the Enemy. My danger sense is telling me there’s something, and it’s bad._

Havoc was quiet, still as a statue. Call waited, breath bated. Distantly, he heard the Enemy’s voice, rotten like secondhand smoke, but he couldn’t bring himself to focus on the scene in front of him.

_Wolves, _Havoc eventually said. _Wolves, and maybe another person, I’m not sure. But definitely wolves. I can smell them._

Of course the Enemy brought wolves. It’s not like Call went anywhere without his.

Another wave of panic hit Call, so he took a deep breath.

_Do you have anything on the possible other person? Any information? Recognition? _he asked. This was miserable.

_Nothing, _Havoc responded. _I don’t know what their deal is, but I’m pretty sure they’re there._

_Then I’ve got a plan, _Call said.

_Lay it on me, _Havoc responded, ever trusting.

_Get on the other side of the tunnel, _Call started. _That’s where the wolves are, and this mysterious other person. Give me a report from there. _Hopefully actively responding to the danger would make his danger sense calm down.

_Are you asking me to run through traffic? _Havoc asked.
You’ll find a way, Call said.

Well, obviously, but it’s the principle of the thing, Havoc said. With that, he slowly and quietly made his way out of the bushes.

“Where’s he going?” Caped Justice asked, hand still resting on Convict’s shoulder. Convict was looking over the scene in the tunnel, her face pained.

“He’s investigating on the other end of the tunnel,” Call said. “Danger sense.”

“Do you think the Enemy brought somebody with him?” Caped Justice asked.

“Unfortunately.”

Caped Justice nodded.

“This is wrong.”

Call and Caped Justice both looked at Convict. She was scowling.

“We need to step in.”

Distantly, Call heard the Enemy say, “so we’re in agreement, then?” It echoed weirdly through the tunnel, making him sound more powerful.

Caped Justice said nothing, just watching and keeping his hand on Convict’s shoulder.

“It’s funny,” Jasper responded, sounding weak in comparison. He seemed… small. Call didn’t like it.

“It’s funny that after I tell you that intimidation won’t work, you try harder to intimidate me. Take information when it’s given to you, Constantine.”

“You’re begging for the kiss of death,” the Enemy rumbled. Where he had been relaxing against the graffitied wall inside the tunnel before, the Enemy was now standing, tension and anger written in every line of his posture.

“Guys,” Convict whispered. Call knew they couldn’t go, they needed to wait for a report from Havoc.

“Seems you think the whole city’s begging for it,” Jasper said. “That’s why you released a virus on thousands of innocents, yeah? We’re all just “begging for the kiss of death.”” Jasper went so far as putting sarcastic quotations around the phrase. He grew a bit bolder with the statement, but his shoulders never stopped slumping.

“You know full well why I released the virus on the city,” the Enemy said.

“I know full well that you made a choice you can’t take back and now you’re desperate for my help,” Jasper snapped. “And intimidating me wasn’t the way to get it. Make me an ally, not a pawn, you fool.”

“Keep talking,” the Enemy shouted. “Keep talking and see what happens, deWinter.”

Convict shoved Caped Justice’s hand off and stood, stepping out of the bushes and into plain sight of the Enemy and Jasper. Call jumped after her, pushing her across the path to the other side of the tunnel entrance so they wouldn’t be seen. They couldn’t go in until they knew who the Enemy had with him. Variables were killers.
“Throwing a tantrum cause the blackmail won’t work? Poor baby,” Jasper said, voice still hollow despite the biting words. He knew what he was doing. He didn’t care. Call didn’t bother trying to understand his game.

“Let me go,” Convict hissed, but Call kept blocking her way when she tried to move past him. Call shook his head.

“We wait for Havoc to report who the Enemy has on the other side of that tunnel.”

“You aren’t above my blackmail. I see it in you. You wouldn’t be able to live with the crack in your façade.” The Enemy was getting quieter. More intense.

“Then we attack?” Convict asked, strained. Her eyes kept darting over to the tunnel entrance.

“Then we attack,” Call agreed. Her mouth twisted, but she stopped trying to get past Call.

“Break it,” Jasper said, hushed. “Smash my so-called façade to pieces. Ruin my life and ruin the city, but don’t be surprised when there’s no place for you here.”

“You don’t know my true power,” the Enemy sneered. “I will make my place.”

“All you’ve made,” Jasper said, “is your own downfall.”

“You—“

“I was your chance at mercy, and you wasted it,” Jasper bit.

_Call, I’ve got sightlines._

_Read them to me, fast_, Call replied.

“You will regret this,” the Enemy said, simple and harsh enough to send chills down Call’s spine. Convict was shaking, likely out of rage. Caped Justice had gotten out of the bushes, and was hovering next to the tunnel entrance on the other side. Call held up his hand to let him know to stop, and Caped Justice nodded, halting in his movements. They waited.

_Three wolves and a man. Tall. I don’t like the look of him one bit. He’s not Lightning, and has a staff. I don’t think it has any special abilities, I can’t sense anything from it._

_That’s it?_ Call asked.

_That’s it._ Havoc responded.

“That’s my line,” Jasper spat. “There is no ending where you’re the victor.”

Call stepped back, giving Convict the clear sign they could go now. She nodded. Caped Justice, across the way, moved with her, both unbearably close to the entrance of the tunnel. Ready to enter in tandem, guns blazing. Call hung back, just a little.

“I am always the victor.”

Like two storms converging over a valley, Caped Justice and Convict leapt in, furious and forceful. They didn’t yell, they didn’t communicate with each other, they didn’t tell Jasper he would be alright and they didn’t tell the Enemy he was going to rot.

In contrast, Call stuck to the fringe of the fight, slipping just inside the lip of the tunnel and watching
intently. He needed to know the full situation, after all these days. He needed to know how to account for the last variables. He needed to be on the outside looking in, rather than in the throes of the fight, ready for when Convict and Caped Justice took a hit and couldn’t defend themselves.

Within the tunnel, the scenery had changed in the amount of time Call and Convict had stopped watching. Now, the Enemy was holding Jasper by the collar of his shirt, and Jasper was staring back at him, matching his glare hate for hate. For a split frozen second in time, the scene looked like an elaborate statue, the wrath of the unjust king facing down against the immovable might of the wronged people, revolution still ringing in the air.

Convict blasted the Enemy with a stream of water.

The Enemy stumbled, releasing his hold on Jasper in the onslaught of dirty ditch water. Jasper ducked away from the Enemy and the attack, letting his back fall against the grimy wall of the tunnel and his eyes shut. He took a few deep breaths.

The Enemy, on the other hand, shouted (which probably got some of the water in his mouth, that idiot), and starting dodging down to get out from under the stream. Caped Justice was pulling a flank on him, though. As soon as the Enemy was out of the water, Caped Justice pushed him sideways, effectively throwing off his balance.

It was looking promising until the wolves and mysterious figure bounded in from the other end of the tunnel.

*I'll take care of the guy,* Havoc told Call, which alleviated some of the dread building in his stomach.

“We’ve got more coming in,” Call warned, drawing Convict and Caped Justice’s attention to the added fighters, although Jasper stayed glued to the wall, eyes closed. Probably for the better.

When Caped Justice glanced away from the Enemy, though, the Enemy roared and launched at him. Caped Justice’s attention was snapped back to the Enemy as soon as he started moving, so Caped Justice managed to half brace himself for the attack. A fist flew, and a fight started.

“The deWinter boy…” the strange not-Lightning figure said ominously, looking at Jasper. The stranger opened his mouth to say something else, but right as he started, he got pummeled in the back by a blur of wolf. Havoc, to be specific.

They both hit the ground. Barking started echoing through the tunnel, from the other three wolves, all standing around the strange man and growling at Havoc.

“Forget Joseph!” the Enemy suddenly shouted. “To me!”

Call’s eyes darted over to where the Enemy and Caped Justice were standing. The Enemy had just finished speaking when Caped Justice hit him with a sharp elbow to the face. They couldn’t see the effect it had through the mask, but the Enemy hissed.

While Call was happy to see the Enemy get beat, by Caped Justice of all people, the Enemy’s wolves were about to abandon Joseph—the strange man—to attack Caped Justice in defense. Their team suddenly felt spread too thin, between Jasper and the Enemy and Joseph and the wolves.

Caped Justice could probably handle the Enemy on his own, and from the looks of the Enemy’s stumble where he was standing, it was likely. Havoc might be able to give Joseph a run for his money, but that couldn’t be said for sure as Joseph was too much of a variable. It looked like Havoc had him under control for now, but that could change in the very near future. From there, Call and Convict would be left to handle the three wolves by themselves. And, that was assuming the Enemy,
you know, a supervillain, and this Joseph guy wouldn’t turn the tables on Caped Justice and Havoc.

That being said, the three wolves were flocking over to the Enemy now, presumably convinced by the Enemy’s callous control over them to abandon Joseph. Joseph rolled and threw Havoc off, but Havoc snarled and immediately jumped at him again.

Focus on the others, Havoc told Call quickly. I’ll let you know as soon as I can’t handle him, which is unlikely.

Call sent Havoc the mental version of a nod while picking a hefty stone off the ground. It was the size of a golf ball. Glancing up, Convict was panting (that initial swipe of water must’ve been draining), and the wolves were dangerously close to Caped Justice and the Enemy. The Enemy was in the process of trying to shove Caped Justice, Caped Justice was in the process of dancing around the Enemy and all three wolves.

Call didn’t think, Call didn’t pause to take a deep breath. Call just threw the rock, as hard as he could.

It hit the side of a wolf with a muffled sound, clattering to the floor. The wolf stuttered in its step, whipping its head around to Call. Call was caught with the urge to wave, but that wolf was a monster and it wouldn’t understand the gesture. No, instead, the wolf growled, turning from the Enemy in full.

Interesting that it could ignore commands from its master. Now that Call thought about it, it was also interesting that the Enemy had to speak out loud in order to issue a command. Was Call a more powerful mind controller than the Enemy of Death?

The thought flew through his head for a mere moment before it was chased away by the wolf taking two long strides closer to Call, barking once. The bark got the attention of the other two wolves, but Call could only perceive their movement out of the corner of his eye, most of his focus trained on where the primary wolf was leaping, and where he’d have to go to dodge those claws.

“Are you in fighting condition?” Call asked Convict as he swept himself to the side of the wolf’s reach. He immediately moved forward as the wolf hit the ground and tried to drive a knee in its side before it had fully regained its balance, but the wolf whipped around and Call twisted on his heel to avoid the snapping teeth. That move was one step too far for his leg, which promptly started aching with familiar pain. No more kicks, then.

“My fists are always ready to swing,” Convict responded after a second, fire glimmering in her voice but her usual snarky, confident smile absent from her face. Bummed and exhausted or not, she was fighting. Call said a prayer of thanks for Convict.

The other two wolves didn’t take their time to run over, the Enemy yelling in the background but Caped Justice yelling over him. Call and Convict, meanwhile, started getting driven out of the tunnel by the wolves, which fanned out into a line and started nipping at Call and Convict’s shins. It effectively made Convict and Call surrender ground to avoid the teeth.

The two superheroes immediately noticed that they were fighting on the defensive, and neither needed to point out the obvious of that being a negative point. Call caught Convict’s gaze for a moment, looking between her and the wolf standing in the center, prowling in front of them, then looking back at her. Convict’s mouth twisted as the two of them dodged another quick snap, and her eyes darted over the two wolves on the fringes then back to Call. Call smiled grimly, and nodded. Convict still looked exhausted. Besides, the wolf in the middle looked like the alpha. It was symmetrical, then, that the alphas fight each other.
Inside the tunnel, Caped Justice cursed, loudly and desperate. Call glanced up to see Caped Justice crouching, holding his stomach. The Enemy was bloodied and already lunging to tackle Caped Justice.

Call’s eyes were drawn away from the cinematic scene by the sound of a wolf growling, and he just jumped out of the way of two different sets of teeth. He exchanged another look with Convict. They nodded at the same time.

Convict crouched, scraping up a quick handful of dirt, and in one smooth motion swooped it into the eyes and mouth of the alpha wolf. It hesitated, shaking its head violently, and Convict took this as an opportunity to leap, using the wolf’s back as a springboard and landing back inside the tunnel, successful buckling the wolf down and gaining back all of the ground they had surrendered in the backing.

While the alpha was on the ground, Call turned his attention to the wolf on his left and jumped at it, wrapping his arms around its neck and aiming to pull it down. The wolf startled, thrashing. Call hadn’t gotten a good grip— the wolf had flinched when it saw Call descending on him. Ultimately, the wolf was dodgy enough that the hold Call on it slipped, causing him to fall backwards onto the damp ground. The wolf growled. Call didn’t move.

The wolf jumped, landing it’s heavy, clawed paws on Call’s arms and pushing him down harshly. Hitting the sidewalk hurt. His skin prickled from the claws, but Call wrote it off, too focussed on how to get the wolf off. There was a simple, if problematic, solution. See, he’d said no more kicking earlier, but his leg wasn’t throbbing as bad, so maybe it could be pushed. Call, remembering the last time he’d done this and just how that had gone wrong, brought his knees to his chest and kicked the wolf off his stomach, rolling as he did in order to push the wolf into the bushes they’d been hiding in earlier. The number of tangled branches in there might hold it off for a moment.

As soon as Call sat up, though, the other wolf he was supposed to be holding off, the one he’d dangerously disregarded, bit into the hood of Call’s sweatshirt and started dragging him across the ground. Call scrambled to push himself away, but the strength of the wolf’s jaw was monstrous. It wasn’t budging. Call couldn’t get his legs under him, either, his left leg already being uncooperative after he’d pulled the kicking maneuver. He was being dragged steadily across the ground, away from the tunnel.

“They close at 9!” the Enemy shouted, desperate but distracted. He was holding his shoulder, not peeling his eyes from Caped Justice, who was panting and had blood dripping steadily from his lip, still curling a hand around his stomach.

The statement confused Call, to say the least.

The wolf stopped dragging Call. Call looked up to see the wolf’s ears cocked and at attention, staring at the Enemy. More interesting by the second.

“Just tell the monsters to bring them to me,” Joseph said, and his voice was raspy. He was holding out his hand to Havoc, looking like he was trying to hold him back with the force, but Havoc snarled and feinted. Joseph flinched. Amusement was written on the angle of Havoc’s tail.

Tamara kicked the wolf she was preoccupied with viciously, and the whimpering noise it made brought the Enemy’s eyes over to them. Caped Justice charged, but the Enemy caught his arm mid-swing, and the two flew into another bout of swings and dodges and intensity.

“To me, Constantine, to me,” Joseph called, hand steadily on Havoc’s scruff. The sight of Joseph touching Havoc made bile rise in Call’s throat and anger surge through him, fast and harsh like a
dart, and he tugged to try to get away from the wolf again. He would dance on Joseph’s grave unless
the man unhanded Call’s dog this instant.

The wolf, of course, didn’t relinquish its hold, didn’t even flinch, and Call immediately switched to
his mental channel. This wolf was releasing him, whether it liked it or not. Call was going to beat
Joseph into the second dimension.

Havoc twisted, using his paw to scratch at Joseph’s hand. Joseph shouted, ripping his hand away in a
blur of blood and defeat. Havoc spun and advanced, slow and fierce, on Joseph, and Joseph took an
unthinking step backwards. He cradled his scratched hand.

Call relaxed, fury still beating his heart, but Havoc could take care of himself. He switched out of his
mental channel. What was he thinking? No mind control. No mind control. Not now, not ever, no,
nope, nada.

“To Joseph, bring them to Joseph!” the Enemy shouted right before ducking under Caped Justice’s
swing. Right. Call had forgotten about that conversation.

The wolf immediately started dragging Call towards the tunnel, and Call started trying twisting
around again. While they were still on the path, though, the other wolf finally worked its way out of
the bushes, covered in snapped branches and yellow flower petals from the blossoms on the bushes.
Limping. Its attention snapped to Call as soon as it was fully out of the bushes, and Call looked into
its dead eyes.

Fear, what an all-encompassing adjective.

The wolf snarled and bounded towards Call, and Call struggled again but couldn’t twist away from
the grip. He could only lay still, watching the monster surge closer. It opened its jaw, close enough
that with one great jump-

Call didn’t think. It was a knee-jerk reaction.

Thoughts barraged the wolf, vicious thoughts, persuading thoughts, scary thoughts, beating against
the wolf’s mental barriers. The wolf, shocked by the onslaught, paused, ears falling flat back against
its head.

Call kept shooting a constant stream of consciousness at it, anything that came to mind, he was an
open circuit leading directly to the wolf. It started whining, but Call couldn’t hear it, couldn’t hear
anything. The sounds of fighting in the tunnel went mute, the noises of traffic and crickets fading out
to nothing while Call stared unfeeling death at the wolf, unrelentingly trying to break into its head
with more thoughts than even he could process.

Of course, the wolf was a wolf. The walls keeping Call’s thoughts from getting fully into its head
dropped against sheer force. It immediately started howling.

A howl is a haunting thing, monster or not. It snapped Call out of his reverie, and the horror of what
he’d done settled over him like a chill. The wolf kept howling, louder and painful and tugging at
Call’s chest.

“We need to go,” Joseph yelled to Constantine. Call dragged his eyes over to the scene inside the
tunnel. Jasper, against the wall, staring, horrified, at the howling wolf. The Enemy, holding his head
and curling in on himself like he was being torn from the inside. Caped Justice, measuring the
Enemy with calculating eyes and sweeping the feet out from under him, watching as the Enemy hit
the ground with a clap. Putting a foot on his stomach. Convict, literally wrestling with her wolf,
rolling over the leafy, muddy floor of the tunnel. Havoc, hackles raised, demanding Joseph's full attention, even as Joseph kept trying to sidle over or glance at the Enemy.

Of all the nights to stop thinking, how inconvenient that Call chose this one.

It wasn’t even a conscious thing, as far as Call could tell, but as soon as he saw Havoc, some part of his brain reached out, seeking comfort maybe, or as a warning. But he touched base with Havoc, a bare brush of a thought, more of a feeling, an awareness.

Havoc stiffened. His head veered towards where Call was, and he was met with the sight of a monster holding Call by his hoodie. The shift was immediate, and dooming, and ultimately Call’s fault. Havoc, falling into not-so-unfamiliar anger surging through him, dartlike, abandoned Joseph to vault out of the tunnel. Joseph, unguarded, ran over to the Enemy and Caped Justice, and pushed Caped Justice away. While Caped Justice was getting his feet under him, Joseph hefted the Enemy to his feet and wrapped his arm over the Enemy’s shoulders.

Joseph shot a panicked glance around the tunnel, seeing everything, seeing mostly Caped Justice advancing towards him again, persistent like the ticking of a clock.

“Hm,” Joseph grumbled, low as he looked over the scene around the tunnel. “Interesting.”

Havoc ran past the howling wolf, jumped over Call’s limp form, and landed in a frenzied attack on the other wolf. There was harsh growling, an animalistic sound that made Call’s blood freeze, and thrashing. The wolf never let go of Call, though, so claws started flying in a dogfight that was happening two inches away from Call’s head.

Then a whistle chimed, quick and goading, from the tunnel, and Call opened his tightly shut eyes to see Joseph. The wolves, the one holding Call, the one fighting Convict, the one howling, all angled their heads to look at him, and, after a moment, walked to him.

The wolf holding Call let go. Call didn’t immediately scramble up, instead just laying there and watching as the wolves gathered around Joseph, making an effective block to keep Caped Justice from getting any closer to the Enemy. The howling wolf had stopped, although its ears were still flat against its head, and the Enemy was still doubled over.

Convict was crouched, panting, eyes steadily and warily set on the group of villains. She looked rough from the wrestling, but then again, so did the wolf.

And then it was just all of them, panting. Staring. Waiting.

Joseph raised his head to look out over the force of superheroes, looking like a man that was welded out of steel, his gaze flinty. When his eyes landed on Call’s, the oddest thing happened. For the mere second they made eye contact, Call was blasted with the worst wave of danger sense he’d ever felt. Period. He felt like he was on a rocking, stormy ship, his vision whitened out, pain rocketed through his chest and down his arms, his ears started ringing.

Then Joseph’s gaze moved on, and it all immediately stopped.

It was in that bone-chilling moment directly after that Call knew they needed to get out of there.

Before Call could even open up communication with Havoc about an escape, Joseph harrumphed (Call wished he was kidding), and raised the hand that wasn’t wrapped around the Enemy, still bleeding from Havoc’s scratch. Call tensed, pushing himself off the ground to run and tackle Joseph before he could do whatever damage he was about to do. As he was standing, though, his leg cramped, and he fell back onto the pavement.
Convict seemed to get the picture the way Call did and jumped to her feet. Caped Justice reached, but didn’t dare step any closer to the wolves.

Joseph snapped his fingers.

The click was an inappropriately insubstantial thing, Call barely heard it despite the echo that made it bounce off the tunnel walls. There was no time to panic about the effect of the snap before the tunnel bloomed with a thick fog, spilling out over the sidewalk on both sides and so thick it looked like an impressive, billowing sculpture of moving stone. Call nearly flinched as it flowed about him, but he had no time to run and escape it, and nowhere to run to, and no means to run anyhow. His leg hadn’t stopped cramping, after all.

The last thing he needed that night. More pain. One more wrench in the spokes.

Weirdly enough, it was quiet for a time. Call couldn’t say second or minute, finding himself in the phenomenon of timelessness that lingers inside billows of fog. It’s a hard thing to explain until the person being explained to has also been inside a cloud, which is a bit of a high demand (literally), but things act different when fogged. Case in point: no sound, no time, no urge to move.

It was a shifting mass, but it didn’t dissipate. Call couldn’t see well enough to trust himself to find a safe way out, didn’t think any of them could.


“Here,” Convict responded, more exhausted than Call had ever heard her.

“The Enemy? What about the Enemy?” Call asked, in lieu of calling where he was. He had to raise his voice a bit, he was further from the tunnel, and it sounded unnatural to him to be so loud.

“They left,” Caped Justice said flatly.

“Left?” Call repeated.

“Split like a banana. I don’t know where they went, I don’t even know how they left. One second they were here and the next second they weren’t.”

Can you sniff them out? Call asked Havoc. Havoc, in response, sniffed the air, then shook himself out.

Nothing. It’s almost unsettling, Havoc responded, and that was that.

“Does that mean this fight is over?” Call asked. The prospect of the end of the night, both sudden and close, cheered him for some reason. He found he wanted to be home. He wanted a blanket and a microwave brownie in a mug. He wanted to fall asleep on the couch and not wake up for a couple of millennia.

“It must be,” Convict said, her voice hollow, like her feet had been pulled from under her. Call felt the unsteadiness, too. Everything had moved so fast. He didn’t even know where the fight had left them, what the repercussions were, what Jasper was, what Joseph meant.

There was too much to think about, and the bags under Call’s eyes got darker merely at the thought of it.

The fog wasn’t clearing.
“Where are you guys?” Caped Justice called, and he sounded closer. Call could picture him, blinking around, arms held out like Frankenstein, or maybe like Indiana Jones on the cover of a DVD. Call had never seen Indiana Jones, so he wasn’t an expert, but he was going off of what he thought Indiana Jones ought to look like on the cover of a DVD.

“I’m on your left,” Convict said, and Call realized he was caught up in thinking about Indiana Jones and hadn’t even responded. Call was bad at the whole talking out loud thing, wasn’t he?

“Should we find a way to clear the fog?” Call wondered out loud, because he needed to get better at that. There was a contemplative quiet, filled with the reassuring sound of traffic, of crickets.

“Do you know of any large birds around here?” Convict asked. Oh, they could beat the fog away with their wings, of course.

“On it,” Call said, out loud again. He knew he had an annoying habit of slipping into his mental channel without letting the people around him know about it. Havoc had a way of complaining about that. Constructively, of course.

It took about ten minutes for a group of birds to swoop in, and another five for them to thin out the fog enough that it would be completely dissipated by morning. Not that Call was a fog expert, or anything, but the birds were getting tired so they called it a night. Those fifteen minutes were filled with odd silence. It seemed there were things to say, a thousand of them, but no way to talk about them. The fight had shaken them, each in different ways. Convict for her private, silent reasons. Caped Justice for his constant, unrelenting skirmish with the Enemy, carrying weight he didn’t realize until it wasn’t pressing on him anymore, and now he was left to think over the phantom it left on his shoulders. Havoc for fighting Joseph by himself, and hurting him, two things he never liked to do despite all his talk. Call for his mind control, for his certain level of helplessness. Jasper for that scar, for that eye to eye stare down with the Enemy. For the entire encounter, really.

If Call was being honest, he’d half-forgotten Jasper was there at all, aware of him maybe, but not on any real level. He’d been too quiet, his presence too subdued. If he’d started attacking the wolves or Joseph maybe, Call probably would have been more aware of him, but he’d simply stood against the wall, curling in on himself, staring steadily at the ground. He hadn’t moved an inch from the last time Call had seen him, and Call got the impression that he hadn’t looked up once during the fight at all, the fight that took place mere feet in front of him.

For some inexplicable reason, Call didn’t blame him.

It was a new thing, not immediately pinning something on Jasper, not leaping at a chance to break him down. Even before Call was trying to weasel information out of him, the two had been at each other’s throats. This was different, though. Things had changed. The Enemy had changed them. Jasper being strong instead of slick had changed them. The two of them mutually surviving that encounter in the tunnel had changed them.

And so, Call forgave Jasper for being shaken. No doubt, he would have been, too, if he’d talked to the Enemy that way. Not to mention the way Jasper had reacted to his mysterious scar being brought up.

Nothing bode well. Not for any of them, but especially not for Jasper.

So, when the fog cleared and after Call had given each of the birds his personal thanks (they flew in a synchronised circle around his head so he looked like a disoriented cartoon character, his friends laughed at him, he didn’t know if he was mad about it or not), there was a pause where they’d reached the end of their rope. The five stood, empty in a tunnel that had been so full earlier.
Somehow, they all wanted to talk, either wanting to say something or wanting to have something to say, but there was a moment or two where they just stood, staring, thinking, revelling. In their own way, healing.

“The park,” Convict eventually said, shocking the air.

“I have a curfew-” Jasper coughed out.

“We have things to talk out,” Convict responded. Her voice resembled the sound a hammer made when it hit the flat head of a nail.

Surprisingly, there was no further protest, and they trekked out of the tunnel, following the sidewalk over a curving hill. The actual, sprawling park was too far away for them to walk to at this time of night, at this level of post-fight energy. So, they stopped when they came across a small, open area, something like a town square that was more of a four-way intersection for pedestrians. Either way, there were benches on the fringes, so the posse crowded over to one. Havoc sat to the side of it, Call sat swaggily on the ground in front of it, Caped Justice stayed standing and leaned over the back of it, so only Convict and Jasper ended up actually sitting on the bench.

Caped Justice’s lip was still bleeding, and Convict looked worse for wear from her wolf wrestling. Call figured he couldn’t look much better. Jasper was the only one who wasn’t bleeding, although none of them produced any bandages.

Noise was louder here, in the thick-er of the city. It was late now, later, so Call hoped that there wouldn’t be as many people on the streets to recognize them. The hour combined with the virus had really thinned out the people walking down side streets. At least the type of people that would stop when they saw a group of slightly weirdly dressed teenagers.

The virus. Call hated thinking about that. He hated that he had to think about it at all.

Jasper sighed, leaning back against the bench and covering his eyes with his arm. His shoulders sagged.

“I suppose you want me to explain myself?” Jasper asked. Call couldn’t help but feel the question was directed at him, what, after the days of badgering, the black eye. If Jasper owed anything to anyone here, he owed an explanation to Callum Hunt.

“Sounds about right,” Call grumbled. His voice was worn. He was worn.

Jasper sighed.

“The Enemy doesn’t have an antidote.”

The air froze.

“Pardon?” Caped Justice asked, voice clipped. Call felt the panic setting in, saw it echoed in the widening of Convict’s eyes and the pull of Caped Justice’s mouth. The only thing Call could hear was the beating of his heart, and the phantom sound of Jasper’s words, as if he were still saying them.

Over and over.

The Enemy doesn’t have an antidote.

The Enemy doesn’t have an antidote.
The Enemy doesn’t have an antidote.

“He lied about having an antidote. He doesn’t know how to stop the virus. I assume you guys were there long enough to hear our conversation?” Convict nodded, because Call couldn’t muster up the motivation and Caped Justice seemed stuck to where he was, lost in his own deep head.

Jasper smiled wanly, dropping his arm from his eyes. He didn’t even see Convict nod. Call supposed the answer didn’t matter very much.

“He needs me because he thinks I can find an antidote. That’s what this whole thing has been about.”

Call stared very hard at the street in front of him. If there were people moving on it, he didn’t see them.

“Why you?” Caped Justice asked, strained, peering at Jasper oddly. Jasper drew in a long breath through his nose, not looking at any of them, not even Havoc.

“I uh,” he said, and his voice dipped a little. He cleared his throat. “The root of the virus is one of his cronies. Their superpower, it seems, is starting and spreading a virus. But they don’t know how to turn it off. The virus will only keep spreading, and along with the general lack of knowledge surrounding the science of superpowers, an antidote was… unrealistic.”

“And?”

“...and, I made it realistic. I’m a… chemist. Of sorts. A superhero chemist. A superchemist, if you will.”

“You have a superpower of chemistry?” Call asked. Jasper? A superhero?

“No,” Jasper sighed, annoyed despite the vague truce they’d silently probably agreed to follow. “I study the chemistry behind superheroes and superpowers and super… stuff.”

“I thought that was impossible?” Caped Justice said. A lot of impossible things were happening tonight.

“Well, of course not,” Jasper said, slightly affronted. “Sure, it doesn’t make sense most of the time, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t make sense, you know?”

“Uh,” Convict said.

“The secrets of the practice have been in my family for generations,” Jasper said. His mouth twisted a little. “Passed down. They’re only ever improved upon, so technically, I’m the leading superhero scientist. It only makes sense that I would know how to stop a superpower virus. If anyone does, it’s me.”

“So, do you know how to stop the virus?” Caped Justice asked. Call didn’t dare hope.

“No yet,” Jasper responded. “But with time and research…”

“You could?” Call asked. His voice felt hoarse from fear. He couldn’t dare hope.

Jasper was quiet. Maybe Call imagined it, but it almost looked like he was staring at his left shoulder. Wondering. Or maybe he was looking down the street, and maybe Call was overthinking.

“Yeah. Yeah, I could.”
Call didn’t know who Jasper was convincing, himself or the heroes around him.

“Why would the Enemy release a virus that he doesn’t have an antidote for?” Convict asked, quiet. Call wanted to be home. The city needed him anyway.

Jasper scrunched his nose.

“You won’t like it,” he said.

“Might as well say it anyway,” Caped Justice responded. He hung his head low, waiting for the news.

“Superheroes can’t get sick,” Jasper said. For the first time, he looked at them, at Convict, then Caped Justice, then Call. It was serious, and lingering, and Call stewed through it. Part of him wondered if something was changing between him and Jasper, if the only thing that was fueling their adversity was the dishonesty.

“Really?” Convict asked.

“Yes really, leading superhero scientist, remember?”

“It’s weird, that’s all.”

“Have you ever gotten sick?” Jasper asked. Call thought, really thought. He’d always been fine through flu season. He figured it was a strong immune system or something.

“The Enemy’s weeding us out.”

Everyone looked at Caped Justice, head still hanging. Realization hit Call and Convict and Havoc at nearly the same time.

The Enemy was getting the entire city sick until the only heroes were left. Clear, sitting ducks.

“Why?” Call asked.

“I don’t know,” Jasper sighed, frustration leaking into his tone as he tilted his head to look back at the sky. Call had to wonder if he’d been asking himself the same question the whole time he’d known the Enemy’s plan.

“That’s a first,” Convict said. Call snorted. It felt odd to lighten such a heavy situation. He couldn’t shake a bad feeling in his gut, something like dread. Knowing the full scope of the plan, knowing what the Enemy was doing and what he was after made Call uneasy. Whatever was happening behind the virus, whatever the Enemy wanted to hunt the heroes down for, couldn’t be good.

Call closed his eyes and took another breath. From the silence, it sounded like the others were doing the same. Breathing, thinking, getting hit by the brunt of the new information.

Hey, Havoc said in Call’s head. The sound of his voice was comforting, despite.

Hey what? Call asked.

At least we don’t have to hand over the mayor to get the antidote, now. Magista really won’t fall under some bully, because he has no collateral to hold over our heads anymore. We have a clear shot at the victory, here.

Call blinked.
“Guys,” he said weakly, “if the Enemy doesn’t have the antidote and we potentially do, doesn’t that mean he can’t boss us around anymore? No hand-over-the-mayor tricks?”

“That-“ Jasper started, but then he stopped. His eyebrows furrowed.

“...you’re right,” Convict said. A small smile started growing on her face.

“Havoc’s right,” Call said. “I was too caught up on the fact that we’re teaming up with somebody that punched me in the face to see the positive side of things.”

“Havoc’s quite the strategist,” Caped Justice snorted, voice also a tone lighter.

“Hold on, we’re teaming up?” Jasper asked. Everybody looked at him.

“Well, yeah,” Convict said. “We’re going to help you get what you need to find the antidote, and keep you safe from the Enemy, since he obviously has it out for you. That means teaming up.”


“You have the antidote,” Call said plainly. “You are the only one who can truly save the city. That means we need you, we support you. Our interests align.”

“Unless you don’t want to save the city?” Caped Justice said.

“No, no, I do. I’m just… surprised? I punched your partner in the face and was in sort of kahoots with the Enemy,” Jasper said. This frantic, hopeful side of him wasn’t something Call had seen before.

“We’re fast forgivers,” Call replied, shrugging.

“I met up with the Enemy multiple times,” Jasper noted.

“Because he threatened you, yeah?” Caped Justice said, glancing down to look at Jasper.

“Well, yeah…” Jasper responded.

“Then it doesn’t count against you,” Caped Justice said, imitating Call’s shrug.

“Wait, Radar,” Convict said, sharp. “Are you picking anything up from him?”

“Did he drop something?” Call asked.

She’s talking about your danger sense, bud.

**OH,** Right. What would I do without you. Call thanked God every day for Havoc.

“He’s clean,” Call said out loud, and it was true. Once Jasper had stopped considering meeting up with the Enemy, there was nothing dangerous about him. All of his danger was by association. Caped Justice and Convict nodded.

“It’s decided, then. Welcome to the team, Jasper,” Caped Justice said. He smiled at Jasper. Jasper looked around again, at each of them, even Call. Miraculously, he started smiling back.

The five of them were going to give the Enemy a run for his money.
YO SUP I MISSED YOU GUYS. Okay, There are a lot of excuses. First of all I had roughly six other writing projects with (and cover your loved ones ears) DEADLINES. Second I had to fix this pesky dragon problem for a nearby village. Third I had, like, school or something (lame, I know). Fourth, this chapter was being REALLY MEAN TO ME and WAS HARD TO WRITE until I eventually CHOPPED IT IN HALF. This is the part that was easy to reconcile. I'll beat the other half to a pulp until it's presentable, just for you guys.

thankyouthankyou for your patience. Hope somebody's still here to read! I've read all of your comments a million times to keep me going through this Dark Age, and every kudos email sold a bit of my soul to you in appreciation. Seriously. You guys rock. I'm going to try to get the next chapter out ASAP, just for you.

Alternate Title for the chapter: Call didn't realize talking to people came with the job, and so he is a Hot Mess. Enjoy.

The black eye was troublesome.

Convict and Caped Justice both knew that Radar had a black eye, so if Call rolled up to school the day after Radar got a black eye, and Call had a black eye, it wouldn't take very much critical thinking to draw some dangerous conclusions.

Call had iced it as soon as he got home, like Convict had said to, so it didn’t hurt as much as it definitely would and should have, but it still hurt, and it was still starkly obvious against his face. Having Alastair call Call in sick seemed like the best option, but then Call would have to face his dad while sporting a whole black eye, and that was another thing he didn’t want to do. How would that conversation play out? Would Call say he was mugged? Or beat up at school? Did he help an old lady across the street and then get pummeled by a bus but only retained an extremely specific injury? Had his childhood nemesis returned to exact their vengeance?

Bad plan. Bad plan all around.

How the hell do I get rid of this? Call thought to Havoc while he stared aggressively in the mirror.

Wear a hood all day and duck your head, Havoc said.

People can see under the hood. Call responded, gripping the edge of the sink in frustration. He’d been awake for half an hour trying to solve this problem. He needed to leave soon to nowish.

Eyepatch?

Pirate day is next week.

Pirate day should be every day.

Focus, Havoc.
Sunglasses?

Call considered it.

I think those would be confiscated.

It's not like they can force you to take them off if you don't want to, Havoc quipped. He was looking at Call instead of looking at Call in the mirror, because he was still a dog and mirrors still freaked him out a little.

I'd get in trouble, Call responded, already walking out of the bathroom so he could ransack his dad’s room for a pair of sunglasses.

Should I be concerned that you say that like it’s a pro instead of a con? Havoc asked, plodding along after Call.

I'm a superhero, Havoc. Call didn’t blink twice at walking into his dad’s empty room and beginning to shuffle around in the dresser drawers for some stylin’ shades. He found an acceptable pair after a minute of search and slipped them on. Getting in trouble is my hobby.

You didn’t answer my question, cool guy.

You bet your floppy ears I didn’t. Call, now bespectacled, left his dad’s room and gathered everything he needed for school, opting to skip breakfast since he didn’t like the idea of the paperwork that would come with being late to school.

Havoc followed Call downstairs and to the door, standing in the doorway. Call opened the door and stepped over the dog. Havoc growled. One day.

Good luck with your trouble, Havoc said as a send off. Don’t hesitate to call me in.

Even as Havoc said the words, something started stirring in Call’s gut, and Call scrunched his nose.

You already know you’re my go-to, Call responded, not letting himself get too preoccupied with this feeling that could be his danger sense. It was too early for this.

I don’t know that, which is why I have to remind you. Havoc growled. Call’s eyes darted over to the door that led out to the garage, where he could hear his dad working. He didn’t know why. Usually it didn’t bother him that his dad never cared enough to say goodbye when he left for school. It was bothering him today, though. Something was bothering him today.

Call, you’re doing it again, Havoc said. Call’s eyes didn’t leave the door to the garage.

Havoc butted his head into Call’s right leg, jolting Call out of his confused ponderings. Get going.

Whatever. Call sighed. I’m out. Havoc gave him a concerned look, as concerned a look a dog could have, and Call closed the door on his adorable little face. The sidewalk in front of him was open, so Call dropped his skateboard down.

Skateboarding helped him think.

His danger sense was being odd, lately, to say the least. It was unpredictable and vague, unrecognizable sometimes, incapacitating at others. That could mean any number of things. Either he was getting dysfunctional, or the situation around him was getting substantially worse. It was possible he was constantly on alert from all the danger around him, the Enemy’s plots and wolves
always in the works. Danger in that kind of saturation would make his superpower act up. It would explain why he was having a harder time recognizing it.

Somehow, everything Call was dealing with seemed it was the Enemy’s fault. Before, Call had figured that if they could work out the Enemy’s motivations, they could work out his plan. One led easily into the next. But, after last night, they knew the motivation for everything the Enemy was doing, and nothing felt more solved. He sent Lightning after them because he was trying to catch the superheroes. He released the virus because he was trying to catch the superheroes. He was sending the wolves through the city so he could catch the superheroes.

Turns out there are levels to motives, aren’t there? Because Call was landing on one question: why was the Enemy trying to catch the superheroes?

Call skated around a corner, ignoring the distressed pigeons. Questions only gave way to more questions. Maybe Caped Justice and Convict would help with the questions when they met up after school today. That was all Call could hope for, because the more he beat the situation up in his head, the less he seemed to understand. It didn’t add up. Answers weren’t there to be found. With the virus already spreading, though, it felt like they were on a clock. They couldn’t keep waiting until they understood answers. They had to find the answers. They had to stop letting the Enemy come to them, through Lightning or Jasper or the wolves or broadcasts. It was time for them to find his HQ and take some offensive action.

The street leading up to the school was busy as always, and Call glided down it with practiced ease, letting his thoughts calm down to empty buzzing and giving his head a break. With that, Call realized that his danger sense had calmed down the closer he got to the school. It was still pulling him back in the direction of his house, but not in any urgent way. Call hardly gave it a second thought. It could just as easily be the direction of the LEGO store, or just as easily be his danger sense acting up and giving him an apparently common false alarm.

Call hopped off his skateboard and shoved it in his backpack, next to his costume. He hardly had any room for the homework he didn’t do.

When Call got to English, a full minute before the late bell rang (take that Mr. Lemuel), he was promptly faced with three facts that he had blissfully oblivious to mere moments prior.

Fact one: Jasper deWinter was in this class.

Fact two: Aaron Stewart was in this class.

Fact three: Call was technically on friendly terms with both of them, and would have to act like it.

What did that even mean? Should he try to sit next to them? Did he want to be on friendly terms with them if he had to sit next to them? Were they even on friendly terms? Why was it always English class that Call found himself overthinking? He needed to stop questioning his every move, stop thinking, and sit down.

Call stopped thinking and sat down. Next to Aaron Stewart, coincidentally (it was not a coincidence). Aaron was the safer option. Aaron was a casual friendship, that, while Call had no idea why they were friends or why he was letting this friendship thing continue, didn’t have any lasting repercussions on fate. Every interaction Call had Jasper was charged by the fact that they would rather beat each other up, but they couldn’t for the sake of the whole of the city. Every interaction with Aaron was confusing, but it wasn’t stressful.

When Call collapsed into the desk next to Aaron, immediately a lot more disruptive and sloppy than
whatever standard high schooler usually sat in this desk, Aaron whipped his head over to look at Call. The surprise in Aaron’s eyes was almost endearing.

“‘Sup?” Call asked, because he was already wearing sunglasses indoors. He had to embrace the persona.

“I, uh,” Aaron stuttered, blinking a few times. “Hey?”

“What’s with the surprise?” Call asked, smirking a little. He always took joy out of shocking people.

“I just, didn’t expect you to sit next to me,” Aaron said, a blush starting to creep across his face. Call presumed that was embarrassment.

“I thought this was the thing we were doing? Sitting next to each other?” Call said. “It’s what you did in Latin yesterday.”

“No, right, yes,” Aaron said, nodding a little. “Sitting next to each other. Because second chances.”

“Second chances,” Call said, shooting him finger guns. He couldn’t work out why Aaron seemed to be short circuiting. There was no danger coming from Aaron, so as far as Call could tell, nothing was up. Surely Call hadn’t surprised him that bad.

“So,” Aaron asked after a moment, huffing something of a sigh that was likely supposed to be unnoticeable, “why the shades? We are indoors, you know.” Call was relieved that Aaron was pulling himself together, he didn’t want to have another thing to overthink about, but his relief was somewhat curbed by the fact that he was getting interrogated about something he was hoping he could leave and let be. However, it was the golden opportunity to test run some of Call’s pre-planned excuses.

“I have a presentation later today that we needed to dress up for,” Call said. It was weak. He could work with it.

“What kind of presentation calls for you to look like a tool?” Aaron asked, starting to smile. Far too long a recovery period for Call simply sitting down next to him, but Call let it slide.

“Hey, watch yourself, sarcasm is my thing,” Call responded, letting himself grin. Aaron laughed, and Call was proud of himself, for some reason. It all felt strangely familiar.

It was then that the English teacher started class. The teacher’s eyes caught on Call’s glasses, but then decided giving Call grief over the dress code or proper etiquette was a waste of time, and the teacher looked away. Call watched the resolve drain from his teacher’s expression as the lecture began. The glasses just might work.

Call didn’t know why lectures were still necessary in English classes. While he was still debating whether he should pay attention or not, the teacher turned to the board and a slip of paper landed on Call’s desk. Call couldn’t find it in himself to be surprised.

Call glanced at the paper, eyes skimming over the hasty note Aaron had written.

*Care to tell me more about that presentation that you have to dress like a wash-up government agent for?*

Call couldn’t suppress the smallest grin, rereading the note and forming a response in his head.

*You’re a bit too spot on. It’s a home ec presentation where we talk about the career we want in the*
future, and dressing the part is on the rubric for some outrageous reason, Call wrote back, flicking the paper onto Aaron’s desk when the teacher looked away again. Call, watching out of the corner of his eye so that the teacher wouldn’t notice the obvious shenanigans, saw Aaron light up at receiving the note, a secretive smile on his face as he completely disregarded the lesson. He looked excited to read it, something Call didn’t understand. Surely Call wasn’t that good of a conversationalist.

The single eyebrow that Aaron rose upon reading the note was something Call was proud of, though.

*You want to be a wash-up government agent when you’re older?*

*I want to be whatever I found in the back of my dad’s closet to get a passing grade.*

*Your dad dresses like a wash-up government agent?*

*Unfortunately.*

*Have you tried thrifting out all of his clothes?*

*And leave his closet empty? My dad naked is worse than my dad faux-James-Bond.*

*I’ll admit I did not think that far ahead. Abort. Bad plan. I’ve never even met the man and I know I don’t want to see your dad naked.*

*Congrats, you just saved us all. I was a bit worried that I’d have to live through seeing my dad become a middle aged streaker.*

*The option not to take my bad thrifting advice was always open.*

*First of all, bad thrifting advice is the backbone of this society. Second, you’re a hard person to deny, Aaron.*

*Why do you say that?*

*Well, only a select few Chosen Ones can be good at thrifting. The rest of us merely ever strive after the prospect that they’ve set for us. Being bad at thrifting has evolved into its own culture made up of those of us that have come to terms with it, and therefore the bad thrifting advice continues to shape the style of a generation, maybe even two.*

*You were writing for so long that I didn’t know what to expect. In-depth fashion philosophy was pretty far down the list, admittedly. Also, my question was regarding your second statement, not your first.*

*Regarding, huh? Now that’s a word and a half. You play scrabble? Try “about” next time.*

Call watched Aaron as he read the note, wondering if he noticed that Call dodged the question. Usually Call had to use his keen ability for skirting around the truth to avoid suspicion about his nightly chores, but this was a weird lucky break. He had no truth to skirt around, because the reality was that he didn’t know the answer to the question. He’d written the words thinking they made sense, and they continued to make sense to him until he was asked to explain them. Aaron was a hard person to deny. Simple as that. Call knew from experience. A whole few school days of telling Aaron no, telling Aaron he was wrong, telling Aaron to get lost, was exhausting. Besides, his face twisted a little when he was determined (an expression Call got increasingly used to after forcing Aaron to something of a breaking point on passionate matters), and Call found it increasingly hard to deal with that, with the thought of making Aaron upset. This was an anomaly. Call made a lot of
people upset, and didn’t have time to feel remorseful. But, imagining Aaron making that face at him again, even over something small, made Call’s throat tighten a little bit. And he didn’t like that. So he didn’t want to deny Aaron.

How would Call tell Aaron that? How would Call put that odd understanding into words and then give those words to the very person he was analyzing so harshly?

All of Call’s confused muddle stopped its whirlpooling when he heard Aaron snort while reading the note. Call blinked the thoughts away, bringing himself back to the conversation by watching as Aaron opted to circle something on the paper instead of writing a response. Aaron’s pen (yes, he wrote in blue ink pen, it was nerve wracking) gracefully made a circle on the paper. One of those really good sloppy circles. Even the way Aaron passed notes was grade A, that justice-loving do-gooder. It was oddly charming.

Aaron slid the note back to Call, raising his eyebrows in a very serious way when he noticed Call was watching him, creating dramatic effect. Call flicked him a smile and glanced down to the note. A perfect curl of a circle in blue pen ink rested around the word, “outrageous,” which Call had used earlier in the conversation. Call got the message. Despite making fun of Aaron for using big and fancy words, Call also had a tendency to talk like a 40 year old.

Touch é. Have I ever told you how weird it is that you write in pen?

So the notes went, back and forth, all class. They ended up filling up the entire front and back side of the paper they were using, at first using only the margins and then falling in on their own lines to write in whatever space was left on the paper. Following the conversation later would be like trying to do a maze backwards, probably, but they weren’t particularly caught up on formatting.

It was… confusing, especially because they weren’t talking about it. Call had hated Aaron’s guts a day ago, but now he was sitting here and they were acting buddy-buddy. Hell, Call was choking on his own laughter so the teacher wouldn’t notice, and refusing to admit to himself that he got dashes of pride when he saw Aaron do the same. He liked making Aaron laugh? That was an odd thing to learn. It was all odd! He wasn’t used to quick forgiveness, he especially was barely used to friendship (Havoc was Call’s only friend before he realized he had friends all of last night, so he was new to this, suffice to say). There was no logical reasoning for any of this. This, forgiveness. This, friendship.

Havoc would know what to do. Call made the mental note to ask him later.

The bell at the end of the block surprised Call, prompting him to double check the clock and make sure the people in the office had read the time correctly. Next to Call, Aaron was standing and stuffing the paper they had written on into his bag. He zipped it closed with a semi-metaphorical finality. Call noticed Aaron’s bag was blue, which he now knew was Aaron’s favorite color. Hence the pen. Basic, but not boring.

Aaron smiled at Call, and Call smiled back without thinking about it. Aaron’s ears reddened again, but before Call could dwell on that, Aaron muttered something.

“See you in, uh, PE,” Aaron said.

“You don’t have to sound so disappointed,” Call responded.

“I’m disappointed I have to wait until tomorrow to write you notes again,” Aaron said, which was a whole other thing Call was not prepared for. “How am I going to wait that long to finish our discussion about whether or not people with eyepatches are perpetually winking?”
“Don’t you think it’d be a bit of a challenge to write notes in a PE class?” Call asked, not knowing how to process Aaron’s comment. It was easier to brush it off.

“Way to rub salt into the wound, Call,” Aaron said, and the way he said Call’s name made Call smile.

“We’ll work it out with paper airplanes or something,” Call said, if only to comfort Aaron.

“I don’t trust you not to give me a paper cut in my eyeball,” Aaron said.

“Really, you have one falling out over potential criminal activity and nobody trusts you anymore,” Call said, throwing his hands up in exasperation and slinging his backpack over his shoulder in a fit of drama. This one was a risk. Reminding people of past reasons they had not to like you was not the best idea, generally. On the other hand, it was really funny.

Aaron laughed, one of the earnest ones that meant he was both surprised and delighted by said surprise. It was a good combination, and Call was proud again.

“We’ll work on it,” Aaron said through his smile, and his voice was bright.

“Ugh, work,” Call said, which made both of them huff a small laugh again.

“Well, I, uh, have to get to class,” Aaron said, and Call checked the clock, forgetting the bell had rung, still not quite trusting the time.

“Is this goodbye, then?” Call asked.

“Hush, you overdramatic hellion,” Aaron said.

“Gee, you really are 40.”

“Goodbye, Call,” Aaron said pointedly, with a laugh bleeding through into his tone, walking out of the classroom. He glanced back at Call just before he was out of eyeshot.

“Goodbye, hellion,” Call said after him, which felt like a good joke. He picked his pencil off his desk to put in his bag.

“Will you get out of my classroom?” Call heard a voice ask, and he spun around to see his English teacher at the desk, head in hands after having to witness the entirety of Call and Aaron at their worst (and having to teach through a class where the two of them exclusively wrote notes and made a point of not paying attention).

“...Was there homework?” Call asked, trying to sound like he cared about the class, for the teacher’s sake.

“You wouldn’t do it even if I told you,” the teacher bemoaned, and the accuracy almost hurt. Call took the blow with pride and walked out of the classroom.

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If Call thought he didn’t know how to act around Aaron, he was beyond hopeless with Jasper. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d so much as thought something about Jasper that wasn’t rude, and as far as Call knew, Jasper felt the same way about Call. But last night, disastrous last night, chucked all of their agreeable distaste out the window.

They had to work together now. That was how alliances worked, working together. That would
have been understandable with possibly any other human being that managed to exist on the mortal coil, anybody that wasn’t Jasper deWinter.

Yet, there they were.

Call elected to make shaky eye contact with Jasper (which was admittedly quite the failure due to the sunglasses) and sat down across the room as the bell rang. While sitting across the room looked like a deliberate avoidance move, there were assigned seats in this class. This worked in Call’s favor. They wouldn’t be passing any notes.

Study hall, meaning Call’s scheduled nap, had been going on for all of five minutes when the grace period after the bell where students weren’t allowed to sign out expired. Chairs started scraping across the floor. This was common, a pattern set at the beginning of the year, but what was uncommon was the knocking sound on the desk Call was currently sleeping on.

Call looked up, not groggily so much as grumpily. He didn’t recognize who he was looking at.

“What do you want?” Call asked, biting back the comment that his desk was not a door and knocking on it made this kid look like a prick.

“I’m Drew, your history partner?” this kid, who was apparently Drew, said.

“Oh, you,” Call said. “Go away.”

“I wanted to talk about the project,” Drew said.

“Celia’s not here,” Call replied.

“And?”

“And there’s no point in talking about it if we can’t all be contributing ideas, so scram,” Call said. This kid was cutting into naptime.

“Well, we aren’t getting time in class, and I’m busy every day after school all week,” Drew said.

“Your excuses are cute.” Call hated group projects.

“Really! I’m an apprentice jockey. That stuff takes time.”

“No, I’m sure,” Call said, wondering if his tone was more sarcastic or tired.

“We have to solidify things to make sure we don’t all flunk this. Like our topic! How much do you know about, say, radar?” Drew asked. It took every spare inch of willpower Call had not to wrench his eyes open at hearing Drew say that, instead staying calm and pretending to sleep.

“Why radar?” Call asked instead, making sure to yawn as he said it to look extra uninterested.

“The project is about technological advancements, isn’t it?” Drew asked, and Call didn’t know if Drew sounded like a scheming bastard or if he was overthinking again.

“I wouldn’t know,” Call said. “Look, if you want to plan, do it in the group chat, at least then Celia is there to help you with the ideas.” Call splintered his eyes open right on time to see Drew make quite the displeased expression, which Call reveled in, and watch him walk back to his own desk. Success. Naptime could commence.

There was a solid ten minutes of sleep before Call felt somebody staring at him. It was uncanny, and
it wasn’t his danger sense, and he felt like he was probably overthinking so he didn’t investigate. After another five minutes, the stare felt too intense, so Call caved, blinking light back into his eyes and looking out over the lake of 30 of his peers to see who was causing him this distress.

Lo and behold, Call’s eyes met Tamara’s playful stare. She raised a single eyebrow, and Call heaved a sigh before sitting up and waving her over to his desk. Tamara smiled and stood up, acrobating her way through the seas of people and attached chairs and progressively thinning aisles to make it to Call’s desk. As for Call, he didn’t have to justify this one. Aaron didn’t make sense yet, Jasper would never make sense, Drew was already a nuisance and a half, but Tamara was pretty awesome. She had a go-getter attitude that completely made up for Call’s general distaste for effort, and it was refreshing to talk to somebody who was so opposite to him, somebody who actually got things done. Not to mention, she was the only one who had helped him out yesterday. The fact that her snark kept up with his was an added bonus.

Tamara plopped down on the empty desk in front of Call, putting her feet on the chair and looking every bit in charge of the room. Call propped his head to look up at her.

“Hey, stranger, don’t you know sitting on desks is illegal?” Call asked.

“Then consider me a convict- I mean, uh, criminal,” Tamara responded, posture tightening as she stuttered.

“There’s a difference?” Call asked. Tamara relaxed, and she nodded.

“One is more sinister,” she said, and she was definitely making that up.

“Is there some sort of official rating system on how sinister any criminal individual is so they can rate whether you should call them a criminal or a convict?” Call asked.

“Sometimes, you read way too far into things,” Tamara said.

“It’s the only way I know how to be funny,” Call responded.

“Try knock knock jokes.”

“Fine. Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Your mom.”

“Real mature.” Tamara was smiling through her exasperation. Score. “Let me show you how it’s done. Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?” Call asked, if only to humor her.

“Fashion,” Tamara said, and Call immediately couldn’t tell where she was taking this.

“Fashion who?” he asked.

“It makes sense that you don’t know what fashion is, since you’re wearing sunglasses indoors,” Tamara responded smugly. Tricky.

“You couldn’t help yourself, could you? You saw me like this and just had to give me a hard time,” Call said, and Tamara laughed.
“Absolutely. How could I let it slide? I’m touched you think I have that much self control.”

“They’re just glasses!” Call said, throwing his arms out and nearly hitting one of the talking kids next to him.

“They make you look like an absolute tool,” Tamara said. “What were you thinking?” As joking as they were being, this was a genuine question, which he could tell because he also asked his questions veiled in a few layers of sarcasm. The answer gave him pause. Obviously the presentation lie wasn’t very effective and instead spurred more questions, so maybe he could pull the awkward sympathy angle.

“I woke up with a headache and lights kept making it worse,” Call mumbled, scrunching his face up for effect. Tamara’s expression immediately shifted to concern, so it seemed he pulled it off.

“Do you need to go to the nurse or something?” she asked. “I’ll walk you. I don’t even think we need to sign out. Pretty sure that’s a farce that the school is barely maintaining.”

“Nah, it’s getting better since there are less lights to ruin everything,” Call said, readjusting his glasses to make the point. The action knocked them against the bruise, causing a pulse of pain through his entire head, and an inevitable flinch. Tamara, seeing the flinch, looked unconvinced.

“You sure?”

“You worry too much,” Call responded. “Also don’t you have homework to be doing in study hall?”

“I could ask you the same,” Tamara responded, smirking, and thus the subject was dropped. Call was a mastermind.

“You’re going to learn really fast that I do roughly none of my homework,” Call said.

“That explains why every teacher hates you,” Tamara said, snapping her fingers with the realization.

“No, that’s because I dress in all black and don’t care about authority.”

“That would also do the trick.”

Call winked, but then remembered that Tamara couldn’t see the wink because he was wearing sunglasses, and promptly switched to giving her fingerguns. Tamara huffed.

“Well, as much as you sound like you’re living the life, my grade suffers if my teachers hate me, so I have homework to do,” she said.

“What ever will I do without your liberating presence?” Call deadpanned. Tamara scoffed.

“You’ll find something, I’m sure. I came over to ask you a question, though.”

“Well, shoot,” Call said.

“My friends and I are meeting up at like, the mall or something tomorrow. Window shopping, crappy nachos, maybe catch a movie, the like. Want to come?” Tamara asked. There weren’t any hints in her tone to make Call think she was playing a joke on him, and she was sitting with a slight twist to her mouth, waiting for an answer. It seemed so simple.

Call had never “hung out” with anybody from school before. Ever. Period. Open and shut, he was never involved with his peers, this was entirely new territory that he didn’t know the etiquette for. It sounded like such a complicated thing in theory, there was invitation and graceful acceptance and
social groups and rides and money and chemistry with possible other groupies and humor levels and agreements about which teacher’s homework sucked to work out. It would mean being stuck with the same people in a constantly changing environment for a long period of time and not letting the conversation stall. It would mean hiding his black eye again and keeping up with the others even through his limp. It was so much.

But, it seemed so simple when Tamara asked him and waited for an answer.

So Call said, “Sure.”

“Nice!” Tamara said, smile splitting her face. “Mind if I ask your phone number? It’ll be easier to plan if we can text.”

“As opposed to carrier pigeon, I get it,” Call joked, pulling his phone out of his pocket and passing it over to Tamara. He started having another thinking crisis, having never given out his number for anything other than a project, did this mean they were supposed to start texting on a regular basis, how would he tell his dad that he could get a girl’s number and not a boy’s number, the like, but he landed on the same conclusion. Tamara made it too easy, tapping her phone number into Call’s contact list and sending a text to herself before handing the phone back to Call. He glanced at the contact name she’d put for herself--Your Worst Nightmare--and laughed.

“We can work out the rest of the details later, over text, after I finish my homework,” Tamara said, sliding off the desk.

“What is it, math?” Call asked.

“Calc,” Tamara responded.

“Ouch,” Call said. “Try not to hurt your brain doing that.”

“Thanks for the well wishes,” Tamara responded, smiling, and walked back to her own desk.

Back to regularly scheduled naptime.

Call had his peace for a hefty fifteen minutes this time around before he felt a tap on his shoulder. He didn’t bother holding back his groan as he rolled his head and looked up to see who the perpetrator was this time around.

None other than Jasper deWinter himself stood in front of Call. Of course.

“The shades really do make you look like a tool. Do you not have concealer to cover it?” Jasper was acting huffy, not really looking at Call. There was a minor amount of sneer, but it didn’t have its usual kick.

“Why would I have concealer?” Call asked, letting the usual bite in his voice dull down a little.

“I imagine this isn’t the first time you’ve had a noticeable bruise from your, uh, outside gig. Seems pretty dumb of you not to have concealer,” Jasper said, scrunching his nose and raising his voice a little. So he would attack if slightly provoked, then.

“It’s dark. I don’t think concealer would cover it on its own,” Call muttered, changing the subject instead of pursuing the fight.

“Well, you have to use the green stuff first,” Jasper sighed. “Hell, man, do you even use wikiHow?”
“What’s that?” Call asked, mostly to annoy Jasper. Old habits.

Jasper let out a long breath through his teeth, closing his eyes and physically forcing his body to relax from how tense it was getting. Call watched him systematically calm down, and it was… admirable? When Jasper opened his eyes, he levelled Call with a look.

“We’re meeting up tonight, aren’t we?” Jasper asked, voice quieter than Call had ever heard him.

“Same time, same place,” Call responded, just as quietly, if only for effect. The two were practically impossible to hear over the din their not-studying-or-halling classmates were making.

“I’ll bring you some and show you how to apply it, all right?”

Call scrunched his eyebrows and sat up again, looking Jasper up and down. He didn’t look seriously ill, or like he was hallucinating, but he must have been.

“Do you need to go to the nurse?” Call asked, peering into Jasper’s face.

“Oh sure, antagonize the person who’s both trying to make amends and help you, that’s probably the brightest idea you’ve ever had, Call,” Jasper responded hotly, scowling.

“Blink twice if this is a fever dream,” Call said.

“I can’t believe you,” Jasper hissed.

“No, I can’t believe you,” Call said. “Hence me asking if this is a fever dream. This is… weird… for you. Weird to say the least. You hate my guts.”

“You’re making it pretty hard for me not to,” Jasper snapped. He sighed again, closing his eyes and reopening them slowly. “Look. We started off on the wrong foot.”

“And we stayed on the wrong foot for a very long time,” Call cut in.

“Maybe so,” Jasper said through gritted teeth. “And while I’m unwilling to admit that was entirely my fault, even I have to concede that I’ve provoked you. Wronged you, I guess. And I’m, well, uh, getting closer to sorry every day.”

“I liked the way you phrased that,” Call said.

“Look, I know it sounds jerky—” Jasper started, annoyance in his tone.

“No, I was being serious that time,” Call interrupted, leaning forward so he was more relaxed. He didn’t want this to look staged. He was sarcastic so often that when he was genuine, he needed to convince people he was being genuine. “I don’t need you to be sorry. I don’t even think I want you to be sorry. I was just as bad to you. Well. Maybe you were worse to me than I was to you. In fact, almost guaranteed you were worse. But I don’t particularly care if you’re sorry or not. As long as we both agree that we were both at fault, and we agree to try to move past that, that’s good enough for me.”

Jasper was staring at Call. Call stared back, although it was probably less intense due to the sunglasses.

“Do we agree, then?” Jasper asked, tone clipped.

“My biggest issue with you was your pride, anyway,” Call responded, sitting back in his chair again and stretching. “This little encounter of ours has forced you to dumb it down, so I’m content. Yeah,
we agree.”

“Glad we’re on the same page,” Jasper said, nodding, looking like he didn’t know what to do with his hands.

“I’ve still got to ask, though, why are you offering to help me with the black eye?” Call asked, looking at Jasper over the rims of his glasses for emphasis. He was sure the bruise bled out over the corner of the frames just so.

“Well,” Jasper said, shuffling, “I’m the one that gave it to you. And you’ve saved me from the Enemy, twice now. Whether you acted like you hated me or not, you still got me out of there. Seemed pretty evident at that point that most of the problems were on my end rather than yours, since you were willing to put yourself in danger for my sake.”

“No, please, keep telling me how brave and courageous I am. Throw in handsome for good measure.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Well, now that we’ve forgiven each other, I’m allowed to be. There probably isn’t any malice on this end,” Call said cheerfully, pushing his glasses back up.

“Ditto,” Jasper said, giving Call the most malice filled look he’d ever seen. Call laughed.

“All’s well and all that,” Call said. “Thanks for working up the guts to make us talk. Must have been hard for you.” Even Call didn’t know if that was an insult or not.

“You’re hard enough to be around that getting forced in the same room as you got rid of most of the challenge,” Jasper responded.

“Now there’s the Jasper I know and love,” Call said.

“I hope you’re not winking behind those glasses.”

“You see, I have been all day, but you’re the first person who’s noticed, and for that, I thank you.”

“May I repeat: you’re insufferable.”

“You may.”

“I may go hit my head against the wall.”

“But that’d ruin your hair!”

“Repeatedly. I will do it repeatedly.”

“Come on,” Call said, smirking now. “Was this so bad?”

Jasper regarded Call again, letting the silence culminate.

“No,” Jasper said, sighing. “I suppose not.”

“Then it’s been a pleasure making nice with you,” Call said.

“Likewise,” Jasper said in the least pleasurable tone he had, probably on purpose. He turned to wrestle his way back to his desk.
“Don’t forget-“ Call started telling his back.

“I won’t,” Jasper responded before Call could say what he didn’t need to forget. Remembering what he was going to forget. Now that was talent.

Jasper sat down. Call sighed, rubbing his hands over his face (taking care to avoid his black eye) and slouching. This was an exhausting naptime.

While Call was still systematically disintegrating every part of his brain that turned on so he could have conversations, he heard another voice, to his left this time. Where the teacher’s desk was.

“Well,” the teacher said, “aren’t you popular?”

Call sighed, not even turning to look at the teacher.

“Unfortunately.”

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Home ec was where everything went wrong.

First of all, Call’s teacher immediately told him the glasses were not permissible, which was a weird thing to say because a) his other teachers were fine with the glasses and b) permissible is a word only teachers and evil CEOs use in general conversation. It was a natural thing for Call to immediately refuse, and laugh at the teacher’s threats to call home. They spent a solid five minutes arguing about it before the teacher threatened to bring the principal into it, and the last thing Call wanted was a genuine suspension. His dad was okay with misbehavior, but not to the point of getting suspended. Besides, there was nobody in this class that knew Radar got a black eye the previous night.

“You win this time,” he told his teacher, taking the sunglasses off. He was sure she had some wicked response to that on the tip of her tongue, and it was so, so satisfying to watch that die. As Call took the glasses off and slid them in a pocket of his backpack, his black eye was so entirely prominent that it would be hard for his teacher not to notice. He acted like nothing was wrong, zipping his backpack closed again and going back to sit in his seat. His teacher’s gaze followed him, a stutter falling out of her mouth.

“What’s the problem?” he asked her after a minute.

“Do you need to go to the nurse?” his teacher asked, and it looked like it pained her to give Call a reason to get out of class.

“It would be preferable,” Call said, not one to refuse an opportunity to get out of class.

“I said need, not want,” the teacher snapped.

“Oh, the pain, I’m getting a headache from all this light,” Call deadpanned as he stood up from his seat and slung his bag over his shoulder again. “To the nurse with me.”

“Take someone with you,” the teacher said.

“I’m allergic to people, don’t endanger me,” Call responded, already almost out of the classroom.

“Callum-” the teacher said, but then he was gone, out the door and turning the corner to face the math hallway. He stopped once he was around the corner and took the glasses out of the bag again, sliding them back on. It was something of a placebo, but the pounding soreness around his eye went
down when he was wearing the glasses. He was less aware of it when he knew others weren’t aware of it.

He was in the middle of leaning coolly against the wall and scheming about what he would do with the free time he had gained from his epic fooling of the teacher when his danger sense went off. It had such good timing. Cinematic.

“His danger sense went off,” would be an understatement, though. It was more along the line of ballistic, disorienting, a sudden wave of absolute surety in destruction. Call felt like he was dreaming, lost in the throes of his own drowning superpower. His breath caught in his throat, the whole deal. It was some dangerous danger, some close, real, dangerous danger.

Through the thrashing of his own upset stomach, Call closed his eyes and breathed, thinking on his danger sense. It didn’t take him very long to understand the situation, since the danger was so prominent. A mass, a something, walking through the city without causing too terribly much destruction. It seemed more bent on causing fear than destruction, for now. The “for now” was operative there. If Call was reading the path correctly, it looked like this mass was moving towards a shopping center. And, if Call knew anything about dangerous masses and supervillains, there was going to be some destruction.

Okay. Okay. Okay. How far was that shopping center from the school? How far was it from Call’s house? Havoc. He should let Havoc know.

*Havoc,* Call thought, and he could feel his panic bleeding through.

*Where do you need me to go?* Havoc asked, concise and already on alert. Call loved his dog.

*The shopping center with the cool fountain.*

*The dolphin one?*

*Bingo.*

*On my way,* Havoc responded, and Call knew he was sneaking out through the doggy door they’d installed that may or may not have been legal. *Can I ask the danger?*

*A… mass. Destructive. Very dangerous.*

*How dangerous? Is your danger sense incapacitating you? Are you okay?*

*I’ll work it out,* was all Call could reply, because it was the only answer he really knew how to give at the moment. He knew how to say, this, this is bad. The only thing he knew how to focus on was that mass of danger running through the city and messing with his head, and the same danger running through his head like an itch that dominated his entire thought process. Which also managed to make him feel sick to his stomach.

They needed to deal with it. Havoc was already on the way there. Call needed more people he could trust to deal with it. He couldn’t do it alone. Where could he get Caped Justice and Convict? Where were they? How could he warn them?

Okay. Right. They were his age. They went to this school. They all knew about the fire drill. Caped Justice walked him home, so they were in the school. Jasper was there too. The shopping center wasn’t very far from the school, if they left soon they’d be able to deal with the danger effectively. But that meant Call had to find them, out of the mass of the student body.
Call’s frenzied thoughts swirled until he landed on an, admittedly poor, answer. He trudged off to the main office, keeping his head down so nobody would stop him and ask for a hall pass. It was for their own good. If anybody interrupted Call right now, they’d probably get a pen stabbed in their eye, he was so on edge.

Call stopped at the bathroom before he got to the main office, glancing around to make sure nobody saw him go in before ducking inside. He quickly changed into his costume, taking care when he put his mask on that it didn’t agitate his eye too much. Once he was properly adorned, he hid his backpack behind the toilet, where nobody looked, and if they did look, where no God-fearing man would put his hand for fear of the slimy growths. And then, Call left the bathroom and walked into the main office, striding like he was sure of himself and not currently having a meltdown about some very impending danger. When he walked into the office, he was immediately met with surprise and wide looks and questions that he wasn’t entirely sure how to answer.

It took a couple of tries for the employees to understand what Call was asking, either because they couldn’t hear him over the sound of their own chaos or because Call couldn’t properly articulate the urgency in his head to words that concerned desk ladies would understand. It was quite the mess for a moment, Call stuttering while everybody doted over the sound of their own voice. Eventually, Call shoved the words out: “I need to make an announcement of the PA system,” and they heard him this time. Understood, even. He may not have said it loudly, but he was a superhero. He didn’t need to be loud. They would listen.

Most of the workers were hesitant. The blonde attendance lady was suspicious, Call could tell, probably suspecting he wanted it for some nefarious scheme, like saying, “butts butts butts” over and over. Similar sentiments were echoed in the pulled down corners of people’s mouths all over the room. The disapproval didn’t matter, though, as long as Call had at least one person with access to the PA who approved. Which he did. The nice lady in the front that always had a Panera sandwich in the morning on the days Call signed in late, she had magenta librarian glasses and was pretty much as awesome as a person could get. Needless to say, she didn’t think twice and shoved the microphone towards Call.

Call cleared his throat and pressed the button before anybody could take it away from him, smiling gratefully at the lady while he did so. She gave him a thumbs up.

“Afternoon, everybody, this is Radar. Uh, I’m not quite sorry to interrupt, because I need Caped Justice and Convict to meet me outside the main doors of the school ASAP. Thank you, happy studies.”

There was a little bit of a crackle when Call took his hand off the button, which almost made him smile with how predictable it was. He pushed the microphone back to the lady, thanking her again and waving at the whole of the office before leaving. He was barraged with questions as to why he needed the other two at the moment, if they should call the police, if he had a hall pass, and Call ignored the whole of them. No energy could be spared on trifles like adults who thought he couldn’t handle the situation. He had it more under control than they did.

He left the office, electing to leave his backpack in the bathroom.

Ignoring the spiralling panic in his head as he walked towards the main doors of the school was much harder than Call thought it would be. He was unnerved. There were stares hanging in the air, directed at him from pieces of art hanging on the walls, awards students had won that he had never bothered reading, and the other people that were in the hallway (presumably with passes) who had all heard the announcement. The stares made him more unnerved, feeling them claw against his back and around the corners of his eyes as he refused to turn and look back at any of them, focusing only
on the doors. His heart was racing, he felt like he needed to throw up, it was every symptom of his
danger sense that he’s experienced a thousand times but it still hurt, and it was still terrifying, and it
still managed to amplify itself to give Call the worst possible experience. The people made it worse.
The everything made it worse. It kept getting worse, and a sickly feeling crawled over Call’s skin
when he walked and felt gazes follow him, be them suspicious or adoring.

Call shoved his way out the door and stumbled along the wall before letting himself lean against it,
gathering his thoughts, gathering his breath. His danger sense was getting more urgent now that he
was outside and therefore closer to the danger, so he started concentrating on it. If his brain wanted
him obsessing over the danger, then he would. He needed to know what they were up against, since,
“dangerous mass” wasn’t nearly descriptive enough.

Call felt deathly sick, so it was definitely the Enemy. Either the wolves, the man himself, or both.
And, with the mass getting closer, things were getting clearer.

It was a mass to Call’s danger sense because so many of the entities were the same amount of
dangerous, with some more or less dangerous variable thrown in. There were some deductive
conclusions that left Call with. The wolves, for one, were all the same amount of dangerous across
the board. So it was mostly wolves, which wasn’t a comforting thought. It wasn’t all of the wolves,
Call remembered full well how all the wolves together made him feel back at the bank, but it was a
selection of them. An elite force, perhaps.

The variables were what Call was worried about. Associates of the Enemy that weren’t wolves.
Cronies. Lightning, Joseph, the Enemy himself, any number of the ones they hadn’t met yet but Call
was sure were there.

Call felt a gentle tap on his shoulder, and he opened his eyes to see Caped Justice, smiling weakly
and with tension written over every line of his posture. There was a moment where Call stopped
thinking and was only worried about Caped Justice. He didn’t like that expression on Caped
Justice’s face at all. Every previous priority of saving the city and whatever citizens were around the
shopping center was suddenly second to Caped Justice, who Call sporadically realized was way
more important.

“What’s up with you?” Call asked. He didn’t know how to comfort Caped Justice, but he needed
Caped Justice to be comforted. His hands hovered awkwardly at his sides.

“Getting out of class without being suspicious was stressful, man,” Caped Justice responded, running
a quick hand through his hair. “We need a better way to contact each other in the future.”

“I’m sorry,” Call said, and it was almost weird that he meant it. He hated the idea that he had made
Caped Justice upset, which was… out of character for him. He could deconstruct what it meant that
he, the world’s greatest menace, cared about upsetting somebody, later. Right now he had greater
concerns. Like Caped Justice, or saving the city, or by goodness he needed Caped Justice to stop
frowning.

“I’m already over it, don’t worry your pretty face,” Caped Justice said, relaxing. His eyes widened a
little after he finished saying the sentence, and Call had no mental excuse for that. He was a bit too
busy short circuiting over what had been said.

“Uh, I, uh, most of it’s covered by a mask anyway, what do you know,” Call said, latching onto an
easy joke.

“Sorry, uh, slip of the tongue,” Caped Justice said, his ears turning red. “I, you uh, remind me of
somebody I know, is all.”
“Somebody you regularly call pretty?” Call asked, raising an eyebrow.

“In my own head, sure,” Caped Justice squeaked, somehow turning more red.

“I’m intrigued. Why not to their pretty face?” Call asked. Sure, he could feel his heart skipping beats, and not from panic, but the opportunity to antagonize Caped Justice was too good to ignore.

“Good question,” Caped Justice said.

“Flustered?” Call asked, and he started grinning. His danger sense was screaming at him, mostly out of frustration of being ignored. Call found it in himself to keep ignoring it.

“You are ruthless,” Caped Justice said frankly.

“You find it funny,” Call brushed off. Caped Justice huffed a laugh in response. It was then that both Jasper and Convict approached, both of them breathing deeply and glancing over their shoulders. As soon as they were at the same section of wall where Call and Caped Justice were, Jasper bent over double and Convict started catching her breaths.

“What’s up with you?” Call and Caped Justice asked at the same time, which made Call a little flustered for some reason. Maybe that reason was because Caped Justice turned and smiled at him like he found that funny, and that smile being directed straight (gay) at Call was as good as a weapon.

“Had to create a distraction to get out,” Convict said between breaths.

“Had to run,” Jasper added on.

“What kind of distraction made you run like that?” Caped Justice asked.

“Don’t ask,” Convict said, closing her eyes.

“There was so much mucus,” Jasper huffed. Call suddenly didn’t want to know.

“As much as I would love to let you catch your breath, we have a bit of a situation on our hands,” Call said.

“How situationy of a situation?” Jasper asked.

“So do you skip English class, or?” Call asked.

“Better than writing note- better than staying in and still not understanding it, I mean,” Jasper said. Call didn’t know how to feel about the fact that Jasper had just so seamlessly pushed Call to the edge of a deadly precipice and then pulled him back without so much as flinching.

“Bet you five dollars and a stick of gum my English grade is better than yours,” Call said instead of acknowledging Jasper’s slip.

“You’re on,” Jasper said instantly.

“Was there a danger, or was I mistaken?” Caped Justice asked.

“I didn’t know you had that level of passive aggression in you, buddy,” Jasper quipped. Caped Justice stuck his tongue out at him.

“Caped Justice makes a good point,” Call said.

“Yes! My bad. There’s an elite force of monster wolves and Enemy goons moving through the city to stage a riot or an attack in the shopping center with the cool fountain.”

“The one with the dolphins?” Convict asked.

“The very same,” Call said.

“Really, you could have led with that,” Jasper said, pushing his sleeves up.

“The dolphins?” Call asked. Now that the others were concerned with the issue, he had less reason to be. They could do all of the worrying for him.

“The elite force, you moron,” Jasper said. “About how big is it?”

“I’d say roundabout twenty wolves,” Call said. “I don’t know how many cronies there are, and I can’t tell if the Enemy is among them or not.” He couldn’t help but notice that every time he brought up the Enemy by name, Jasper tensed infinitesimally. Some part of Call hoped that Jasper wouldn’t have to come face to face with the Enemy in any of the coming conflicts.

“Are there more cronies than wolves?” Convict asked, the corners of her mouth pulled down. Call shook his head.

“Quite a few more wolves than cronies,” Call said. “We got somewhat lucky.”

“Glad you’re an optimist,” Jasper remarked.

“Someone has to be,” Call said, looking pointedly at Jasper. Jasper raised an eyebrow at him.

“Twenty is an unrealistic number to fight,” Caped Justice said. Jasper gave Call a pointed look.

“He’s being a realist,” Call said. “There’s a difference. Ask Havoc.”

“Not if we flank them,” Convict said. Call couldn’t tell if he and Jasper were being ignored or not.

“That sounds like it’d be a messy maneuver to pull,” Jasper said. Apparently not.

“Not in a shopping center,” Convict responded, voice lowering conspiratorially. “Think about it. There are those small spaces between the buildings. If we can stage in those and wait for the force to show up in the square, we can get them on all sides without them realizing. It’s the element of surprise.”

“But against twenty wolves? How will we fight them all? The element of surprise alone won’t be enough,” Caped Justice said, staring hard at the ground.

“The element of supplies,” Call responded, remembering his past fights with the wolves. They never won fights of brute force. He doubted they could. They always had to chase the wolves off, somehow.

“I wish now was the time for genius puns, but it really isn’t,” Convict said.

“No, I’m being serious,” Call pushed, “with a genius pun thrown in. We can ask the surrounding services in the shopping center if they’ll let us borrow any sort of weapon against the wolves. Fire extinguisher. Pepper spray. Lavender field Febreze. Confetti cannon. Surely some of them will cooperate. I’ve heard stores playing our response broadcast playing 24/7 on at least one of their TVs,
it’s not like people are unwilling to step up and help us out. We can use that to our advantage, here. If we scare the wolves or drive them off, then the only thing we’d have to worry about would be the cronies, which we’ve dealt with easily before and can likely deal with again.”

“I like the way you think,” Convict said, a smirk spreading over her face.

“Especially when you throw a genius pun in,” Caped Justice said, smile echoing Convict’s. Jasper looked between the three of them.

“Is this what it’s like to be a superhero?” he asked.

“Messy plans that are mostly messy discussions that manage to amount to something? Yeah,” Convict said. Jasper shook his head.

“I was talking about the weird rush,” he said, eyes darting between their faces and the ground. It was Call’s turn to smirk.

“Welcome to being an underdog,” Caped Justice said, a laugh in his voice that made Call’s chest feel funny. “You’ll start hoping against your own common sense and dreary outlook, and that hope will be strong enough to spread it’s golden wings and charge you to victory.”

“Not to mention, everybody’s rooting for you,” Convict added.

“It rocks,” Call said. And it did. Even then, he felt the undue hope that they could charge into this coming battle and win, excitement shooting through his arms and leaking an involuntary and therefore juveniley genuine smile onto his face.

Jasper finally looked up from the ground, looking into all of their eyes. “Let’s do this.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Now, I hear what you're saying. "Cody," you all cry, "an inconsistent update schedule should be at least slightly consistent, i.e., why the hell are you updating two weeks after the last update? Are you drinking more coffee than usual? Did somebody that knows how to manage their schedule take over your life where you are in reality stuck in a closet? Should I or should I not call the authorities?" to that I say, shhh, just let it happen. I have pulled multiple all-nighters these two weeks, and that seems very clear in the writing style. Also, I found a pack of dollar store balloons and inflated all of them, so now there's ~9 orange balloons in my room. I guess they give me Writing Power. That's probably the reason.

This chapter ramps everything up. I mean everything. Nothing is the same after this. Be ready. It gets more devastating, and more gay. There's more winking, more confetti cannons, more #shenanigans, more cool skateboard tricks. Prepare yourself.

Note, there are 21 confetti cannons because Tchaikovsky used 21 cannons in his classic 1812 overture, and he is my life's biggest inspiration.

Enjoy >;))

The alarms of Call’s danger sense got more desperate the closer the danger was to Call’s position. That always made missions like this, ambushes where he had to sit and wait, their own form of agonizing.

He was close to throwing up, but if he started throwing up and then the forces of evil walked in and he’d have to start fighting while still throwing up, that would be unfortunate. Or maybe the ultimate weapon. He’d have to bring up the question with Convict at a later date, she’d have insights.

The weapons they’d collected, though, were generally much more effective than vomit. Upon seeing superheroes cross their own thresholds, managers were very cooperative. A few of them started swinging fists at invisible enemies to prove how fired up and not at all afraid they were at that moment, and Call could tell from the look on Jasper’s face that he wished he had a camera to record it. Other managers twiddled their thumbs and immediately agreed to any terms and conditions, a few asked the superheroes (and some even asked Jasper) to sign the weapons before taking them and fighting with them.

The weird part was, nobody refused them anything.

Out of every shop they went to, every supply they asked for, every high or weird demand (like asking to go out the side door to get access to the fenced-off area they could use for their flank, or if Havoc could have flame decals on his sides), everybody agreed. One store even had confetti cannons, which Call promptly asked for every single one of. The superheroes ended up with twenty one confetti cannons, and Call campaigned for Havoc to be the one to yield all of them.

Instead, they set the cannons aside in hidden spaces around the square, like they did with every other instrument they got their hands on. It was like a dangerous, out-of-season easter egg hunt. With
cannons. They hid them in the bushes, in staged suitcases they’d gotten from a random travel store strategically placed around the square to look abandoned, in fake rocks from the gardening accessories store which really had no place in a city without lawns, or even in plain sight, if the instrument allowed for it. The gnomes that the antique store was discreetly trying to get rid of (the store runner had gotten them from her aunt, and personally thought they were a little bit cursed and a lot a bit too real looking, but her aunt kept asking after them) could be placed in window sills or on the edges of the sidewalk. They’d make good grenades, or distractions, or last-resort ammunition.

Of course, every civilian in the square who’d asked for a pepper spray had gotten one. Conveniently, the convenience store had recently gotten a shipment, and they had more pepper spray than they knew what to do with. An abundance of pepper spray was poured directly into the waiting arms of the superheroes, which meant they could stock everybody. The managers and cashiers and runners at every facility were supplied with all the armament they felt they needed. Everybody around the square who asked what was going on and was sure they wanted to help was also supplied with an unhealthy number of pepper sprays, or other such device. One person in a leather jacket specifically asked for four Febreze’s, which the gas station was having a sale on (for the superheroes, they were on super-clearance: take what you can carry, then exactly two more), so Caped Justice handed the Febreze over without hesitation. The person then docked two Febreze in each hand, juggled for a moment if only to be impressive, then firmly caught all four and launched a warning shot of four simultaneous air fresheners into the sky. It was glorious like nothing Call had ever seen before.

Equipment was staged. People were staged. The superheroes were staged (Havoc most impressively, they had gotten him onto the roof of the ballet and he was going to leap down on the Enemy as soon as the opportunity presented itself). The hope of the underdog started almost seemed beautifully, deliciously, fittingly justified.

Call’s danger sense started getting unbearable, and that was when he knew the force was unbearably close.

*Break his nose,* Call told Havoc, when he knew the force was right around the corner.

*P’shaw, that’ll be nothing,* Havoc responded. *Give me something hard to work towards.*

*Fine, then. Break him,* Call said, a grin crawling across his face.

*Can do, boss.*

When the wolves first came in sight, walking towards the shopping center, Call could have sworn he felt everybody around the square suck in a breath of anticipation. The wolves kept coming, every step they took clawing deeper into Call’s throat and making his danger sense more overwhelming, soon crowding the square. They didn’t take up space with their number as much as their swamping presence, but they took up quite the bit of space. From what Call could see around the corner of the building he was hiding next to, there were quite a few wolves, as well as some cronies, mostly recognizable. That was a welcome surprise.

Lightning was there, and Joseph. Old friends. They were manageable, and predictable (even though they didn’t exactly know either of their powers yet, but they could deal). There were two more people Call was much less happy to see, specifically a shorter costumed individual hovering at Lightning’s arm, and the Enemy of Death himself.

It was far from the first time Call had seen the Enemy. That didn’t make the fear any less real, or the danger sense any more bearable. As much as Call figured the Enemy would make an appearance for this bout, he had also not really understood the breadth of that until the Enemy was here, in front of him. Call suddenly realized, yes, they were going to have to fight the Enemy. They’d beaten him
before, but, that was only because Call had…

Call had used some twisted version of his mind control.

He wasn’t doing it again. He wasn’t. They had to be strong enough to beat the Enemy without Call’s, well, deficiency. He refused to acknowledge it as a superpower.

As if Call had any more headspace to think past the threat that the Enemy and this collection of wolves posed, there was still that henchman sticking next to Lightning. They knew nothing about him. He was a complete variable, and those were dangerous.

All in all, the first few moments were anticlimactic. The Enemy’s whole weird force thing rounded the corner and walked into the shopping center proper, but they weren’t really yelling or doing anything. The hush was… ominous.

“We’re making a scene!” Joseph shouted. It probably meant something, but it sounded obvious to say the least. “Hand over the mayor!”

Nobody really moved, mostly because the superheroes wanted to see if the villains were going to do anything more and the villains were apparently bad at making scenes. Then, the Enemy sighed. He spoke, but Call couldn’t hear what he said over the sound of Joseph shouting again, a wordless shout. All of the wolves perked up, though, so Call presumed they’d gotten a command from their leader.

The battle, then.

While Call had a habit of sticking to the background and watching the beginnings of battles, let the players establish themselves and watching the falling chips so that he could jump in unexpectedly and perfectly where he was needed, that was much harder to do here. He never did well with larger fights, ones that had literally everybody. It was most of the reason he didn’t like Marvel movies.

Everybody was everywhere. Call couldn’t possibly watch everything, couldn’t account for every wolf snarling at every civilian, every cronie that had been surprised by Caped Justice jumping out of thin air from between the buildings, every Enemy of Death that Convict kept slapping with water. Well. Technically there was only one Enemy of Death, but the point stood.

Instead of trying to watch the whole scuffle, instead of being able to know the outcomes of their supply idea, instead of being where people needed him, Call had to dive into the fray. He certainly couldn’t leave them with only Jasper as support.

So, Call stalled a moment, danger sense roaring inside him.

So, Call jumped out from between the buildings and served a knuckle sandwich with extra mustard to the first person that set off his danger sense.

He immediately processed who he’d just punched, it was the cronie he hadn’t recognized, and felt a shock of fear. His danger sense was crowing in a familiar way, a unique spice to his nausea that he’d felt before. It wasn’t the trademark Enemy of Death danger sense. It was the You’ve Seen This Person Before danger.

Call ducked beneath a swing, caught the arm as it was over his head, and used his grip to throw the cronie onto the ground. The cronie, mask sort of like that of a wrestler and sort of like that of a circus act, hissed, jumped up in a strange combative maneuver that didn’t seem possible. As soon as the cronie was on his feet, he rocketed back at Call, another attack in the works.
Cronies never stop to smell the roses. Maybe that was why they were cronies.

Call waited patiently until the cronie did the lunge that Call was expecting him to (the mask was a reckless, open color, with wide eyes. Somebody that wore it with confidence was somebody that was not a precise fighter). The lunge left him wide open, so Call aimed a costly (darn leg) but effective kick to the crotch. More accurately, he aimed the kick at the stomach, acting like he was trying to get there through the crotch.

Of course, the cronie crumpled. The mask did its best impression of a wrinkle.

There wasn’t much of a collar to the cronie’s costume, but Call grabbed what collar he could find. After a cursory glance around the disorienting square (Jasper with his foot in a wolf’s mouth and the wolf looking like the one that felt that loss, Convict breaking out of a headlock the Enemy had her in as her hood fell to her shoulders, Caped Justice getting cracked in the head by Joseph’s staff but using the opportunity to fall into Lightning and wrestle his arms behind his back, the civilian with the Febreze laughing in the face of a snarling wolf) to make sure nothing was ready and raring to attack Call while his back was turned, Call put his full attention on the newbie.

The collar wasn’t much, sure, but it was enough to get in his face.

“Care to explain the game you’re playing?” Call asked. His reputation as the least polite and most dark of the superheroes helped him in times like this.

“Surely you don’t expect that to work,” the cronie responded, voice still thin. Call felt a moment of a tricklingly soft, corrupt thing. He wished he could just creep around in this cronie’s head and know things. There was so much potential wrapped up in his superpower that he let die.

There was so much in his superpower that had let people die, though. Patriarch. Parable. Miri.

Call’s mouth became a thin line and he punched the cronie, as hard as he could, where he thought the nose should be through the mask. The cronie’s head jerked, Call was sure he should have qualms. But he would go back to school and get taught by a substitute, in a half empty class, everybody home with the virus.

The virus wasn’t being merciful. Neither was Call.

“Give me something I can work with,” Call said, and he wasn’t asking. He heard Havoc bark, distantly, as another wolf whimpered.

“You’d be so dead if my superpower worked on you,” the cronie rasped.

“That’s not very threatening,” Call responded simply. “Try not to acknowledge your own lack of power next time. Just a tip.” The cronie’s eyes darted, but Call kept staring him down. He needed to get something out of the newbie, since he was such a variable. Something to account him to. Anything.

Then, the thing that the cronie’s eyes had been darting to grabbed Call and threw him off. Call blinked, twisting to see who had crept up on him. He was disoriented again, though, seeing Lightning next to the Enemy, Caped Justice next to Convict, a shattered gnome next to a wolf heaving breaths on the ground. His danger sense swelled, threatening to choke him, covering his body with chills.

Joseph stood over Call, his staff pointed down at him. Call felt something in his stomach sinking. This kept happening, a point in the battle where he was in the clutches of the other side. It stunk of failure, this pattern. After all, if the enemies wanted to catch the superheroes so bad, the superheroes
had a responsibility not to be caught.

“Ahem,” Joseph said, and Call opened his mouth to respond with something amazingly clever before he realized Joseph wasn’t talking to him. Joseph was talking to the cronie. “Did you even tell him your name? You were so excited about it.”

“I was busy getting my nose broken,” the cronie said, overdramatic. Call knew he couldn’t hit hard enough to break bone. That was Jasper’s job. The statement still sounded like “I guaiz ndissy ‘ettin by dose moke...n.” Call would have time to be proud later. He tried to slip away, but Joseph dropped his staff heavily on Call’s chest and knocked the wind out of him. Call clenched his teeth and tried not to tell himself he wasn’t a threat. He was a stone like any other on the ground.

“Quit complaining. You have not felt real pain yet. Go on, tell him,” Joseph said. Call felt somehow he was a pawn in a game, being moved by the enemy side. He wasn’t more than a pair of ears to Joseph. He wasn’t a threat. He was a stone like any other on the ground.

His danger sense sizzled.

“My name is Turcotte,” the cronie who was Turcotte said.

“I don’t even know how to make fun of that,” Call wheezed. “French is a very hard language to make fun of.” Joseph, steely eyed, pointed his staff directly at Call’s forehead, and Call remembered with sudden clarity how Joseph had made himself and the Enemy disappear the night before. Into thin air. He, then, as well remembered that the wolves had been dragging Call somewhere, that the Enemy was tracking down the superheroes, that Call was trapped on the ground with aching ribs and no immediate way to escape.

“How disappointingly easy,” Joseph said. Call tried to wiggle away again, rolling and pushing harder, but Turcotte kicked him down as the air around the staff started heating.

Then, in a rather deja-vu or circular or ironic or well written moment, both Turcotte and Joseph were dragged away from Call and thrown down. Caped Justice, Convict.

“DUDEx,” Convict yelled at Call, not looking at him so her attention could focus on Joseph. There were levels of exasperation in her voice that came from how close of a call that had been, this being the third time Call had been captured, how dangerous this scene already was.

Call, grievously aching from that number, did not have the breath support to respond. He glanced around again. Most of the wolves had been chased off by now wounded and exhausted civilians, one of whom had broken glasses and another of whom had lost both her heels, all of them holding some makeshift weapon. The remaining wolves were sitting around, bored or tired or uncommanded by the preoccupied Enemy. Speaking of.

Havoc was on the Enemy, snapping at his heels. Jasper was on Lightning, snapping as well at his heels (a sight that Call was confused and delighted by). Convict was handling Joseph by bathing his staff in swaths of water, and Turcotte never stood a chance against Caped Justice in the first place. After all, his power didn’t work on them. It was nearly unfair to pair Caped Justice, a superhero with a superpower, against Turcotte, a cronie with a useless power.

All of the danger was, essentially, well accounted for. But Call’s danger sense was, if anything, getting worse.

“Something’s wrong,” he yelled, not to anybody but just so they could hear. He started looking
around. He started breathing without his chest whistling. He started focusing. His danger sense would answer his questions if he asked them.

“I wish you could give us good news and bad news instead of just all bad news all the time,” Convict responded. Joseph grunted, affronted that she wasn’t paying full attention to their battle, an act of disrespect to another warrior.

“What’s wrong?” Caped Justice asked. Call almost didn’t want to tell him. He wanted this to be easy. He wanted Caped Justice to have the sunshine, and the squirrel that heals instead of dies, and the good news instead of the bad news. All that Radar ever gave him was the bad news.

They were a team. They were friends. Call had come to terms with that. Just as well, he kept getting them stuck. At the bank, when Lightning held a knife to Call’s throat. Last night, when he’d let Jasper incapacitate him. Today, nearly vanished by Joseph. And he kept making the situation worse and worse. More bad news.

Maybe if they knew Call, too, some of the bad would be balanced by his charming personality. But all they got was Radar. Radar was dark. Radar was rude. Radar was the bearer and bringer of bad news.

Call hadn’t realized insecurity came with friendship.

“Radar!” Caped Justice yelled, loud and desperate, as he was now fighting both Turcotte and Lightning. “Your radio silence is going to get us killed!”

Well, that wrapped up his insecurities with a tidy bow.

“Danger sense,” Call said, and syllables felt like a jumbled thing. He was getting lucky, though. Because everything in his head was so muddy, his danger sense, which was not in his head (it was a superpower and who knows where the hell those are stationed) was suddenly very clear in comparison. And it was pointing him away from the square, a far off direction. It was a straight arrow, as true as a trained aim, but Call hadn’t noticed it before. The danger sense shouted louder about the people in the square.

And that had been precisely the plan.

Which they had all fallen for.

“Being vague doesn’t help,” Jasper snapped.

“What are you kids even talking about?” Joseph snapped. “Turcotte or Lightning, I don’t care, one of you go contain the short hero before he does something stupid.” Joseph, learning Convict’s pattern, swirled out of the way of Convict’s water and brought his staff down in between Caped Justice and Turcotte and Lightning, right before Caped Justice had lunged at them.

Call realized the Enemy hadn’t spoken loudly this whole time. The Enemy, the man with a poison voice that was his most powerful weapon. The mask, silver and threatening, didn’t fit as snugly on the edges. The Enemy’s entire form was less filled out, slightly frailer.

Slightly, but enough.

Call started running. He stumbled on his leg. There was a plastic skateboard at the edge of the square, with bite marks from a wolf in it. One of the wheels was absently spinning, and Call upended it without thinking, jumping on. This was the fastest way for him to get to city hall. If the skateboard made him look less like Radar and more like Callum Hunt, he’d have to suffer that risk. Because the
Enemy of Death in the square was a decoy, a look-alike, and Constantine was being dangerous in the exact direction of city hall.

There was shouting behind Call, but of course, he didn’t listen. He never did. He was always too preoccupied to listen.

“Somebody go after him!” Joseph yelled, dreading that the boy had caught onto his plot.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Convict said lowly, enough that she could be heard. She was more confused than mad, mostly mad he had ditched them when they had enemies to beat. She used this frustration to make her water sharper, though, more erratic. It was easier to sweep Joseph’s leg from under him. She caught Lightning by the wrist when he made a swing with his knife, and he broke out of her grip easily.

“Want me to go?” Turcotte asked. He bounced on his heels, easily stepping away from Caped Justice now.

“Everybody stays,” the Enemy rumbled. “The boy will find nothing.” Then Havoc bit his hand and he let out a beautiful shrieking sound.

Caped Justice stayed in stony silence. Cold, maybe. His movements after Turcotte were methodical and harsh, eventually catching up to his flying feet and staying a step ahead of every punch. The pull of Caped Justice’s mouth hinted at his upset. Radar was funny, sure, and a friend Caped Justice had been excited to have. But these quiet spells, this inability to communicate efficiently even though that seemed to be his superpower, was impossible. There was a way to forgive him for it, but it was becoming common. And it was a slip up that kept almost getting him killed, or the entire team compromised.

If Radar was going to be the weak link that led to the fall of Magista, then Caped Justice didn’t know how they could be partners, let alone friends. Because friends shouldn’t let friends down.

His mouth was sour as he stepped on Turcotte’s arm and felt the bone snap. It wasn’t the screaming he was tearing apart over, though. He simply turned back to Lightning.

Call, meanwhile, learned he knew the way to city hall pretty well. Maybe it was years of living in the city. Maybe it was well marked streets. Maybe it was the runway lights of his danger sense. Maybe it was the anxious nights spent staring at a map of the city, of the quickest way to get to city hall so he could save the mayor at a moments notice if there was an attack at a moments notice.

He passed another street he recognized. He willed the skateboard faster. His hands started shaking with the power of his danger sense, blistering under the proximity of the real Enemy of Death.

Call, upon reaching the stairs opening up to the entrance to city hall, tried to do a cool sideways slide and deceleration, like cars do in action movies. Skateboards and cars have a numerous amount of differences, though, like metal frames and thick rubber tires.

If Call fell off the skateboard (and that’s saying if), he did it awesomely. Like in action movies.

“A real superhero is here!”

“We’re saved!”
“If he just fell off that skateboard, should we really pin all of our hopes on him?”

And then, louder, perhaps pointed: “We’re saved!”

If Call didn’t feel particularly saved or particularly heroic, he couldn’t show it here. If Call was alone now, without Havoc and without his friends, he couldn’t show it here. If Call felt he was pretty lame at being a hero, for slipping into using mind control and for continuing to get captured and put the team at jeopardy, he couldn’t show it here. Here he was needed. Here his insecurities were dangerous, and so he could not show them.

The Enemy was crouched atop the awning over the door into city hall, like a gargoyle that had lost its gothic cathedral and found a secondary passion in regional politics. A murderous, masked gargoyle. Of doom.

“Ah,” the Enemy said, voice not raised but still louder than the rest of the crowd, sinister like the leaping notes of a flute playing a song of shadows. “You’re the one that showed up. I should have known, with your radar.”

“I can’t tell how capital you made that ‘R’ in radar,” Call said. He had to shout. He had no voice based mind control power.

“I’ve never cared much for grammar,” the Enemy said, pushing himself to standing now. “So there is no relevance to your R. Stop stalling.”

Call felt the compulsion to stop stalling, but as he knew all too well, a compulsion is not a command. “My English teacher will have your head for this.”

“Oh, your English teacher wants my head?” the Enemy asked. He spread his arms out, gesturing to the roof, or the hall, or the whole of the city. “Come up here and get it for her.”

“Don’t assume my English teacher’s gender.” Now Call really was stalling. And also a fierce defender of trans rights and believer of the liberal usage of a they/them pronoun. But also stalling. Why would the Enemy want him on the roof? It was obviously some sort of trap, but the only danger up there belonged to the Enemy, so it wasn’t like he had any cronies to help him with anything. Besides, shouldn’t he be trying to break into city hall, take the mayor or take control of the city? While he wanted the superheroes, Call had kind of figured he wanted both, superheroes-and-city, a two for one deal. Maybe use the superheroes to get the city? Either way, he should be more focused on trying to get past the civilian barricade in front of the door to get to the mayor than trying to get Call.

So there was a game.

“I can see why people think you’re the least formidable superhero, if you talk about grammar in the middle of a standoff,” the Enemy said.

“You’re not going to goad me up to the roof with insults,” Call said. “Especially not with bad ones. If you’re going to be evil, please learn how to insult better. Go for my actual weaknesses, not my logical ones. That’s 101, dude.” Convict would flip if she heard he’d called the Enemy, “dude.” That is, if she wasn’t mad at him for compromising the team and then running off in the middle of a massive operation, for the second time. They’d already forgiven him for abandoning them at the bank. Apparently this was a regular thing, now, though.

Lone wolf. Ha ha.

“Why would you think I’m goading you?” the Enemy said.
“Come down here and I’ll explain it to you,” Call said, suddenly feeling like an exhausted pet owner trying to coax a cat out of a tree.

“When are you two gonna fight?” asked a voice, and Call looked to see a bystander, holding their phone sideways and obviously recording. Immediately, Call knew how to get the Enemy down from the roof.

“Whenever you want me to, babe,” Call said, and winked.

“Hell yeah,” shouts another bystander. “I love winking!” A lot of people in the crowd started winking, either at the air or at each other. The specific bystander Call had winked at checked to make sure they were recording, and then checked to make sure Call was still listening to them.

“What’re you—” the Enemy said, unable to perfectly discern the situation when he was literally on the roof and not interacting with the crowd.

“Shut up, I’m having a heart-to-heart,” Call shouted to the Enemy, then turned back to the bystander. “Sup. Any particular reason you’re giving us a hard time?”

“Well…” the bystander said.

“We’ve got time, and it’s pretty private right now,” Call said. They had no time, and were assuredly in public.

“I’ve been on edge since the Enemy of Death made his announcement,” the bystander admitted, lowering their phone. “My mom and sister both got sick with the virus. Also hearing flippant and uncaring use of grammar makes my blood boil. So today’s been quite the day.”

“Man, hasn’t it?” Call asked. “I almost got turned to mist earlier. But, hey, you’re not the only one that’s been on edge since the Enemy of Death showed up.”

The bystander eyed the Enemy, who was now viciously flipping Call off from the lip of the roof, and looked indecisive between jumping down to fight Call and staying up to catch Call. He looked a bit like a buoy, floating between jumping and staying.

“I can’t imagine why,” the bystander said, and Call chuckled heartily.

The Enemy decided to jump down. He landed on his feet with a solid thud, managing to look like he hadn’t just inverted his knees. His gaze swept easily over the crowd.

“Hey,” Call said, nudging the bystander. “Scram. Call the police. Make some soup for your mom and sister, and I’ll get them a stronger antidote before long.”

The bystander looked at the Enemy, then back at Call, hesitating a moment before nodding. They started running, like the rest of the crowd was, away. Call didn’t let his eyes follow them. After all, they’d served the proper purpose: take the attention away from the Enemy long enough that the Enemy would feel the need to steal it back. After all, the only type of person that would make a city wide broadcast and start a city wide panic and release a city wide virus is the type of person that needed to be in a spotlight.

“I thought you wanted me on the roof?” Call asked the Enemy as the Enemy stalked closer.

“A foolish mistake!”

“You said you wanted me on the roof.”
“That was also a foolish mistake!”

“At least you admit it. Very hard to capture me when you’re tripping over column heads. Want to try the park instead? I know a real scenic place by the riv-”

The Enemy cut Call off by taking a few quick steps forward and grabbing his wrist so tight that Call felt like he was choking. There weren’t air pipes in his wrist. He shuddered to think what might happen if the Enemy actually tried choking him.

“I only wanted it to be on the roof so it would be an easily visible spectacle when I defeat and kidnap one of this city’s precious saviors,” the Enemy seethed. “But in this commotion, it’ll be just as easily visible on the ground.”

“It would have always been just as easily visible on the ground,” Call said. “You did not ever need the roof even a little bit.” The Enemy, if possible, gripped Call’s wrist tighter. Call clenched his teeth, tension making his jaw pop.

“You have no dramatic vision,” the Enemy said, staring Call in the eye now. As he did, Call could feel his mind starting to puddle, a polite knocking at the door into his head. So it began.

If there was anybody Call didn’t want to get in a mental battle with, it was the Enemy of Death. It didn’t look like he was going to have much of a choice in the matter, though, because if there was anybody he didn’t want to lose to, it was also the Enemy of Death.

He didn’t bother trying to break his wrist away, instead starting to try to kick the Enemy’s knees. They would be fallible after landing a jump off the roof. The Enemy kept scooting away from Call’s efforts, and Call kept trying. Maybe he was still stalling sort of a little bit. After all, he had no Febreze, and no gnomes, and no confetti cannon. Call needed to drive the Enemy off, and needed to avoid being captured. Call needed to do what nobody knew how to do: defeat the Enemy of Death. He didn’t even know if he had the tools to do that. His superpower had very little offensive power. Or. Well. The way he used it, it didn’t.

And there lies the moral quandary, Call thought as the Enemy used his grip on Call’s wrist to throw him at the ground. Call landed hard on his back, but immediately started rolling, trying to get away, trying to get on his feet. Do I use my power, or not? It was how he’d won every other battle.

Call pushed himself to his feet, standing now with his back to the staircase leading up to city hall. The Enemy was in front of him, closer than Call had thought, and getting closer by the second.

Let’s see how far I can get without mind control first, Call thought, knowing that he was making a mistake by even giving himself the option to use it in the future. Knowing he’d lean on that option eventually. Knowing, perhaps, that there was no room for hesitation against the Enemy.

The last moment before the Enemy reached Call, Call ducked and ran forward, tackling the Enemy around the middle and forcing both of them back to the ground. The Enemy tried to roll, but Call was sitting on his ribs. Before the Enemy could throw him off, Call scooped a sizeable rock from the ground. It was heavy in his hand.

The Enemy opened his mouth to say something, to make the polite knocking in Call’s head something more of a polite jackhammering, but Call hit the Enemy in the face. In the metal face. Specifically, the eye socket. With the rock.

The mask immediately dented, jagging into the Enemy’s eye with a shrill thud. The Enemy did a weird grunt scream, and Call wondered what to do next. He clearly had the Enemy in a vulnerable
position. The cops hadn’t shown up yet, so they couldn’t arrest him on the spot. Was Call supposed to keep hitting him with the rock and risk brain damage to keep him incapacitated until the police arrived? He hadn’t planned for this.

It ended soon enough, anyway, because the Enemy’s pain turned to a flashing, living anger. Call saw the moment it happened, saw the way the Enemy’s posture tightened for a fight and the force in his head became sinister. That seemed like a good time to scramble away from the Enemy, so that’s what Call did, accidentally dropping the rock in his rush to get away. It clattered to the ground as Call scooted back towards the steps, as the Enemy stood and followed.

There was a moment before the Enemy had fully gotten into Call’s head, and there was a moment after. Call didn’t know the moment between, didn’t feel it, had no real time to defend against it.

“Pesky,” the Enemy said, although he couldn’t keep the smile out of his voice. He knew he’d broken in, could see it in the way Call’s eyes unfocused.

Call, weakly, tried to punch the Enemy, tried to be a hero like Caped Justice would be. Caped Justice had fought the Enemy before, kept him off with a few well-executed hits. The Enemy was a human, the Enemy felt pain. The Enemy caught Call’s fist, twisting it so Call’s whole arm leaned the wrong direction. Call, feeling his mind fold and his thoughts scatter, followed the direction his arm was pulling in with nearly lazy movements. He spun out of the twist, using his other arm to elbow the Enemy in the side. It would have looked cool if Convict had done it. All Call got out of it was a push to his back. He stumbled forward.

The force in Call’s head was swirling, a little like a whirlpool. Call, likewise, spun around, ducked around the Enemy’s next hit, tried to punch the Enemy in the throat. A part of him wondered, if not now, then when?

The Enemy seemed to tire of Call being pesky, and was perhaps a little let down that Call wasn’t as good as Caped Justice, didn’t make quite the same show. Either way, he grabbed Call by the collar of his hoodie, lifted him off the ground until they were eye to eye.

The mask was a gruesome thing, now, asymmetrical with the dent, everything twisting at corners to account for the misshapen side. Call didn’t want to fall into the Enemy’s gaze, afraid of what might happen to his head if he did. Struggling was the better plan, struggling was what Call attempted. Kick. Try to pull the Enemy’s hands off. Twist to throw the weight off. Anything.

If not now, then when?

The Enemy shook Call, roughly, once, and Call finally glanced up to meet his eye. The whirlpool in Call’s head started roaring larger, taking more space. Call, on the other hand, opened his own whirlpool. The thing he had done before, with the Enemy’s wolf, flooding its mind with sensation to overwhelm it. That had worked. Call wasn’t so foolish to believe he could control the Enemy, not when the Enemy surely had much more practice in the whole mind control business. Maybe this would throw him off, though.

When Call started filtering thoughts, feelings, horrors, everythings, into the Enemy’s head, the Enemy smiled. Call didn’t see the smile, he felt it, in his own mind. Every dimension seemed unreal. Call didn’t know where his body was, or what his brain was.

“There you are,” the Enemy said, and his voice gave Call disgusted chills, everywhere. Call filtered that feeling through the Enemy, too. He tried his best to open up the wide, direct channel, the one that would fit two full experiences into one head.
The Enemy, in turn, flipped Call’s mind over. That was the best way to describe it, as Call knew where everything was in his head, and suddenly it was all somewhere else. This disorientation made a notch in Call’s channel with the Enemy, and suddenly they were both jumbled messes, no idea what was where and who was when and why and how. Mind control was a messy thing to play with.

“You know,” the Enemy hissed as the whirlpool was suddenly so big that Call felt the last thing left, his control over himself, starting to fall into it, “we’re not so different, you and I.”

“Don’t,” Call said, and he meant to say more, but everything tripped, so he didn’t. He did what he could for one final push, tried to wrap his control around the Enemy’s head, tried to push the idea to stop into it. But, the Enemy was stronger. But, Call was weaker. But, Call was a fool to ever even try this.

Perhaps it would be better for the team if they didn’t have to worry about him getting captured, though. After all, he would be already captured. The competent heroes would be left to save the day.

“Don’t you feel what you’re trying to do to my head right now?” the Enemy asked. “It’s what I’ve already done to yours. We are the same.”

The same.

Call opened his mouth to say something, to deny it, but felt even his control over that washing away. The moment before he slipped all the way down the drain, though, the unstoppable movement of the whirlpool stuttered. Then, it flickered in his head, like a faulty projection. Then, the black water of the Enemy washed out of Call, flooding away and leaving only what Call recognized as himself.

He still felt like a puddle, but that seemed like a logical effect of nearly being completely taken over. Call pulled his eyes open (no, he didn’t know when he closed them, but he had a very good reason not to know that, i.e. he was about to be literally possessed by the Enemy of Death like a demon in a fucking Conjuring movie), realizing he was on the ground now, realizing the Enemy was no longer holding him at all.

The Enemy was on the ground in front of Call, holding the back of his head. Standing over the Enemy was the bystander from earlier, holding a baseball bat.

“Did I tell you I play baseball?” the bystander asked as Call looked up at them.

“Did I tell you baseball is my new favorite sport?” Call responded. There were sirens in the distance, and Call scrambled to push himself up so he could hold the Enemy down until they got there. As he sat again on the Enemy’s ribs and invited the bystander to join him for extra security, he wondered in his puddly head if this was going to be it. Surely, defeating the Enemy would be harder than nearly losing and letting some bystander call the police. Surely, it was supposed to be more dramatic, more drastic.

Then, the Enemy whispered: “Joseph.”

Before Call could decide what that meant, what to do about that, to look around desperately for Joseph, a bloom of smoky mist swept into the street, all around city hall. It was a familiar mist, the one he’d seen last night, the one Joseph had summoned so he and the Enemy could disappear.

As Call remembered that, suddenly he was falling, and suddenly he and the bystander were sitting on their butts on the hard brick of the sidewalk in front of city hall.

“Where’d he go?” the bystander asked.
“How did Joseph hear that all the way across the city?” Call asked himself. “Stupid magical voice.”

“Oh, does he have golden pipes?” the bystander asked.

“No, just a superpower. Apparently one that gives him an instant escape plan out of every situation. I didn’t know he could teleport. Damn. Double damn.” Call thought about contacting Havoc, but his superpower was all the way worn out after he worked it to the wick trying to fight the Enemy. Brains are harder to use when they’re in puddle form.

_We are the same._

_The same._

Maybe Call didn’t want to use his superpower, anyway.

Call stood up, holding a hand out to pull the bystander up, too. They had saved his life, after all. He always needed saving, after all. He could barely see them through the mist.

“Is-” the bystander said, but cut themself off. The sort of way where they wanted to say more, but the thought couldn’t get past the tongue.

“Of course we still have a chance,” Call said. He smiled at them, but he didn’t know why, and he didn’t know if they could see it. Maybe they could see it, though, because they nodded.

“Don’t give up on us,” Call said to the bystander as he walked away, hoping to escape in the mist before it cleared so he couldn’t be interrupted by press or police. He was so tired, suddenly. Maybe it was everything he’d already had to deal with today. Maybe it was everything he was about to face. Maybe his failures were weighty. Maybe his brain was a puddle.

“Don’t give up on us,” the bystander called after Call, so maybe Call was getting better at people. There was that, at least. That didn’t mean he was going to try to go and meet up with his team, though. They likely didn’t want to see him. Besides, he didn’t feel any more danger pulling him in their direction, so clearly the threat had been dealt with. They didn’t need him for that to happen.

Call pulled off his hoodie and his mask before stepping out of the mist, making his way back to school.

_The same._

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And how the hell was Call supposed to pay attention in class?

Every teacher’s smiling face was a smiling mask, every word they droned covered with echoes of the same, everything they deemed important so vastly unimportant when Call felt his life was burning down around him.

If Call didn’t get any work done, nobody noticed a difference. Drew and Celia could handle the project on their own, even if Drew was talking weirdly (like he was trying and failing to do a British accent for some annoying reason), and Celia was home sick. With the virus. That nobody knew how to stop.

Call’s mood was acidic.

After school, when Call had long shedded Drew and retrieved his backpack from the bathroom,
there was a familiar shadow lurking next to Call’s usual sidewalk. Call was torn between being relieved Caped Justice was alive, being upset he would talk to Caped Justice while smelling like bathroom, and guilty that he wasn’t hesitant to spend time around Caped Justice. He shouldn’t want to. It was still dangerous.

Two days of walking home with Call. A week of adventure and failure with Radar. Caped Justice, the whole time, had been what Call hadn’t thought was real. He was noble, and the kind of funny that high schoolers generally weren’t. He was careful and just as easily reckless. He would break a man’s nose. He would drop everything to perform first aid on a squirrel. He was, unfortunately, very cute.

Call had made a lot of friends the past few days. Caped Justice was the only one that didn’t stress him out. Two days of walking home, three now, but Call-and-Caped-Justice already made sense. Already put a sense of calm in the air. Already snuck a smile onto Call’s mouth.

And when Caped Justice stepped from the shadow, overly dramatic and absolutely worn with his hair swept everywhere and his smile not noble and not brave and not the face of justice but small and meaningful, Call became a weak man.

“Mind if I walk with you?” Caped Justice asked, and his voice was worn from strain. Call knew, just then, that he would do anything for Caped Justice. An inconvenient thing to know. An unsafe thing to practice.

Radar was practically already dead, with three near misses now. Call was painting a target on his back to walk home with a cute boy.

Not just any cute boy— a cute boy that was hopeful, looking at Call. Beaten but not broken. Looking to Call, Call of all people, for solace. It was clear Call wasn’t the only one of the duo that thought they made weird sense, that found the walks to be a near different dimension from the rest of the crap he had to live through. It was clear that Caped Justice was chasing that warm buzzing of calm smiles, the comfort of strolling somewhere next to a person, company to combat the lonely sunset. It didn’t make sense that Call was that person, but then again, maybe it did.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” Call asked. “Caped Justice. Surely you have friends that are cooler to walk home with than li’l ol’ me.” Caped Justice blinked a lot when Call said his name, and Call didn’t know what that meant.

“I think I’ve done all the ‘doing’ there is to do today,” Caped Justice said. “And I tire of my friends. They aren’t you.” Meaning: I don’t exist with them the way I exist with you. It was in Call’s nature to question that. How the two of them had managed to exist so differently with each other, especially when Call was Radar. He let it go.

“I give you a sock and a water bottle to heal a squirrel one time and suddenly I’m the best friend you’ve got?” Call asked. He didn’t know why he was asking all these questions. He did know why he was asking all these questions. It takes a while for brains to repair from being a puddle.

The same.

Shhh.

Caped Justice looked at Call, and suddenly Call was very aware that the mask was hiding the bags under Caped Justice’s eyes. Call knew they were there. Call had them too. But seeing this infallible boy in this tired way was a stark thing. Knowing the acidic mood this day was being persistent about, knowing Caped Justice was suffering it too.
Light, wonderful, powerful, chilling Caped Justice.

“I—” Caped Justice said, and Call was reminded of the way the bystander had been cut off the same way earlier. How they had started a sentence, and then the sentence ended.

*The same*, that encounter had said, that failure had revealed.

*Shhh. Shhh.*

The thing interrupting Caped Justice’s sentence was himself, because then his shoulders sagged with a breath and he surged forward. An attack?

Call felt a lot of things, adrenaline, fear, betrayal, bone crushing sadness, exhaustion, acceptance, acid. But then he felt a hug.

The shadows were cool, nicer than the unforgiving sun. The two stood there. The chatter of the school was off, elsewhere. They were only brick, sidewalk, shadow, and distant woods.

Caped Justice clung to Call like a mistake. Call felt the straining in Caped Justice for a moment, the moment Caped Justice regretted what he did, and then the relaxation. The moment Caped Justice decided to be selfish. His arms slung easily and weightily around Call, his face resting on Call’s shoulder, his torso leaning closer so he could fall into Call and the comfort of the hug.

Call stood. He didn’t know what the hell he was doing. It was a terrible day, he felt terrible, he was terrible. He was wearing fucking sunglasses, which Caped Justice hadn’t made fun of yet. He had made friends, he was getting used to friends, he was hanging out with friends, he was ruining his friends, none of which made any sense. He was confused today. He was a loser today. This was a day Call was destined to lose.

A terrible day for such a lovely thing. Oh, how Call wished he didn’t like it. He wished he could be comfortable being alone, comfortable with people disliking him, comfortable walking home without somebody else. Uncomfortable with hugs.

Call didn’t even let his father hug him.

Caped Justice, if at all possible, sagged some more, in a teary way, and started to pull away from the hug. A sentence was forming in Caped Justice’s his mouth, something Call could feel, even though he couldn’t see.

Before Caped Justice could pull all the way away, Call hugged him back, hugged him tighter, hugged him closer. This was the kind of friendship they had: protecting the other, warming the other, holding the other.

Call was acidic. Call was ruination. Call was weak. But, Call was open to change, if this was what change was.

It was a terrible thing of Call to do, to encourage this, to be weak, to put himself in danger to hug this strange, charming boy. But it was an impossible future, one where Caped Justice pulled away. So Call hugged back, laid his head on Caped Justice’s shoulder, felt the coolness of the shadow wrap around them as he forgot he was Radar, forgot he wasn’t good with friends, forgot he was *the same*.

They hugged.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?” Call eventually murmured.
“Didn’t you already ask me that question?” Caped Justice responded.

“So I did.”

“Why haven’t you pushed me away yet?” Caped Justice was uncertain, now. His face lifting from Call’s shoulder the barest amount, grip looser, leaning ever so slightly away.

“Why did you hug me in the first place?” Call asked. They would never get anywhere if both of them responded in questions.

“Why did you let me? It’s been three days,” Caped Justice said. Call couldn’t tell him they’d known each other for almost a week, now. Call didn’t know how to put into words what they both knew, that there was the world, and then there was them. There was life, and then there was the twenty golden minutes they spent walking home together. There were people, and then there was Caped Justice when he smiled at Call, walked next to Call, so much as looked at Call.

“Three days is a long ass time when everybody is dying and the city is falling,” Call responded. “Three days is enough if they’re better than any other three days with any other people. Things don’t happen in three days, things happen in a moment. Like, with magic, there is a before and an after, and that’s enough for the enchantment. Magic doesn’t take three days. Life doesn’t take three days. Apparently, neither do we.” With that, Call hugged Caped Justice tighter. It was comforting. He couldn’t believe he’d just said the word-

“Magic? Do you believe in that?”

Call considered this. Call hugged Caped Justice. Call was weak, and terrible. Everything was crumbling and changing around him, and he felt he wasn’t allowed this moment that he took anyway. He didn’t communicate, ever. He didn’t have feelings, ever. But everything had changed this week. Why couldn’t he? Why couldn’t he let people in?

The rule that said he couldn’t was something he wrote himself, and could just as easily erase.

“I believe in you,” Call said.

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The woods were usually about ten to fifteen minutes to get through.

That day, Call and Caped Justice spent an hour dashing between the trees. The sun found itself nearer and nearer to the horizon, and sunset was the time the heroes always agreed to meet up, but both of them had had a long enough day to stop caring about basic rules and etiquette. The only things they ended up caring about were the pointy spiders suspended in their webs, the squirrels, the fallen trees, the moss, and each other’s warmth.

Caped Justice went into the forest without blanching at the dirt, and didn’t comment on how squandering and intimidating the whole place could be once they were inside. Instead, they walked into the tree line, pushed through some brush, and then stood in something of a clearing that was mostly ankle bushes and rocks and old, fallen logs on the forest floor. Caped Justice stopped, considered. Call thought he was looking at the forest, but Caped Justice was only looking at him.

“Which cardinal direction is your house in?” Caped Justice asked after a careful moment. Every breath they breathed together, the shaky boy that had so desperately hugged Call in the shadows was becoming more and more himself.

“East.” Call pointed. Lengthwise down the forest, behind them, where they had walked before,
where they needed to go.

Caped Justice grinned, and again, it wasn’t noble, it wasn’t glorious. It was boyish, and buggy, and exhausted, and rejuvenated. He said, “Take me west.”

Into the setting sun.

The plants were alive in the light, glowing and gold and dashed with heat and shade. Bugs hissed louder, reminding them the forest was alive. Call pointed out the sycamore tree, and the poisonous hemlock, and the rock that looked everything like a turtle. Caped Justice pointed out the thorns Call was about to walk into, the tree that looked like a rooster, the beetle tanning on the rock that looked everything like a turtle. Call showed Caped Justice the best climbing trees, Caped Justice admitted he had never climbed a tree.

This was remedied, this was remedy. Slowly, the two boys went from terrible to worse, from ruffled to undone, from weak to defenseless. They were an absolute mess. In the best possible way.

They climbed the tree, which in hindsight, was a bad idea, because Call’s sunglasses fell off. The moment they slipped from his nose, everything went cold. This only worked because Call wasn’t Radar. Caped Justice would hate him. The night would be over, he felt like it had only just started, he had only just gotten the taste of what his world was always meant to feel like.

Indeed, when Caped Justice saw Call’s eye, his expression hardened. There was every reason for him to put it together.

But, Call had been smart, and he was overdue on a bit of luck. He had a third excuse planned for the injury, after all. Dress up for a presentation, warding off a headache, but also-

“There was a break-in at my house last night,” Call revealed, not really looking at Caped Justice. “Have you noticed in the papers recently all the break-ins that have been happening? They’re everywhere. Apparently especially auto repair shops.” All of that was true. If Caped Justice looked at the papers, he’d find the very reports. The city was getting restless, and the superheroes had a predominant crime to worry about. There had been a series of break-ins, recently, that targeted auto repair places. And Call, Call was a lucky boy.

Caped Justice’s expression hardened even more. He had, after all, been reading the papers. “We should have been there to help. You got injured…”

He had no clue he had been there to help. He had no clue Call was Radar, right was wrong, the day was the night but it wasn’t, so it was dusk. Call shook his head so Caped Justice would clear the ridiculous notion from his head. Caped Justice reached out and trailed his fingers, ever so lightly, over Call’s bruised temple and cheekbone. It was a pretty precarious move, accounting for the fact they were both sitting in a tree. Call wasn’t sure he was breathing. Call was sure it wasn’t painful. It would be so hard to for Caped Justice to hurt him, Call, as long as Call wasn’t Radar.

“It’ll heal,” Call said, because that was his general view on injuries. Complain, but it’ll heal. Hurts, but it’ll heal. Still, anger set on Caped Justice’s jaw, and Call was still terrified it was towards him.

“I’ll hunt them down.” No anger towards Call, then.

“It’s really okay.”

“That’s an intentional injury. Crowbar? Fist?”

“I don’t exactly remember getting it,” Call said. “Everything was dark, it all happened quickly.”
Caped Justice seethed.

“I don’t need you to protect me, big guy,” Call said, sarcasm towards Caped Justice’s attitude dripping in his voice. “Case in point,” and then he jumped from the tree. They were easily two stories up in branches, but there was a clear shot to the forest floor, and Call had been climbing trees before he climbed out of his mother’s womb.

One learns how to land on the good leg.

There was, of course, a snap where Call had landed on his dad’s sunglasses that had fallen off, but that didn’t matter, because Caped Justice’s face was equal parts worry and awe and hilarity.

“Do it!” Call yelled up to him. Caped Justice eyed the ground skeptically, although Call didn’t know what there was to be skeptical of. The ground didn’t go away. Then, Caped Justice jumped, and Call tried to get out of the way but couldn’t in time, and they were both in the dirt and springy brush, together.

“This forest is a lot more inviting without dying squirrels,” Caped Justice said.

“There’s more,” Call said. He stood, dusted himself off, and held his hand out to Caped Justice. There was further west to go. More trees. More rocks. More night.

Caped Justice gave Call a piggy back ride, and he purposefully fell over again when they came to another field of soft ferns. They ripped up grass and peppered each other with it. They found the stream (Call stopped to ask directions from the woodland creatures a few times, and told Caped Justice he was just taking multiple, very short bathroom breaks). The stream was wide enough and shallow enough that they could run down it side by side, and so they did, splashing the hems of their shirts with their crazy running, with their pushing, with their tackling. The found a long, new, log, sitting sturdy against the forest floor. It was thick, up to Call’s waist. They jumped up to sit on it, Caped Justice helping lift Call even though Call insisted he didn’t need the help. After sitting on the log, knocking their heels against it, sticking their hands in the knotty hole near the base, they ran along it til they met in the middle. Jousting? Neither of them fell. Caped Justice almost did, but then Call hugged him again. Hugs are life saving things.

Call showed Caped Justice how there were often bugs under moss. The bunny nest (although he wouldn’t let them get too close). The place where all the 20 year olds sit and drink beer and leave their litter. The tallest tree in the forest, and the shortest. Caped Justice eagerly listened to every word, picked dandelions when he saw them and tucked them into Call’s waistband, told Call about where a beetle could and couldn’t live. Apparently he had gone through a beetle phase when he was younger.

They eventually made it as far west as possible before they would start to see city again, and this is where Call dragged Caped Justice to a steep rock. They scaled it, not without effort and some slipping from all that running they’d done in the stream, and sat on the top. It was smooth, but also they’d fall off at any moment. Exhilarating, ruining.

“Your superpower is extended vision, yeah?” Call asked. Caped Justice stiffened.

“Yeah…” he said. Superhero that didn’t want to talk about his superpower. Dime a dozen.

“Can you see past the horizon?” Call asked.

“If I stretch it,” Caped Justice responded, hollow or scratchy, all too much like a preset record. Call reached his final question, something he never thought he’d care about.
“Can you see the constellations before they rise?” Call asked.

Caped Justice sat, and they watched as the light slipped below the horizon with the rest of the sun until it was just a dark sky, and it was so impossible. He told Call about constellations, Perseus and Leo and Cassiopeia. He was hesitant at first, sounding like even he didn’t know what he was seeing. Eventually he was just telling Call about stars.

They were doing something, that was the thing. This wasn’t what people generally did after long days, after long hugs. This wasn’t what Call knew how to do. He didn’t know how to friend, but this, surely, was not how it worked. This wasn’t how friends hung out. This wasn’t how friends felt.

Caped Justice, worn and damp and dirt dusted and messy, was stunning in profile. He was glowing, but not the literal way he usually did, how he would glow when the sun caught his hair just right. He was glowing in the night, in the possibility, in the graying sky. He sat, at home on a dangerous rock next to Call, flicking bugs off his arms and talking softly, smiling wildly. He looked different in the blue of dusk on a Friday, framed by the wonder of their woods.

Oh. So Call had a raging crush on Caped Justice.

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It didn’t want to end, they didn’t want it to end, but.

But.

There’s no rest for the wicked. And other such excuses.

The walk back to Call’s house was quieter, both of them apprehensive of the end. Call, because he didn’t know how he would deal with his knowledge of his crush going forward. It made sense in the woods, and when he was Call. It would make less sense in the harsh light of the city, and when he was Radar. But it wouldn’t go away. Call was a stubborn boy.

Besides, neither wanted to. Leave the woods, that is. But.

Not to mention, Call wasn’t sure his house looked properly broken into, and was worrying a bit about that.

“What’s your favorite song?” Call asked to fill the silence. Music was a generic thing that still managed to be a personal thing. Music was what moved people, and they were two moved people, so perhaps it was about time to start talking about it.

“It’s obscure,” Caped Justice said, and told Call about it.

“I recognize the artist,” Call said, smiling at the look on Caped Justice’s face. “My friend Aaron also likes them.” Aaron had asked Call about music while they were passing notes that morning.

“I’ll have to meet him someday,” Caped Justice said, holding an ironic smile when there was, again, nothing to be ironic about.

“You’d hate his dumb face,” Call said, and Caped Justice’s heart sank, “only because it’s prettier than yours,” and Caped Justice’s heart rose.

“You have no idea how pretty my face is,” Caped Justice defended.

“No, but Aaron Stewart is by law more attractive than everybody else,” Call said.
“Should I be jealous?” Caped Justice asked, over the moon, over the sun, over the stars.

“You don’t have much right to be,” Call said. He rose an eyebrow, the one over his not blackened eye. “Three days, after all.” They both huffed a laugh at that.

Three days was quickly becoming a joke, to them. The fact that it could be so little time. The fact that it was so little time and they were both irrational, to decide to be close friends after three days. The stars bled out into the sky, and Call didn’t recognize any of the ones Caped Justice had told him about.

That was okay. He’d mostly wanted to hear the stellar boy talk about himself.

When they got to Call’s house, Caped Justice was not examining it for break-in damage, as he should have been. He was staring directly at Call, who found he didn’t mind eye contact if it was with this boy.

Call put a hand on the doorknob, looked at Caped Justice, at every loose hair, every dripping shoelace, every runny nose (there was only one runny nose). Perhaps Call would have to tell Aaron there was somebody in the world more attractive than him.

“See you around,” Caped Justice said.

“Catch you later,” Call responded.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

This chapter, in my notes, is called, "The Dumpster Fire," and most of the music I listened to while writing it was 8-bit gothic, and a hint of ABBA. I also wrote a good chunk of it between the hours of 1am and 6am. This tells you everything you need to know about the chapter. If you don't hate me by the end of it, I've done something wrong. Also, considering none of these kids get any sleep, instead doing BATTLE in the middle of the night with all these wackos in masks and getting beat to death, then going to school on three hours of sleep, it only makes sense I stay up all night to write this flaming mess.

List of things Call is bad at throwing: basketballs, popcorn, and parties. My need to specify this will become apparent somewhere near the middle, if you are not so distracted by your own screaming.

I would say You Have Been Warned, but you haven't been. Good luck.

Call felt like a moth ridden carpet that had been cruelly chafed against a balloon to generate some semblance of a spark. The kind with a design that might have been good, once. The kind with fraying edges that might have been purposeful. The kind that people tracked mud on.

Not because anything particular or awful had happened, but because he was at home. He’d been able to be used to the vague panic or unease being at home had caused him, but his danger sense wasn’t fond of being ignored. Or the danger got greater. Or it got closer. Whatever it was, it was his ruination today.

He was eager to leave, to bring back the good mood he’d been in after talking to Caped Justice, to make amends with his friends for leaving them earlier, to stretch his legs. Mostly, he wanted to stop feeling so unsafe. Usually, when the danger got to this point, he would hunt it down to deal with it. There was nothing for Call to hunt, though, nothing for him to do. As soon as he walked into his house, it was an omnipresent thing. He just wanted to leave. No time for lasagna.

He wrote a note for his dad without thinking what he was writing, had his costume on before he realized he’d gotten it out of his backpack. Havoc was asking incessant, buzzing questions, but those were easier for Call to endure. After all, they were mostly static.

Where have you... fought with... made... couldn’t go... do you ev... why is... hear me...?

“I fought someone I shouldn’t have,” Call said while he grabbed an apple and peeled the sticker off. “You’ll hear all about it when I tell the other two.”

Can’t you... now...?

Call opened the front door for Havoc, and followed him out, looking around to make sure Caped Justice wasn’t still around. “There are more questions than answers right now. It’s better to wait to discuss it so they can tell us if they know anything.”
Havoc couldn’t properly voice how upset he was- first Call ran off during the fight, then he was late coming home, now Call’s messed up his power somehow- but he gave a gravelly growl and it almost did the trick. Call innocently ate his apple.

He was a few bites deep when his danger sense stopped pulling him back home and started pulling him a different direction, far more urgently, far more far. Call chewed on his cheek, thinking. It was a vaguely urgent thing, something they’d already be addressing if he and Caped Justice weren’t late. He had been looking forward to, or at least banking on, making amends with Caped Justice and Convict (they had to be mad at him for running off on them), discussing their situation, everything. There wasn’t time for that, now. The city needed saving, and wasn’t going to wait for them to talk.

Call heaved a breath, threw his apple core in a trash can, and picked up the pace.

The bakery was a lot scarier than he remembered, and that was his own fault, and he could hear Jasper complaining on the roof about the fact that the superheroes couldn’t just meet in a, “regular place,” that wasn’t, “on the roof.” Hard to believe Jasper was saying they needed to be less melodramatic.

When Convict saw Call, Call felt the air sour. When Caped Justice saw Call, Call felt the air chill. When Jasper saw Call, the air may have been tense, but the two had long since made their peace.

“We-” Call started to say, intent on the danger still. Convict stormed over to him and pushed him, roughly. Call nearly fell, Havoc neatly caught him, Call’s tongue could suddenly only stutter.

“How do I express that I’m both outraged and concerned?” Convict steamed.

“I wish I could tell you,” Call said, trying to brush off the hurt. He was expecting their anger, but actually facing it down was harder to swallow. “We don’t have time-”

“Just so you know, more outraged than concerned,” Convict said. “You’d better have a damn good explanation for running off on us.”

“I do,” Call said. “But-”

“But nothing,” Caped Justice hissed, and Call jumped. Being interrupted again chilled his spine, and Call knew the danger was getting worse by the second. “You can’t keep endangering the team, Radar.”

“I’m sorry, really. There’s-”

“How sorry could you be?” Caped Justice barked. “This is what? The fourth time? You keep spacing out, and this is the second time you’ve run out on us. Weaknesses like this is what’s going to cost us the city. You will be the reason we can’t save it, at this rate.”

Call closed his eyes. He was burning. There were people in danger.

“We’re already at a disadvantage. We can’t have a weak link.”

“You don’t get it,” Call said, against his better judgement (Havoc, his better judgement, couldn’t get through to him very well at the moment).

“We get that you have a tendency to abandon us,” Convict said, and she was cutting steel.

“And that you’re most often the one incapacitated in fights,” Caped Justice said.
“Guys,” Jasper said, but everybody ignored him.

“I can explain,” Call said, desperate, danger creeping thickly through his throat.

“I’m sure you can,” Caped Justice scoffed. Call felt the need to defend himself, to throw up his arm to block their hits, but he needed to take them. He deserved them for abandoning the team. He hadn’t been wrong, but he wasn’t in the right.

“I can,” Call assured. “But later.”

“Oh, you’re so full of bullshit,” Convict said. “Trying to get out of this because you can’t stand your own failures? Are you kidding?”

“That’s not—” Call tried, officially feeling his heart beating fast with how important the danger was getting.

“Yes, it is,” Convict said, same steely tone, same anger. Call felt like ash. Call felt like nothing. Call felt like shattered glass. Call didn’t know what he expected.

“We need to talk about this now,” Caped Justice said. “Because as of now, we can’t trust you. And we can’t work with somebody we can’t trust. Not with the city at stake.”

“Guys,” Jasper said, louder this time, and since he also sounded mad, everybody looked at him. “You aren’t listening.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Convict asked.

“It means Ca... Radar’s been trying to tell you about something, probably a threat, this whole time, and you haven’t given him the chance,” Jasper said. His usual jerky tone was aimed at somebody who wasn’t Call, for once, and Call was suddenly glad they’d made something like a truce.

“What,” Caped Justice said, more blunt than a question.

“He said we didn’t have the time to talk,” Jasper scowled, “and considering he’s the one that knows when things are wrong, we’re going to assume that means something’s wrong, right Radar?”

“Yeah,” Call said, voice somehow weak, “worse by the second.” Caped Justice and Convict looked at each other. Havoc’s tail wasn’t wagging. Jasper was glaring. They were a mess of a team.

“What is it?” Convict asked stiffly.

“The Enemy,” Call said. “What else?”

“Can you tell us anything else about the scene?” Convict asked.

“I don’t know, I’m such a weak link,” Call said, even though he shouldn’t have. They needed to be a team, efficient, working with the single goal of saving the city. Their work belonged in the shallows. But here they were, in the middle of a fathomlessly deep ocean, swimming through the mire of each other, screaming and unspoken, hurt.

“Radar,” Caped Justice boiled, nearly dangerously.

“Hey, hey now,” Jasper said, holding up his hands. “Caped Justice, shouldn’t you be able to tell us about the scene? Super vision is, like, your whole thing.”

“That’s Radar’s job,” Caped Justice said, staring fire at Call. Call stared back, drowning. He missed
Caped Justice. The version of him that had come to Call for solace, that had hugged him in the shadows. This version cut him down with ease, and Call let him. “It’s also, like, his whole thing.”

“Leave the sarcasm to me, would you?” Jasper bit. “And surely you can evaluate a scene better than he can, seeing as he’s working with feelings and you’re working with concrete sight.”

“I can’t do it,” Caped Justice said. He was twisted, his tone, his grimace, the emotion in his gaze as he looked at Call, at Jasper.

“And why not?” Jasper asked. “Can’t do your job of seeing things? Doesn’t that make you the weak link?”

Call didn’t know how he felt about Caped Justice being the one attacking him and Jasper being the one defending him. Or, he did know how he felt. He was crushed. Caped Justice was so much for Call, and so little for Radar. To Call, he was starry eyed and gentle. But, because Call was Radar, Caped Justice was a blight, ready to kick him down. It hurt. It hurt that Call wasn’t allowed to be Radar, that Caped Justice was allowed to be so cruel and so lovely.

Silence choked them all, and danger was rocking across the city.

“I don’t know where I’d be looking, and can’t see at night,” Caped Justice said carefully.

“Excuses,” Jasper hissed.

“It’s-”

“I know exactly how your power works,” Jasper said. “Hi, leading superpower scientist here. Sight based powers can see no matter the lighting, and your vision is drawn to where there’s more activity. Isn’t that weird?”

Caped Justice was shaking. Jasper was steaming. Convict was acidic. Havoc was painfully invisible. Call was broken.

“Two cronies,” Call finally said, if only to stop that fight from happening. “I think one of them is Lightning. I can’t promise Joseph won’t show up, because apparently he can teleport.” There were reactions to this, but they couldn’t keep talking, the ocean needed to dry up, they needed to go. They were tearing each other apart. “Only two wolves. That makes an even four against our five.”

They were all frozen. The air was heavy with everything that needed to be said, and Call felt he was about to fold under it.

“Obviously I’m the only one on the team that can fight Lightning, since you two found him so unbeatable at the bank,” Call said, loudly and brashly. It was a desperate, probably idiotic thing, but he was shattered. There was no room left for guesses, he just had to make his shots until they hit.

Caped Justice, surprisingly, laughed. It was sarcastic and lifeless, but it was something. Convict’s posture got less tense, and, okay, this was going to work, somehow.

“Shut up,” Convict said, and it hurt, but probably in a good way. “We can match you against the wolves, because you’re good at animal handling, then put two people on Lightning, and that leaves two people for whomever the other cronie is.”

Call bit back his comment that he was not, currently, good at animal handling, that he was thoroughly broken after his fight with the Enemy, that he was definitely currently the weak link they were accusing him of being. Because he needed them to trust him still, even the littlest bit. He needed...
it. He needed it like nothing else.

“Havoc, you’re with Jasper, make sure he doesn’t die,” Convict said. “You two fight the variable cronie. Caped Justice and I will fight Lightning.”

“Why is Havoc the one protecting me?” Jasper asked.

“Would you rather Caped Justice be protecting you?” Convict asked. “Do you need an opportunity to swoon over his superheroness?” Jasper scowled, and Call blushed, but nobody was looking at Call.

“Let’s just go,” Jasper said. “We’ve stalled enough.”

“Lead on, Radar,” Caped Justice said grimly, and Jasper sent him an accusing look that they all pretended didn’t happen. The fights couldn’t continue now.

They walked in silence. Nobody intercepted them, because the night only seemed to get darker and more empty. The sky was unfamiliar, and lights got dimmer and dimmer as they spanned the streets. Call was the one to eventually break the silence.

“Oh, there’s something you guys should know about,” Call said before he thought the better of it. The closer they got, the more things Call understood about the scene, the more connections he could make.

“Please,” Convict said.

Call was grim. He knew what he was about to say had meaning he wasn’t ready to understand. After all, he’d been so good at ignoring the signs for so long. Mistaking his danger sense for something else even though he knew damn well what was happening when he was eating lasagna, writing notes, getting out as soon as possible every morning and every afternoon. “We’re headed to a break in.”

“...at an auto shop,” Caped Justice said, putting the pieces together, realization striking his tone.

“We, admittedly, should have known the recent spike in break ins at auto repair shops were too specific and definitely had something to do with the Enemy,” Convict said.

Call mindlessly agreed, letting them talk about what it meant that the Enemy was targeting auto repair shops. All he thought about was home. He could be in danger because of the threat that the Enemy was going to break into it, but then his danger sense would constantly be leading him to repair shops across town. Which meant there was something dangerous in specifically his house, which so happened to be an auto repair shop, which so happened to have a connection to the Enemy.

Yeah, not something he was going to tell the others.

The first thing Call noticed when they arrived on scene was the name.

Wheely Good Auto Service was, firstly, a disappointment of a pun. It also happened to be slightly on fire. It would probably be 100% less on fire if they’d shown up earlier, but also, there was definitely oil in there, so there wasn’t exactly time to dwell on that.

They didn’t even stop to add this to their plan. They just ran in, Caped Justice shouting, Havoc blending into the smoke, Jasper calling the fire department.

Call felt where the danger was concentrated, the back left, and assumed that’s where the fire was. He
ran into it, breathing through his sleeve and blinking. It was, again, a small fire, so he could still see, but it was still, you know, a fire. He didn’t notice where everybody else went. He only found himself alone, tripping around flames, worn and broken, and staring down a manic Lightning.

Lightning’s smile was too wide, twisted. “Finally caught on, did’ya?” he asked. Casually, he tossed his lighter onto a desk covered in messy paper. It caught. “That was the last one I needed to set. Want to have a brawl before I’ve gotta go? You and I didn’t get to fight much this morning.” “I—” Call said, but the smoke caught his throat.

“Boss is pissed, by the way,” Lightning said, walking closer to Call, easy, like they were friends. “You shouldn’t have won that fight at city hall.”

“Like I had a choice,” Call strained, backing away from Lightning as he got closer. He should go find the others. He should go find the fucking fire extinguisher.

“Hm. Well. Let’s try that again, then. Maybe you’ll learn.” Lightning took a bigger step, grabbed Call by the collar of his hoodie. Call felt, ironically, like he was on fire. “Choose to lose this one,” Lightning said, then hooked his ankle around Call’s foot, pulled his leg from under him, and dropped him to the floor.

Call hit hard but scrambled up harder, knowing he had to make it through this, knowing if he could make it through a fight with the Enemy, he could make it through this, knowing they had to get rid of the threat before the firefighters showed up, because then the firefighters would be in danger. Or, more danger than usual.

Lightning tried to make a hit, Call tried to duck, they stumbled their way through a fight neither was going to win due to the other’s determination. Call, slowly, was moving the fight along the wall, looking for where the fire extinguisher was mounted. Lightning, slowly, was landing more hits. Call was already broken. He could take a few more.

“Not gonna hit me back?” Lightning asked, because apparently he couldn’t shut up. He was just like Call’s history TA. Never stopped talking. Maybe it came with being a smug bastard.

“I’m trying to give you a fair shot,” Call said. “See, I always seem to win when I hit you back.” He could be beaten to a pulp, but nobody could take away his rudeness. It was all he had.

“You only won at the bank because my power wasn’t activated,” Lightning said.

“Oh, you have a power? I didn’t notice,” Call said, grabbing a spare fender and throwing it at Lightning, fruitlessly trying to distract him. It was getting hotter.

“Of course I have a power,” Lightning said, and good, he was offended. He landed a hit on Call, Call tried not to let himself stumble. “I can fight.”

“That’s it? Your superpower is fighting?” Call asked, wishing Lightning could see his raised eyebrow. Lightning’s next hit landed hard on Call’s jaw, disorienting. Call fell again, tripping over a shelf when he tried to get up. Lightning kicked him while he was down.

“You shouldn’t trivialize it,” Lightning grinned. He tried to kick Call again, but Call grabbed his leg, wrenched it. Lightning may be able to fight, but he was only human, so he twisted and fell.

Caped Justice, somewhere, was shouting for Radar. Call realized he couldn’t see far past the smoke, the fire was getting bad. He sucked in a dangerous amount of smoky air to respond, but then Lightning kneed him in the gut and clamped a hand over his mouth.
“Y’know, I have orders to bring you to headquarters,” Lightning said, talking too much again. If Call survived this, he was going to have some valuable information. “I have a better idea.”

Call wanted to reply, Call wanted to scream for Caped Justice, Call wanted to call for Havoc. Call could do nothing. He was alone, he was doomed, he struggled anyway.

“It would be easy to say you died in the fire,” Lightning said, contemplatively. “Cause here’s the thing: you did beat me. Twice, if we credit your dog’s fighting on the roof to you. And if I’m being frank, I’m mad at you for that.”

Maybe his superpower was being good at talking, not being good at fighting. Caped Justice shouted Radar’s name again, desperate, somewhere far. Havoc was barking, but maybe that was one of the other two wolves, and Call sizzled with the shame that he couldn’t tell them apart.

“Radar, I hate to say it, but I think I’m going to kill you,” Lightning said. He did not sound like he hated it at all. In fact, he was gleeful. Call struggled harder. “The Enemy and Joseph might get mad, but I’ve already got my argument planned. See, they don’t need you for the Alkahest, because the Enemy already has your power. Get it?”

_The same, the same, the same._

Call’s struggles were getting weaker. Today sucked ass.

“Besides, Jericho will defend me,” Lightning said, talking to himself at this point, reassuring himself. “There’s no way this won’t go over smooth. So long as… oh, what’s he calling himself? Turkey? It’s after that one jockey he likes. Some french shit. Tur… Turcotte, God, he’d kill me for forgetting. Or dropping his real name in front of you.” Lightning glanced down at Call, an afterthought, barely a menace.

“So long as Turcotte doesn’t see me do it, I’ll be in the clear,” Lightning finished. “So, I guess this is the end, Radar.”

Lightning pulled out one of his numerous knives, but Call could only focus on Caped Justice, distantly shouting his name. Call felt like a living tragedy. Lightning swung the knife down, the action changing Lightning’s stance enough that Call was able to wrestle one of his arms out of Lightning’s grip and throw it up frantically. A bright sting buzzed over his forearm, Call was still breathing, Lightning was already baring down again, the room was unbearably hot.

Instead of using his free arm to block the next hit, Call made a snap (idiotic) decision and pushed Lightning’s hand away from his mouth.

“**Caped Justice!**” Call yelled like he had never before, feeling it scratch against his throat and steal pools of precious air from his lungs. The knife Call didn’t block landed on his collarbone, on the left, just above his heart.

Through the pain, Call considered that for somebody with a fighting superpower, Lightning was bad at making the killing blow. Then, he screamed. He fought, but he didn’t know what he was fighting, didn’t know anything past the pain in his shoulder. There were a thousand things he needed to be fighting for right now, and he fight for none of them, only scream his throat raw and watch the building burn.

“Dammit,” Lightning hissed. That much Call caught. He also caught the thud, but everything was getting harder to hear under the roar of the flames. A weight fell off his stomach, so Call assumed he was free of the burden of Lightning, and then Caped Justice was pulling him to a sitting position. His
mouth was twisted. Call realized harshly that he’d done it again, he’d gotten caught by the enemy side, he’d been the weak link of the team. Caped Justice was right. One of these days, he was going to get caught. The city would fall because of him.

He felt his entire body shuddering. His blood pounding. Pain screaming. He heaved breaths.

“Radar, where’s the fire, the fire’s the danger, point me there, you know where the danger is, we can fix you once the fire’s out,” Caped Justice babbled, and Call could make out the color of the fire extinguisher in Caped Justice’s hands.

Call pointed weakly with the arm that hadn’t been stabbed. Caped Justice looked in the direction Call was pointing, then back at Call. Something hardened in his face, and then he nodded and ran to where the fire was.

The knife hadn’t been pulled out, so Call wasn’t going to bleed to death. But, he also had no clue how he was going to hide this injury. He barely had the energy to, but he looked to where Lightning was on the floor next to him. Not knocked out, but not moving, simply rubbing the back of his head, eyes blurry.

Caped Justice was in front of him again, suddenly, and Call blinked a few times.

“Did you put out the fire?” Call asked, and words rattled his head with the pain.

“I found Convict and gave her the extinguisher,” he said.

“Then Havoc and… and Jasper are stuck,” Call said, struggling with words again.

“They can take care of themselves,” Caped Justice said, and Call felt the implication, knew that meant that Call couldn’t.

“Why did you come back,” Call said, and it was almost an accusation. Leave me to die, if you’re going to hate me.

There was pain in Caped Justice’s eyes. He wasn’t even the one that got stabbed. “I couldn’t leave you like this.”

“I had it taken care of,” Call said. It sounded lame, even to him.

“Radar…” Caped Justice said, warring with himself. He sighed. There was howling, somewhere.

“Say it,” Call said, not wanting to hear it.

“Why does this keep happening?” Caped Justice asked. “It’s enough of a pattern that there’s got to be a reason.”

There were a lot of answers to this question. Call had to stop concentrating on fights, sometimes, to use his powers. Call was the unluckiest person, for one reason or another, and always seemed to take the wrong step. Call’s leg limited his range of motion from time to time. Call had to teach himself to fight, so he wasn’t very good at it. Everything.

“God, there are so many reasons,” Call eventually breathed. He closed his eyes through the pain, talking steadily. “Only about one I can do anything about. Who taught you to fight, Cape?”

Caped Justice took a flustered, almost confused second. “One of my sisters. I learned some from my dad.”
Call hummed. “And who taught Convict how to fight?”

“She had lessons,” Caped Justice replied dutifully, probably only because he was caught by surprise, only because they were in a burning building, only because Call had been stabbed, only because they’d both had a hell of a fucking day.

“Jasper?”

“From what I remember, he also had lessons,” Caped Justice said.

“Of course you’d know that,” Call sighed, half fond. Pain was blanking him out. He was forgetting he had to be Radar, not Call.

“What’s the…”

“Nobody taught me, and I’m kind of shit at it,” Call said. “I did fight the Enemy, earlier, though. I won that one. Bashed his mask in.”

Caped Justice frowned, hard.

“The Enemy was in the square with us,” he said slowly.

“It was a distraction, a big enough danger so I wouldn’t notice the Enemy wasn’t there,” Call responded. The howling was getting louder, along with some rough barks, and maybe the faintest hint of distant sirens.

“The Enemy was there,” Caped Justice insisted.

“The Enemy there was a decoy,” Call said. “Smaller, frailer, but the mask fit just as well and he had the exact same power.”

“Then-”

“I ran from the fight cause the Enemy was breaking into city hall,” Call said. He started shifting, feeling the blood that had been welling finally start to run down his arm. His breathing was getting rougher.

“And you fought him,” Caped Justice clarified.

“Fought him so good that he broke my superpower,” Call said. “Don’t tell Lightning. He’s lying next to us.”

“No, he’s not,” Caped Justice said, and when Call checked, he was right. Lightning had left.

“You let him get away?” Call asked. Caped Justice just sighed, eyes skirting over Call’s face. Call couldn’t see so great, right now, but he imagined Caped Justice looked absolutely tormented. “Stop pouting.”

“We-”

“We can make amends later,” Call said, because he was already broken, he could take another hit.

“This building is on fire. We need to chase the cronies out before the firefighters arrive.”

Call heard Caped Justice clench his jaw, which wasn’t healthy for either of them. Then, Caped Justice stood up. “We need to get you out of here.”
“No,” Call said immediately. “Get Convict to set the wound. I’m not letting you guys fight four on four, not if Joseph might show up.”

“No.”

“No,” Call said roughly to keep the pain from leaking through his voice.

“Please,” Caped Justice said.

“No.”

There was silence for a moment, then: “Convict! Convict!”

Call snickered, and Caped Justice looked at him like he was insane. There was some thudding, then Convict swept out of the smoke like she was made of it, a mystical cloaked figure with a backlight from the fire. It would be so awesome if it weren’t so dire.

“Set his wound,” Caped Justice said.

Convict looked down at Call, then said, eloquently, “shit.”

“Lightning,” Call said by way of explanation.

“Radar,” Convict started.

“I know! I know, Caped Justice and I had the talk, ask him about it,” Call slurred. Convict looked at Caped Justice, saw the haunted tone to his eyes.

“We’re talking about this later,” she said resolutely.

“I would love to. Hope you guys let me speak this time. That would be lovely.”

Guilt was leaden in the already dripping, dirty air. Call felt his shoulder go cold, colder than any cold he’d ever felt, colder and colder. Everything was numb, to the point his heart was slowing. He closed his eyes and let it happen. It would get him through the fight.

Jasper screamed, and Call’s shoulder stopped getting colder.

“That’ll have to do,” Convict said, eyes pulling in the direction of the scream. “Can you move? Are we going to go fight and give up on the fire?”

“Yes to all. But we’re going to have to be quick,” Call said, mind clearing up without the itching pain. He dragged himself to his feet, and together, the three of them rushed to where the sounds of the battle were, across the shop and away from the fire. Call, somewhat and somehow, was coming back into himself. Caped Justice was going to give him a chance, at least. He had to earn some modicum of respect back for fighting the Enemy. Things may be dire, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t fix them.

Well. Maybe his superpower couldn’t be fixed, but that was fine. Oh, and Lightning had said a few proper nouns during their fight that Call had burned into his memory, and now they had more information than ever.

Who knew running into a burning building could be a good idea.

Havoc was limping and Jasper was receiving a solid punch to the face from Turcotte while Lightning held his arms behind his back when they all arrived at the fight, which was in the garage section of
the repair shop. Well, technically, it was all a garage, but it’s hard to focus on technicality in fight
scenes.

Convict leapt towards Lightning with no hesitation, Caped Justice following. Call focussed his
efforts on the wolves attacking Havoc. He couldn’t get in their heads, and there was no way he could
fight them with his damaged shoulder, but he could be good and old fashioned. A toolbox was sitting
next to a car, so Call hefted a hammer out of it, tossing it in his right hand.

He never learned to fight, but he grew up with his dad’s tools, and he knew how to make hell with
them.

Call threw the hammer end over end, and it spun through the air before hitting one of the wolves in
the flank. The wolf jumped, yipping, shaking out its leg. Havoc barked, and Call had already
launched a screwdriver. Was it irony that he probably wouldn’t be able to do this with a knife?
Didn’t matter. He kept picking up tools, testing their weight, and then throwing them at the wolves.
Throw hammers like knives. Throw screwdrivers like darts. Throw wrenches like frisbees.

The wolves eventually took their attention off Havoc to snarl at Call for throwing tools at them, but
with this distraction, Havoc grabbed one of their tails in his mouth, bit hard, and tugged.

The wolf started crying, so Call threw a tool at it to rub salt in the wound. It started thrashing, and
Call saw Havoc bite harder. Call, taking initiative, walked up to the wolf that wasn’t being bitten and
was about to bite, and he kicked it. This one was smaller, probably Call’s third stroke of luck all day.
When Call kicked it, its body wrapped around the bruise instead of absorbing it like the bigger
wolves. While it was still recovering, Call grabbed it by the ear and tugged.

It was cruel, he hated doing it, but the wolf was fighting them and Call had a hell of a day.

Call stopped when the wolf whined, and it took one last look before turning tail and scampering off.
When the wolf ran by Havoc, Havoc let go of the other wolf’s tail, and that wolf immediately started
running, too. Call should have thought of throwing tools at the dogs before.

Jasper’s nose was bleeding, but he blocked a hit from Turcotte just the same, using his signature
glare. Havoc raced over to help him. Caped Justice and Convict were both fighting Lightning, who
had one less knife, but was still a wild animal. The sirens were getting louder.

Lightning, in a swift motion, spun around behind Convict and pulled a knife to her throat. The flurry
froze.

“Alright,” Lightning huffed. “You nuisances need to calm down. You’re all coming with us, or, you
know, stabby stabby.”

Turcotte started laughing, and Lightning was flushed with pride. Caped Justice and Jasper looked
awash with despair. Convict was warring with herself.

Call had, arguably, the worst idea ever.

He looked down, and found with surprise that the knife was still in his shoulder. He supposed it
staunched the bleeding. Well, not for long.

He gritted his teeth and tugged it out, and since his shoulder was numb with cold, he hardly felt it.
He was also, thankfully, far enough away from the fight that Lightning didn’t care when he started
moving. The thing was, Call knew he could throw tools, but that wouldn’t have the desired effect.
He needed Lightning to drop the knife at Convict’s throat, and blunt tools would only knock it
backwards.
It was, perhaps, ironic, that Call had been speculating moments ago about how he probably couldn’t throw a knife. He could throw a hammer like a knife with deadly accuracy. This was simply a faster hammer with different weight distribution. Totally fine.

This was, without a doubt, so dumb.

Call breathed all of the tension from his posture, testing the knife’s weight and throwing it a few times to get a feel for how it spun. All the while, Lightning was talking, because he was Lightning.

It took a few seconds and the concrete shutting up of his reasonable thoughts, and then Call threw the knife at Convict. Specifically, Convict’s throat. Specifically, the hand holding a knife to Convict’s throat. It spun, barely flashing in the low light.

Lightning screamed, immediately dropping the knife he was holding when all of the muscles in his hand lit up in pain. Convict almost got away from him, but before she was all the way in the clear, Lightning was crazed again. He, of course, had another knife. This time, he slashed more than stabbed. Convict wavered on her feet.

The sirens were loud, and Turcotte and Lightning seemed to realize at the same time that their wolves were gone and Lightning was halfway incapacitated. Call and Convict were both sitting on the ground, heaving painful breaths and putting pressure on their respective wounds, and the auto repair shop was still on fire. Turcotte patted his pocket, then nodded at Lightning. Lightning nodded back.

They had whatever they’d come for.

Lightning and Turcotte left without words or fanfare, weird for Lightning, and nobody quite knew who’d won that fight. Call held the secret conviction that the heroes had, undoubtedly, lost.

“Radar, are you shitting me,” Convict yelled from the ground.

“It was worth the shot,” Call said, carefully, apologetically, he had definitely almost killed her and she had just gotten a wicked cut on her arm and she was probably still mad at him for earlier.

“That was so cool,” she shouted, and Call laughed in surprise. She started laughing with him, and hey, if they weren’t dying in a burning building, it almost felt like things were okay. Havoc started worrying over Call, Caped Justice started worrying over Convict, Jasper was just pacing.

They all huffed a few breaths through the smoke.

“Radar,” Caped Justice eventually said. “Please explain what happened today.” They should probably leave, but it also felt like their responsibility to be there when the firefighters showed up. So, they all sat, shrouded in smoke and burning light and frenzy, and Call told them.

“Didn’t you hear from the news that the Enemy tried to break into city hall?” Call asked, and if the room hadn’t already been on fire, that would have been the fastest way to set it on fire. “Or, did the news get caught by the same distraction we did?”

“What do you mean?” Jasper asked.

“The riot was a greater danger, built to be a distraction. The real Enemy wasn’t there. There was a decoy. I left to go stop the real one,” Call said patiently.

“If the danger was so great, how did you find out the Enemy wasn’t there?” Convict asked. Call, from where he was sitting, stared ruthlessly at her and Caped Justice.
“I need to concentrate to use my power,” he said, and it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I took my mind off the battle for long enough to get caught by Joseph, but also long enough to realize what was going on.” Effectively saving the city, but none of them said it. Instead, Caped Justice and Convict let realization drip down.

“So you keep spacing out during fights…” Caped Justice said.

“To use my power to our advantage, yeah,” Call responded. “It just so happens that I’m not good enough at fighting all the time to make up the difference.”

“And you get caught,” Convict finished, voice nearly masked by the sirens.

“Essentially becoming the weak link, yes,” Call said. Caped Justice flinched.

“Radar-”

“Why didn’t you tell us that the square was a decoy?” Convict interrupted, her voice getting brash again. “We wouldn’t have thought you were abandoning us. We could have helped you… *holy shit* did you fight the Enemy by yourself?”

“Um, yes,” Call said.

“Radar, you’re an idiot,” Convict said.

“We were a bit busy, in his defense,” Jasper said.

“It would have taken too much time to go around and tell you,” Call said, “and if I’d shouted it to everybody, Joseph would have known for sure I’d caught on. Since he can teleport, it would have given the Enemy an advantage we couldn’t let him have when he was already attacking city hall while it was undefended.”

“Joseph can what?” Caped Justice asked.

“Teleport. Poof. Cloud. Remember last night? He did it again. It’s how the Enemy got away from me. I think it’s his superpower,” Call said.

“I know what his superpower is,” Jasper said gingerly. “It’s not that.”

Everybody was quiet. Fire roaring and sirens ringing and murderous emotions were loud enough.

“Oh, and by the way, the Enemy officially messed me up while we were fighting and I can’t talk to animals anymore. I bashed the mask in with a rock, though, so I think we’re even,” Call said after a minute.

“Radar,” Jasper said carefully.

“Yes, dearest?” Call responded, because he was dying in a burning building.

“That’s very not good,” Jasper said.

“Havoc and I are abundantly aware,” Call said.

“Your power broke fighting the Enemy,” Convict repeated.

“Yes,” Call said.
“And you still came into the fight and took on the wolves.”

“Yes. I didn’t want to be the weak link.”

“I shouldn’t have said that,” Caped Justice blurted.

“And I shouldn’t forgive you for it,” Call responded primly. Caped Justice chewed the inside of his mouth.

“Can we just say we were all mad and all did dumb shit and are all okay with everybody else being mad and doing dumb shit because we’re human,” Jasper said. He was running a dirty hand through his hair.

“We aren’t human, we’re superheroes,” Caped Justice said flatly.

“And Havoc’s a dog,” Call chimed.

“You guys know what I mean,” Jasper said.

“Ignoring emotions is a bad way to properly deal with them,” Convict said, and Call wondered how she could be bleeding out and still better than the rest of them.

“With how much we’ve talked about them, I don’t think we’ve ignored any emotion,” Jasper said, but they hadn’t really talked about the feelings, had they? Just the events. Whether or not anybody else thought that, though, they all steadily nodded. They didn’t necessarily forgive each other, but they could understand each other, and forgiveness would come in time. Or maybe Caped Justice would never trust Radar again, maybe Convict would stay mad, maybe Jasper would bully him at school, maybe Lightning would kill him, maybe he would never be able to talk to Havoc again. Maybe the whole city would get infected with the virus.

Or, you know, maybe everything would turn out.

Firefighters stormed the building.

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They were sitting in the hospital cafeteria, Call and Convict thoroughly bandaged, Caped Justice and Jasper minorly bandaged, and Havoc hiding himself under the table. It was probably around midnight, at this point. Call had long since lost track of time.

Hot chocolate wasn’t really an option, but they were superheroes, so it was an option. They were all sipping meekly, melting away the day. Eventually, Call said, “I know Turcotte’s civilian identity.”

“Radar, I’m going to have to ask you to stop dropping things like this casually,” Convict said immediately. “It’s bad for my health.”

“Worse for your health than me throwing a knife at your face?” Call asked.

“Touché, please continue,” Convict said. Caped Justice dutifully dug his notebook out of his backpack, handing it to Convict along with a pen. Convict flipped it open to the page where they had last consolidated their information. So much had changed since then. Jasper wasn’t the enemy anymore. They knew the Enemy’s motivations now. Call and Caped Justice hadn’t hugged yet. Convict clicked the pen open.

“Lightning said that Turcotte was the name of a jockey. And who our age does that sound like?”
Call said, sipping his hot chocolate again.


“Apparently,” Call agreed. “He’s talked to me a few times at school, he was missing during the fire drill, and he talked weirdly after I broke Turcotte’s nose this morning.”

“Does he set off your danger sense?” Caped Justice asked. Call thought back to how uncomfortable every time he and Drew asked, the weird feeling that something was wrong that wasn’t quite a panic and was easy enough to write off.

“Abundantly,” Call responded.

As Convict scribbled furiously, Jasper said, “Wait. If he’s talking to you at school, does that mean he knows your identity?” The irony of Jasper being the one asking this question was not lost on Call.

“He suspects it,” Call corrected, “but I think I’ve dodged suspicion long enough. It’s fine. I also think he’s the cronie that made the virus, cause he said something to me about his superpower—”

“He is,” Jasper said. “Lightning’s is fighting. Turcotte’s is viruses. The Enemy’s is hypnotism. Joseph’s is casting.”

“Casting?” Caped Justice asked.

“It’s like…” exhaustion stole Jaspers words, so he made a few vague gestures in hopes of getting his point across. He got nothing across. He sighed, resigned to speaking. “Old timey, classic warlocks. With robes and stars and pointy hats and staffs.”

“He can control brooms like Fantasia,” Call said.

“Your mom can control brooms like Fantasia,” Jasper responded.

“Not your best.”

“It’s midnight, cut me some slack.”

“My burns are better at midnight.”

“Well, we can’t all be you, nobody else knows how to be an emo shithead and a superhero at the same time,” Jasper said. Call snorted into his hot chocolate.

“Hey, now,” Caped Justice said.

“You’re a rockstar,” Jasper responded.

“That was cheap and you know it,” Call said.

“Can you get them to stop, please,” Convict said to Caped Justice.

“Do… do you guys hate each other?” Caped Justice asked instead.

“A lot,” Call said, probably sarcastic.

“Very much so,” Jasper drawled.

“Uh… huh…” Caped Justice said. He stared into his hot chocolate like it held answers.
“Casting involves things like minor transmutation and warding,” Jasper said smoothly, like Call’s tangent had never happened.

“Seems overpowered,” Call said.

“It is.”

“Does that explain the teleportation?” Caped Justice asked.

“No, he shouldn’t be able to do that. It does explain the fog, though,” Jasper said. The table was surrounded by a wall of frowns, now, and they all sipped hot chocolate in their distress.

“Anything else while I’ve got the book out?” Convict asked without looking up.

“The wolves are getting sick with the virus,” Caped Justice said. Everybody, especially Havoc, looked at him.

“Do you mind?” Call asked, ever so slightly offended.

“There have been fewer wolf attacks recently, and they’re showing up in lighter forces at fights,” Caped Justice said. “Either the Enemy’s pulling back, unlikely, or the wolves are unfit for service. They must be getting sick.”

“Havoc?” Call asked out loud, since he certainly couldn’t ask it in their heads anymore. Havoc brushed Call’s foot with his tail, which meant no. “He says he’s not sick.”

“So your power is working again?” Jasper asked.

“No, I’m just a good pet owner,” Call responded.

“If the wolves are getting sick, that’s good,” Convict muttered.

“It means the virus is weakening his ranks as much as it’s weakening ours,” Caped Justice said. “We just have to make sure Havoc doesn’t get sick.”

“Yessir,” Call replied. “Oh, and Convict write down the words Alkahest and Jericho.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Lightning monologued to me, and he mentioned both of them.”

“That does seem worth looking into.” She wrote it down.

“Now for the obvious,” Caped Justice said.

“Do tell,” Jasper said.

“The auto repair store break ins have been the work of the Enemy,” Caped Justice said, and Call felt a cold chill of horror. He had forgotten. He hadn’t wanted to think about it. Danger at home, connected to the Enemy.

“Is there some sort of pattern to the break ins?” Convict asked. “Why would the Enemy be breaking into auto repair shops?”

“What have they been taking is the better question,” Jasper said. They all thought about this.
“Hey, somebody hand me that,” Caped Justice said, motioning to the newspaper stuck in a plastic canister at the head of the table. Jasper tugged it out and slid it to him. They all hummed while Caped Justice flipped through it.

“There’s a pattern to the break ins,” Caped Justice eventually said. “With an outlier.”

“What’s the outlier?” Jasper asked.

“What’s the pattern?” Convict asked at the same time.

“Get this: it’s reverse alphabetical,” Caped Justice said.

“Are you shitting me.”

“No.”

“How hasn’t anybody noticed?”

“Maybe they’re too busy being infected and/or taking care of their sick family members,” Call said idly. Silence permeated their table.

“The outlier,” Caped Justice eventually said, “is Alastair’s Auto Repair,” and, lord, of course it was. Of fucking course. After all, Call himself had told Caped Justice earlier there was a break in at that very spot. His feelings skipped. Joyful, jittery.

He was new to having crushes, and new to the feeling of his crush paying attention to and caring about what he was saying (especially because his first crush had spent most of the night making Call feel accursed), but. Most crushes probably weren’t soiled with suspicions, fears of letting them too close else they find out too many dastardly secrets. Most crushes weren’t a mess of superheroes and identities and villains making a sick of the city. Most.

Call was just lucky, he supposed.

“That’s odd,” he forced himself to say, willing his voice to stay smooth and not strained. But the city was more important than his high school crush. The virus only ever grew, so it didn’t matter if Call wanted to save face in front of a cute boy. This truth had to be more important than his loving lie.

“...What?” Caped Justice asked, gaze cutting at Call. Call made an effort not to stare at his drink, instead looking back at Caped Justice. How much was a regular amount of eye contact to hold with Caped Justice?

“Well, see, I live near there,” Call said. “I would have known if there was a break in. Danger sense and all.”

“There wasn’t a break in?” Caped Justice asked slowly. *Somebody else I trust lied to me*? He was asking. *The adventures Call took me on could all be lies*? He was asking. *A relationship built on feelings too genuine to do anything else with could lack sincerity*? He was asking.

“Definitely no break in,” Call responded easily. His words dripped like hot, sticky blood from his mouth. He wasn’t quite sure what was bleeding, or what was ironic, or what stars were in the sky. Caped Justice, for the first time that night, seemed put down. Sad in a bone-deep way that anger or inner strength wouldn’t fix. Something inside Call that had remained alive finally withered.

“Where did you hear about the outlier from?” Convict asked, scanning the newspaper over Caped Justice’s shoulder and obviously not finding Alastair’s Auto Repair on the list. Caped Justice
“Nowhere,” he said, and that was the end of it. “The newspaper tells us most of the damages. Tonight seems to be the first case of arson.”

“That probably only happened because Lightning was having a bad day,” Call said.

“How do you mean?”

Call shrugged. “He told me the Enemy was pissed that I beat him. You know how overemotional supervillains are.”

Convict wrote, and wrote, and with all the hot chocolate Call had, he was starting to feel warmth return to his blood. Once Convict finally stopped writing, Jasper said, “I saw something I should have mentioned earlier.”

“Go on,” Convict sighed.

“Turcotte dropped a piece of paper while I was fighting him,” Jasper said. “I think it was tucked behind his watch. I didn’t see where it fell because I didn’t want to draw attention to it, and I forgot to pick it up.”

“You pronounced his name wrong. It’s French. You need to sound more disgusted when you say it, but also like you’re trying to make love to a beating, bleeding heart,” Call said, because he always made a point to be relevant to the conversation.

“You should pursue a career as an acting coach,” Jasper griped back.

“Caped Justice,” Convict said, offhand.

“On it,” Caped Justice responded, looking up from the newspaper, a smirk he couldn’t seem to help pulling on his face. “Mom says you guys need to shut up.”

They all started snickering, because of course they did. The hospital staff had probably spiked the hot chocolate.

“We should find that paper before they do,” Convict said once they’d laughed out all their hot chocolate.

“Which means we send out a search team,” Caped Justice said, as if this day hadn’t already been long enough.

“Even if it’s a note from a secret love, it’ll have something we can exploit on it,” Jasper agreed. Call nodded, and Havoc obviously couldn’t put in his two cents, so it was decided.

“Good. Havoc needs to go because he’s the one that can track things. Jasper needs to go because he saw the paper. Radar needs to go because Havoc is going. Sound good?”

It made enough sense that nobody challenged it, so as Call and Jasper and Havoc got up and left, Convict and Caped Justice stayed sitting at the table, studying the papers in front of them.

It was dark outside. Havoc was barely visible, and before they set out, Jasper pulled Call aside so they were standing next to the door, the flat light still slanting onto their faces.

“What’s this?” Call asked.
“Don’t tell me you’re the one that forgot,” Jasper scoffed, digging something out of his pocket.
“Take your mask off.”

“Wha- oh. Right,” Call said, hesitating before taking off his mask. He really hoped Caped Justice didn’t walk outside. Havoc paced anxiously, and Call didn’t even bother trying to tell him what they were doing.

Jasper, step by step, insult by insult, taught Call how to properly hide a black eye. Call, step by step, wit by wit, learned. They were so close that when they glared, the other caught the full brunt of it. They were so close that when they laughed, they breathed hot chocolate on each other’s faces, and that made them laugh more.

“I know you insist on being awful at, like, everything, but please try harder to stay still,” Jasper said.

“Maybe if you tell me to stay still for an eleventh time, it’ll finally work. Go on, try again,” Call taunted.

“I could stab your eye right now,” Jasper said.

“You wouldn’t be able to stand the fact that I would finally be cooler than you.”

“And how, pray tell, would that kind of injury make you cooler than me?”

“Because I,” Call said, devastatingly, “would get to wear an eyepatch.”

“You’d be so much cooler than me just via eyepatch,” Jasper repeated. “You, the gutter vermin with obviously worse hair.”

“ Yes ,” Call insisted.

In the end, it worked, and then they wiped it off so Call could put his mask back on. Jasper gave Call all of the makeup, and Call shoved it in his hoodie pocket. Then, they were off, the three of them walking towards Wheely Good Auto Service.

“Hey Jasper,” Call eventually said as they strode over a crosswalk.

“Yes, dearest?” Jasper responded, smirking at his sweet payback. Call tripped him where he was walking, but didn’t acknowledge it further.

“Am I going to be able to talk to Havoc again?”

Call tried not to look at the ground, instead aiming at looking at the stars, but perhaps Caped Justice was lying to him as much as he was lying to Caped Justice, because none of them were what he described. He looked away.

Call didn’t want to see the pity in Jasper’s eyes, but he looked anyway. Jasper was staring at the sidewalk, face gaunt with pain. Call blinked.

“I’m going to see if I can find a way to make it work,” Jasper said. “But-”

“But?”

“But, look around,” Jasper said. Call did. The streets had only a trickle of people on them, starkly different from the usual flood. “Finding an antidote is more important.”

“You’re sure my power won’t be an easy fix?” Call asked. His hands were shoved in his pockets,
and he wasn’t bothering looking anywhere, anymore. Jasper took a shaky breath.

“How’d it break?” Jasper asked something weird still in his voice that Call didn’t want to dig into. So, Call told him nearly exactly what happened, leaving out the bits where he and the Enemy were the same. Jasper didn’t blink the whole time he described it.

“I’d have to look into power transport,” Jasper said. “You need a reboot, essentially.”

“You need to turn me off then turn me on again?” Call asked.

“Never say those words again, if you please,” Jasper stated. Call blinked, thought about what he’d said for a second, and then laughed. “You did get the gist, though. A reboot. Essentially, the Enemy made your system rusty, so you need to clean it down. It’ll clean itself automatically if we do a reboot.”

“How do we reboot?” Call asked.

“I’ll look into it,” Jasper responded. “If it’s relatively simple, we can make it happen, but I can’t take too much energy away from looking for the antidote.”

Before Call could agree, thank him, insult him, find some clever way to do all three, they were at Wheely Good Auto Repair. The lights were all off, and nobody answered when they knocked. They walked cautiously into the ashen building.

Havoc immediately started sniffing, wandering around and nudging corners.

“Do you remember what Turcotte smells like?” Call asked. Havoc turned and gave him a look that said, “duh.”

Havoc found the small square of stationary after seven minutes of search, and Jasper swept it off the floor, brushing dust and soot around.

“Are you ready for the juicy secrets?” Jasper asked, unfolding the paper.

“Jasper? Is that you?” a voice came, and it sounded weirdly like-

Jasper looked at Call in a panic, shoving the stationary in Call’s pocket and then pulling back. Before Call could ask, Jasper tugged Call’s hood up, punched Call in the gut, and shoved him to the floor. Call started scrambling, aching with another bruise, confused. Jasper was shouting at him to stay down. Call tried to sit up anyway, started to form words that would only barely encompass his confusion. Havoc was growling, but Jasper whispered something to him that made him stop.

Havoc bled into the shadows at the same time Turcotte walked around the back of a car and into view, at the same time Jasper said, “Play along,” to Call and shoved him back to the ground.

“What’re we fighting?” Turcotte asked, looking steadily at Jasper.

“Some delinquent,” Jasper responded, familiar sneer in his tone. “Probably looking to rob the place, since it’s so inviting.” In the low light of the burned building, there was a chance Turcotte wouldn’t recognize Call as long as he had a hood over his face. Call’s everything was tensed. He was taking long breaths through his nose, and for a second, a nasty voice whispered, we never should have trusted him. Then, Call shut that up, and he played along, acting with hardly surprising ease like a scared delinquent.

“Hm,” Turcotte said, looking at Call for barely a moment before going back to Jasper. “I assume
you’re here for the paper, too?”

“Mostly just cleaning up after the fight to make sure everything’s in order,” Jasper responded.

“Ah, well, I dropped a paper at some point today, did you find it here?”

“Nothing,” Jasper said. Call held his breath.

“Damn,” Turcotte responded. “Gotta keep looking, then. Good luck with your delinquent.” And then he was gone. Jasper watched him until he was out of view, and then they all waited another ten seconds.

“Jasper,” Call said carefully.

“Did I forget to mention I accepted the Enemy’s job offer last night so I could spy on him?” Jasper asked, tone lighthearted even though he was clearly panicking. Havoc came out from his hiding place to sit next to Call and stare daggers at Jasper.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Call asked.

“I’m new to the team and none of you have any reason to trust me,” Jasper explained in a rush. “I figured I would come up with a fake reason I knew everything and I could feed you guys intel and nobody would ever have to find out.”

“Why wouldn’t we trust you just for spying on the Enemy? It’s a good tactic,” Call said. Jasper started pacing.

“Well, you all saw it in the tunnel,” Jasper said. “The Enemy does have blackmail on me. I’d be easy to exploit, so I should be kept away from him so he doesn’t fish information out of me.”

“Have you told him anything?” Call asked.

“Convincing enough lies.”

“How bad is the blackmail he’s got?” Call asked. Jasper’s eyes turned haunted.

“Crushing.”

The word settled around them, appropriate enough, with how crushing things have been lately. The room was lonely, towering around them with near vindication. The skeletons of cars hid them while they said nothing, staring into the air.

Call missed Havoc. Call missed having friends he understood. Call was tired, and had been stabbed today. Call was lonely, and he was realizing Jasper was, too. Jasper was afraid of being kicked off the team, so he didn’t understand they wanted him there.

There wasn’t a simple solution, but.

“Tell me the blackmail,” Call said. Jasper stopped pacing.

“What?”

“Get the weight off your chest. It’s tearing you apart.” Call held Jasper’s stare, thinking about the pain that had been on his face when they were talking about Call’s lost superpower, thinking about how abrasive he was all the time, thinking about the way Jasper was never at school during lunch. Call had always thought it was a skipping thing. He was starting to believe Jasper was just…
“I messed up— *I’m* messed up.” Jasper said plainly. He hugged his left shoulder, the scarred one, the one that had made him freeze in the face of the Enemy. Call didn’t say anything. Let him take his time. “My family doesn’t believe in second chances. So I’m.”

There was an end to that sentence, but Jasper didn’t say it, no matter how much Call waited. Time slid by, the shadows and the city changing around them, and Call thought some more.

“Everybody’s lonely,” Call said, finally. “And, for what it’s worth, thanks for punching me in the gut.”

“Why?” Jasper asked, dry, wrecked.

“Cause it was better than punching me in the face a second time,” Call said. He stood up, brushing off burn and chipped paint. Havoc stood with him.

“It was also better than you getting captured by Turcotte,” Jasper said.

“Seriously, just call him Drew if you’re going to butcher the French so bad,” Call said.

“Call, do you really think now is the time? Really? Can’t you see…” Jasper gestured at himself, insecurity in the set of his shoulders. His perfect hair was messed up. He wasn’t even glaring. Call sighed, but quietly, then put his hands on Jasper’s shoulders, staring at him steadily.

“Thank you, for everything,” Call said. “You’re an invaluable member of the team, and if we were going to drop you, we would have done it by now. We trust you. You can trust us.” Call took his hands off Jasper’s shoulders. “Now, let’s get back to the hospital and show the workaholics the paper so we can all go the fuck to sleep.”

Jasper was ragged with emotion, his eyes holding a thousand secrets that Call couldn’t read in the low light, but he smiled. A real smile. A smile Call had never seen him smile before.

Havoc barked.

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“All that for a paper we can’t read?” Convict asked. She was staring at it in the streetlights as they sat in a random park, crowding around a bench. Call and Jasper had regaled the story about the fight with Turcotte, altering a few of the details so they could save the Jasper’s Doing A Suspicious Thing For The Greater Good conversation for another night. Caped Justice listened, staring into the middle distance with a slight fog in his eyes, and Convict pretended to listen, scowling at the paper, reading and re-reading.

“It’s decipherable,” Call said, studying the scratchy handwriting over her shoulder. There were a few words he could recognize, like, “the,” and, “and.”

“If you can read it, be my guest,” Convict said, shoving the paper at Call.

“I didn’t say I could read it, I said I could decipher it, given time and impassioned focus,” Call said, drawing back. A few moths glittered around them, lonely in the night.

“Well, it’s got to be something important, if Turcotte went out of his way to look for it,” Caped Justice said, rubbing a hand on his forehead.

“I vote we give Ca- Radar some time and impassioned focus,” Jasper said.
Convict sighed, then shoved the paper resolutely into Call’s hands, no matter how much he tried to not have the paper shoved in his hands. He wanted to sleep tonight, not decipher some evil code.

“Okay, okay, here’s what we do,” Convict said. Everybody looked at her. She had her eyes closed. “Jasper goes home and researches antidotes. Radar decodes the paper. Caped Justice looks into the patterns of the auto repair shop break ins, learns what the next targets are, and learns what was taken during each robbery. I can look over everything we know so far about the Enemy and his team, and see if I can’t find things out, like what the Alkahest is, where the headquarters are, and how there can be two Enemies.”

“...And?” Call asked as Caped Justice dug the notebook out of his backpack and handed it to Convict for the second time that night.

“ And, we all meet up tomorrow, tell each other what we’ve learned, and conduct any further research we have to do.”

“Conduct research where?” Jasper asked. Convict blinked slowly, like a snake, and smiled.

“I know about a spot. Show up tomorrow, and you’ll know about it, too.”

“Same time?” Call asked, his voice worn.

“Same place,” Caped Justice agreed, and while his was thick with hot chocolate and betrayal, it may have been hopeful.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

This chapter isn't in my outline, and for that reason, I am mad at it. It also has SO LITTLE HAVOC. I don't know why I took him out of the plot. I miss him. Also, writing and editing this exhausted me emotionally. Why did Call get such dramatic friends. Why is Call himself so dramatic. Have they considered chilling (and, politely asking the Enemy to chill, which would definitely work)?

Call drinks so much coffee it doesn't keep him awake anymore.

#justiceforhavoc

It was his dad’s handwriting. This was something Call was absurdly aware of as soon as he walked into his darkened house, shadows digging at corners, his dad’s shop a sinister skeleton down the hallway without Alastair in it. Call felt like he was being paranoid, the way his skin prickled, the way he thought over every possible place his father could be, the way the familiar dark hallways seemed suddenly volatile.

But Call was studying the note they’d stolen from Turcotte the whole way home, and it clicked at the same time his danger sense kicked in. The scratchy handwriting was unmistakably Alastair’s. Call recognized the undotted i’s (for the sake of efficiency, his dad always argued), the way the c’s and e’s looked exactly the same, the slight notch at the top of the b’s. The more he stared at it, the more he saw, ‘Please excuse my son,’ and, ‘Happy tenth birthday,’ and, ‘Left for the store.’

Call snuck up to his room with extra care, making sure to skip the parts of the floor that creaked, to freeze whenever any noise was too loud, to listen for any movement from Alastair’s room. It was dumb, but he couldn’t bring himself to tuck the note in his pocket. He needed to hold onto it. Something so devastating couldn’t be handled flippantly.

Instead of relaxing when he and Havoc reached his room, unwinding like usual and collapsing onto the bed, Call sat roughly at his desk. He tugged the lamp on. Havoc sat next to him, ears twitching restlessly, and Call looked at the note without really reading it. Now that he recognized the handwriting, it was easy to read. It was a list. Call’s buzzing head and dull eyes couldn’t comprehend much of the note past that. He didn’t know how he was going to tell the others that his dad was working with the Enemy. What could the Enemy want with his father? Why would his father help the Enemy?

Why would his father do this do Call?

Call had never had a mother. Call had never had friends, or partners, or whatever the hell he was gaining recently. Call had never had a barista that learned his order. Call had never had a defender. But, Call had always had Alastair.

The danger sense (feeling suddenly like betrayal) that had plagued him for days was swirling around in the room, pulling at his shoulders, beating his heart into a panic. Call ignored it with practiced ease, looking emptily at the note on the desk. Havoc whimpered, but Call didn’t understand him anymore. The note was clear, but Call didn’t understand his own father’s handwriting anymore.
The city was quiet, sick, doomed outside Call’s window, and Call was crying. He didn’t know why he was crying. He knew exactly why he was crying. Everything ached. He needed to sleep, but he also needed to find out what the list meant, and he knew the city was more important than his health. He had to keep reading, and reading, and reading.

Call was on his seventh hapless reread, hoping this time his eyes would focus, calm would drift over him, he would feel okay, anything, when there was a polite knock at his window.

At first, he jumped, thinking it was a ghost. Then he pushed the tears away from his eyes with the heel of his hand, pulling off the hoodie he used as a costume so he was wearing an unassuming t-shirt. Because there was only one person that would be knocking at Call’s window.

Havoc, seeing Call take his hoodie off, vacated to the hallway, and then Call was free to wrench the window open. Predictably, Caped Justice was on the fire escape. A bare breeze trickled into the room from the open window, and Call felt it wash over him. The note was still burning a hole through him, but Caped Justice was here, comforting and cool, and maybe Call wouldn’t crumble. Maybe.

“Why are you still awake?” Caped Justice asked, the hypocrite, the oblivious idiot, the wonder.

“Why are you?” Call responded.

“Because, I’m a superhero,” Caped Justice said. Call held his gaze steady, let the irony rest, let the danger rest, and smiled a small smile.

“Cool. I’ve got homework, equally as important,” Call said. Caped Justice laughed, stilted.

“Hey, uh,” Caped Justice said. The city was louder than his disquiet, the hesitation in his voice, the way he was leaning away from Call.

Call was tired. “Spit it out.”


Call felt exposed: no hoodie, no mask, no damn sunglasses. Just him and his t-shirt and his shiner. He should have pre-planned a response to this. “How’d you find out?” Stall. Stall stall stall.

“I’m a superhero,” Caped Justice repeated, and there was something in his voice. Was this a fight? Call couldn’t take another fight. “Are- hey, okay, are you crying?”

Call was not still crying, but he knew his eyes were red. He wished he could make that go away as quickly as the tears did.

“Allergies.”

“Call,” Caped Justice said, softly. “Please stop lying to me.”

There was a quiet, between them and through the window, that was Call’s responsibility to fill. There were no cicadas, no sirens, no background sitcoms that could say what he needed to say. Caped Justice was looking at him, his eyes shadows, his smile tilted. Call (on instinct or on accident) reached out and held Caped Justice’s hands.

Call stared at their hands, resting on the window sill. He didn’t know how to say that he couldn’t tell the truth. He didn’t know how to say that his dad was trying to kill them. He didn’t know how to
admit that Caped Justice hated him, because Caped Justice hated Radar, because Call was Radar. He
didn’t know how to say that Caped Justice reminded him of every star in the sky, every stained glass
hero, every wonder of the world.

“I’m in danger sometimes,” Call eventually said. “It also just so happens I live in an auto repair shop.
I took advantage of the circumstance.”

“What do you mean you’re in danger sometimes? Why didn’t you tell me? I’m- Call, I’m a
superhero.” There was thunder, but it wasn’t going to rain tonight according to the forecast. Call’s
neighbor was shouting at a video game. Call’s dad was asleep. Call was blinking.

“Not every threat is yours to take care of,” Call said.

“Yes,” Caped Justice said. “It is.” Caped Justice held Call’s hands tighter.

“I am not yours to take care of,” Call said, quieter, and maybe he was crying again. Maybe. His
hellish week had to get worse before it got better.

Then Caped Justice was reaching in past the window, letting go of Call’s hands to pull him into a
hug. Stronger than before, more emotional. Call let it happen. They stood. The thunder was getting
further away.

“Tell me what gave you a black eye so I can take care of it,” Caped Justice murmured, like it was the
most important thing, like Call would be able to tell him the truth. Call didn’t want to lie to Caped
Justice. Call needed to lie. As it was, he was lucky all he had to do to account for the stab wound in
his shoulder was adjust the way he was hugging Caped Justice and make sure his shirt was covering
the bandage. Making excuses for a stab wound would be harder than making excuses for a black
eye.

Call had said he was ‘in danger sometimes’ because it was the truth, but not all of it. But what else
was there to say?

“I put myself in a dangerous situation,” Call said slowly. “I do that a lot. Remember how I stayed
behind to help you fight the wolf? Yeah. It’s, well, it’s dumb, but I can’t help but take on challenges.
So. I got in a fight and I lost it.”

“With who?” Caped Justice asked. He pulled back to look at Call, eyes roving over his face, tracing
the shape of the bruise over his eye. Concern, something else, fear, something else, wonder,
something else, franticness.

Call couldn’t answer any more questions without revealing the hard, scary truth. He was close
enough as it was. Instead, he let more tears fall (not that hard of a task) and leaned his face against
Caped Justice’s shoulder. Caped Justice wouldn’t push it if Call was crying on him, right?

Caped Justice didn’t push it, mostly because Call was crying on him. He just hugged. After a beat,
though, Caped Justice said, “Could I ask you to leave the heroics to me?”

At that, Call scoffed into his shoulder.

“I can’t believe I’m the official damsel in distress,” Call said.

“You’re the official person I worry about,” Caped Justice replied. He ran his hands up and down
Call’s arms, either trying to comfort Call by assuring Call he was still there, or trying to comfort
himself by assuring himself Call was still there. “I don’t ever want you to be in danger.”
“Bit too late for that, with all those supervillains running amok,” Call joked. Caped Justice froze when Call said that, then pulled Call away from his shoulder so they were face to face again.

“You’d tell me if you were getting sick, right?” Caped Justice asked. Call opened his mouth to respond, then stopped, realizing with acute clarity that he was an idiot. Call felt like he was getting actively hit by a bus, or flooded by a tidal wave, or in the basement of a caving building. There was a detail he’d been missing, been missing for his whole fucking life, and it changed everything.

Caped Justice was laying the back of his hand on Call’s forehead, and Call stood in shock. He was thinking rashly. He couldn’t stop focussing on the note that was on the desk, suddenly. He was burning again, suddenly.

“You seem tired. I’ll let you sleep,” Caped Justice said quietly. “Stay safe? For me?”

Call nodded, gave him the best smile he could muster, still making damning connection after damning connection. “Goodnight,” he said, letting his voice be fluffy and teary so it would mask the fear.

Caped Justice leaned forward, quick as a shot, and kissed him on the cheek. Before Call could react, Caped Justice grabbed onto the rail of the fire escape and vaulted it, off into the night. Fucking superheroes.

Call closed the window. He opened the door to let Havoc back in. He sat at his desk. He copied what the note said onto notebook paper. He washed his face so it would stop burning. He turned off the lamp. He sat on the edge of the bed. He wished he could live a normal life, where he would be focussing on the fact that his crush wanted to talk to him, that his crush worried about him, that his crush kissed him on the cheek. Instead, he looked at Havoc, invisible as dreams in the night and a world of speech away.

“Has my dad ever gotten sick?” Call asked, hollow.

Havoc waited a moment, then whined.

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*What do I do? What does it mean? What does he do?*

The ceiling still didn’t respond, and Call still couldn’t come up with any more answers. Walk into his dad’s room and demand answers? Tie him up in the basement and demand answers? Follow him around all day and discover answers? Go through his papers and find answers?

*What do I do? What does it mean? What does he do?*

Get in his head and force answers?

*The same.*

Not that one.

Havoc was laying at the foot of his bed, but Call knew he wasn’t asleep. He was just lonely. For the first time, Havoc wasn’t there when Call needed him, and Call wasn’t there when Havoc was alone. It was unbearable.

Call started harder at the ceiling, thinking circles of thoughts. His eye was feeling better, his shoulder throbbed but it would feel better, his face still burned but he couldn’t think about that right now. He
should be falling asleep, because it was late, because the human body needed sleep when it was wounded, because he was inevitably going to fight crime tomorrow and doing that was easier well rested, because it had been a long day. But he was too restless to be sleeping right now.

*I... you,* Havoc thought. The static was still clearer than the words, like a squelched radio, like a broken superpower, like lost friends across oceans. Call rolled out of bed and tugged on his shoes. No hoodie, no mask, no dog. He opened his door a crack to look down the hall to Alastair’s room. No light, no sound, just the leaking sense of danger.

“I love you too,” Call told Havoc, then unlatched his window for the second time that night and swung himself through it. He closed the window as best he could behind him, and then set off down the fire escape. His leg disagreed with this particular maneuver, it had had an even longer day than him, but he was all too used to pushing his own buttons. At least he wasn’t vaulting down like Caped Justice.

Not the time to think about Caped Justice.

*The same.*

Not the time to think about other things.

*I messed up.*

Maybe the time to think about Jasper. Jasper, after all, was Call’s best hope for his superpower being restored. There was also clearly something going on with Jasper, between the spying and the inferiority complex, that Jasper wouldn’t welcome help with, but would need help with.

Call was no fool. He knew he and Jasper weren’t friends. The bruise on his eye proved that, without a shadow of a doubt. If anybody was going to get through to Jasper, it wasn’t going to be Call, the person that had annoyed him for days on end and still got nothing out of him out of virtue of Jasper’s own eventual spite. No way in hell.

And so, Call strolled down streets and across intersections, all the way to Jasper’s apartment. As he raised his hand to knock, the door opened, and Jasper was standing there. Or, Jasper was leaping back and spitting a few curse words.

“What are you doing here?” they both asked, Jasper with quite a bit more vehemence.

“I was coming to see you,” Call said, marking himself as crazy as soon as he heard the words out loud.

Instead of saying *at two in the morning? or who said you were allowed to come see me? or fuck off,* Jasper surprised him. “I was coming to see you,” he said.

“I’m laughing,” Call said.

“And we’re both delusional, I know,” Jasper responded, dragging a hand through his bedhead. “I need a sample of your blood to restore all your shit, and I figured you weren’t sleeping, and the faster we get this over with is the faster I can get back to the antidote.”

“So, inside?”

“No, assbrain, JCPenny, yes inside.”

And so, Call was inside Jasper’s apartment, kicking off his shoes and following him down a narrow
hallway. Jasper found a room that looked like the storage closet for their chem lab at school, with the added glory of a small table and an iphone charger.

“Ah, where the magic happens, I see,” Call said while Jasper inched around the table to grab some machine off a shelf. It was so buried behind other complicated and foreboding mechanisms that Call hadn’t even seen it. The shelves were so full that every blinking thing on them bled together. It was like a sci-fi wallpaper, except in 3D.

“If you have a wrong definition of science, sure,” Jasper said. He was fiddling with the machine, so he shouldn’t have seen Call’s wink, but he saw it anyway. “Having sex in here would be so lethal.”

“Do you not get danger boners?”

“Don’t say that like it’s a regular person thing. Of course I get danger boners.”

Call busied himself with cackling so Jasper could concentrate on setting a few dials on the machine. After two minutes, it beeped and lit up in a different way.

“Okay, cool great good, that means it’ll either work or cut off a limb, both will give me the blood sample so knock yourself out,” Jasper said.

“I have such a danger boner right now,” Call said dryly. Jasper huffed a tired laugh, eyes not pulling away from the machine as he scanned the lights again.

“Where did you get this, anyway?” Call asked. “They don’t have these in hospitals.”

“Oh, so he’s a doctor, now,” Jasper said, pushing the machine closer to Call.

“I actually have a PhD in machine identification, so watch your mouth,” Call said halfheartedly.

“Where do I stick my hand?”

“Put your finger in the finger-sized hole.”

“Yes, and?”

“And it’ll only sting for a second.”

“Thank you, you really need to brush up on your doctoral etiquette.”

“Because you know so much doctoral etiquette?”

“Because I know so much doctoral etiquette.” Call stuck his finger into the finger-sized hole.

“I don’t even think doctoral is a word,” Jasper muttered, and both of them watched blandly as the machine whirred and pricked Call’s finger for blood, which then dripped into a quaint vial that Call hadn’t seen, but Jasper tugged neatly from the slot.

“Do I wear the machine forever or…?”

“You may remove your finger.”

“Oh, boo. It would be an awesome weapon against the Enemy.”

“Slap him across the face with a revamped sewing machine, his one weakness,” Jasper retorted, switching off the master power and shoving the machine back on the shelf.
“You’ve been spying on him for, like, a day, don’t pretend you already know his weakness,” Call said. Jasper slobbed his hair around again.

“I might not know his weakness, but I did find out his superpower, so don’t trash on my spying unless you’re willing to prove you can do better,” Jasper said tiredly, just crawling under the table instead of inching around it this time. Call had good reason not to like thinking about the Enemy’s superpower, and was ready to move the conversation away from it, but he paused.

“Is…” Call started, but he trailed off. Jasper was walking out of the room and a few doors down, to a study with a green capped lamp, a massive window, and a massive desk.

“Is what?” Jasper asked as Call followed him into the study. Jasper knew everything about superpowers, as far as Call could tell, or everything a person could know about superpowers. And he was specifically looking further into Call’s superpower in order to give it back to him. He would know about the mind control half. Call’s own dirty little secret. The main thing that managed to keep him up at night. Everything wrong with Callum Hunt.

“Is my power the same as his?” Call asked, a little too scared of the answer to keep his voice from shaking. Jasper stopped sorting and making space on the desk to look sideways at Call, his expression taut with suspicion.

“Do you not know what your own power is?” Jasper asked carefully.

“Not all of us can pass science class,” Call responded, too tired to be clever, too vulnerable not to be. Jasper stared at Call, thinking. Heavy silence was becoming familiar.

“Yours has more of a communication aspect, sure,” Jasper finally said. “But in essence, the effect is the same. You’re both mind controllers. Did you not…?”

“I never- fuck,” Call said, because there weren’t exactly words. How could he have his worst fears confirmed and stay composed? He felt like he’d somehow chosen both Charybdis and Scylla. He felt like the only cracked mirror in a carnival hall. He felt like ashes. There were no chairs in the room, so Call just sat down on the floor, burying his face in his hands. Jasper didn’t move and Call didn’t care. He took a few breaths, missed Havoc, felt shame pooling in his gut. “I only ever used it to talk.”

“Liar.”

“I know.”

“I didn’t want to believe I could do any worse.”

“I know.”

“I was hoping it was a delusion.”

Jasper sighed as he slid his back against the wall to sit down next to Call, knocking their shoulders together. Jasper stared blankly at the papers pinned up on the wall in front of them while Call stayed crumpled up.

“I don’t want to be like them,” Call muttered.

“Like who?”

“Patriarch, Parable, the Enemy of Death, any supervillain that’s ever popped in this city, take your pick.” Call pulled up his head, leaning against the wall. Jasper stayed looking steadily ahead. There weren’t any tissue boxes in the study, so Call made an effort not to start crying again.
“You’re not like them,” Jasper stated.

“Who’s to say?”

The thunder from earlier was so far away at this point, Call could barely hear it. In the roaring silence of the room, past the panicked beating of his own heart, Call heard the thunder anyway. The cloud system was probably already over the state line.

“Are you- are you sure you want your power back?” Jasper asked. Call glanced at him, and the pain was back on his face.

“Who am I without it?” Call asked, bitter. “It’s everything wrong with me, but it’s also all I’ve got, isn’t it?”

Surprisingly enough, it was Jasper that started crying.

“Shit,” Jasper breathed, immediately brushing the tears away. More fell to replace them, and Call was confused. His problems were devastating, but not so much to other people. Especially not to Jasper. Maybe the fact that it was two in the morning justified it.

Call got up, wandering out and down the hallway until he eventually found a bathroom with a tissue box in it. Then he backtracked to the study, where Jasper was still crying on the floor and looking almost as pathetic as Call did.

Call tossed him the tissue box and sat back down, knocking their shoulders together again. Jasper just stared at the tissue box.

“Hey Call?” Jasper said.

“Hey Jasper,” Call responded.

“We hate each other, right?” Jasper picked at one of the tissues.

“Passionately.”

Jasper tugged a tissue out of the box and gave it to Call without so much as a glance, and Call, who hadn’t realized he had started crying, wadded the tissue into a ball. He held it loosely in his hand. His brain thought every thought. “So I can tell you a secret,” Jasper said, and it wasn’t a question.

“Assuredly.”

Jasper hesitated again, Call shifted his gaze out the window. If he focussed, he almost thought he could see the moon dip lower to the horizon, slowly. It was getting close to a full moon. There was a term for that he would know if he paid attention in science.

“Remember how I said I messed up?” Jasper said, sounding for all the world like a scared kid in a house of horrors. Quiet, alone, afraid.

“You said you yourself were messed up,” Call added.

“I am,” Jasper said. “It happened a while ago. I was playing with some testy science, I made a mistake, I got a scar.”

“The way you tell it, it almost doesn’t sound traumatizing,” Call said. Jasper was quiet for a second. Long enough to take a breath. Long enough to convince himself to keep talking.
“I used to have a superpower,” Jasper said, and Call, without Havoc, without capability, without his skills, didn’t have a joke for that.


“No.”

“Could you summon dead people?”

“Still no.”

“Shoot poison from your eyes?”

“That would sting.”

“And be pretty awesome.”

“Agreed.” Jasper sighed again, but his breath caught a bit. “Invisibility.”

“Alright, big guy on the block, master of subterfuge,” Call said, moving his knee to hit Jasper’s.

“Not anymore I’m not,” Jasper said, and then he was crying again. He didn’t even bother reaching for a tissue to dry the tears.

“Wait- wait, Jasper, dude,” Call said. “If you can restore my powers, can’t you restore your own?”

“Don’t you think I’ve been trying?” Jasper asked. “We lost them in different ways. Yours can be fixed. A massive experiment gone wrong, a failure as bad as mine, well, it can’t- it can’t be fixed.”

“You’re telling me that you, Mr. Leading Superhero Scientist himself, Jasper deWinter, have found a problem you can’t solve? Impossible,” Call said. Call wasn’t crying anymore. Jasper was crying enough for them both.

“It’s not…” Jasper trailed off. Call pushed their knees together again.

“You’ve come this far,” Call said, quieter than he meant to, softer than people who hated each other should be. He blamed the moon. She was definitely lower in the sky.

“There is a solution, but it’s- I’m- I’d rather take the hit and stay broken. I won’t do it,” Jasper said, resolute.

“Who do you have to sacrifice?” Call asked.

“It’s- well, it’s a balancing thing,” Jasper explained. He put the tissue box down so he could start gesturing. “Power has to come from somewhere. Wherever it comes from, I know enough to be able to shape it so it’s compatible with my system, so that part’s not the issue. The issue is that in order to get power, I’d have to steal it from somebody else. Leave them as powerless and broken as I am now.”

“Well, that’s perfect,” Call said, completely sincere.

“Pardon?” Jasper said. Call looked at him for the first time since they sat down.

“We have a whole slew of supervillains to choose from.”

Jasper paused. “I wouldn’t wish this fate on-”
“Look, if you’re not going to be morally grey for yourself, then I’ll do it for you,” Call said, almost too forcefully. “We’re going to win against these shits, and then we’ll whisk one of them away before the police can take him to prison. Preferably Lightning, because he’s an asshole. But, if, by some divine stroke of interference, all of them are suddenly redeemable, well. School’s gonna finish eventually. This Summer, we can ditch on whatever idiotic family vacations our parents have planned and go city hopping until we find a real supervillain. And then we will tear him to shreds, alright?”

“You don’t-”

“Say alright,” Call interrupted. Jasper took a breath.

“Alright,” Jasper said, and for some reason he was smiling.

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Jasper sent him on his way with a promise he’d have a solution for Call’s power by the morning, and a threat that if Call told the landlord about anything he’d seen, Jasper would cut off a limb instead of take a blood sample, next time. Call didn’t know if he felt better. He was getting his power back, sooner than he could have hoped, but he also got his worst fears confirmed and also found no solace from the problem that was Alastair. So, instead of going home like anybody with half a brain or a concerned Havoc would do, Call went to a 24-hour diner. The waitress didn’t even give him a weird look when he ordered coffee, she was so dedicated to how bored she was.

Call nursed his coffee, breathing around the aching that was starting to pop up from his stab wound, trying and failing not to think about tonight. His brain kept hovering back to Caped Justice kissing him, the feeling, the exultation, the perfection. He had better things to focus on than a boy that hated him but kissed him anyway.

Alastair teaming up with the Enemy. Alastair having a superpower. The fact that, despite Call’s best efforts, Alastair probably knew that Call was Radar (Alastair would surely recognize the family pet in all the newspaper clippings). Between Drew and Alastair, Call had good reason to worry that the Enemy knew his civilian identity. And that wasn’t good. That was very not good. That put him in very distinct, very definite danger. But… did it? Because Call didn’t have to worry about the Enemy hurting his family, seeing as the only family he had left had sold himself over to work for the other side.

It stung. Kids like to believe in their parents. Alastair wasn’t good at being serious, and he was emotionally distant, and had never really prepared Call for what life was, but he was still Call’s dad. He still made them dinner. They still used to do picnics on Sundays. He was still the guy that had bought Call his first skateboard, for no reason other than a gut feeling.

The worst part was, if Alastair could be evil, well. Like father, like son. Jasper had as well as confirmed it, there was nothing keeping Call from being evil. He and the Enemy were the same. Clearly, definitely, irredeemably.

Call didn’t know that one of his worst fears could be himself.

There was something painful about the fact that Call’s biggest flaw was inherent. Call couldn’t fix himself without losing himself. He was just broken, and wrong, and evil. Even if he only used the good parts of his powers (which he didn’t, he always succumbed to what was easiest, because he was weak), they were still evil things. He was still an evil thing.

It felt like Call wasn’t allowed to be what he thought he was anymore, he had to be what his powers
made him. He could be Callum Hunt, saint, good samaritan, lover of all things nice and pure, but at his core he would always be Callum Hunt, madman. And, if anybody else found out about his powers, that would be the only thing about him that people saw. If he helped an old lady across the street, he was clearly only giving her a false sense of security. If he was acting out in class, it was because he was obviously planning a hostile takeover.

“Hey, stranger, what are you doing awake?” a voice asked. Call blinked, looking up from staring pensively at his coffee. Tamara, of all people, was standing next to his table, managing to stare judgmentally at his coffee. Call didn’t know it would be a relief to have somebody disapprove of his bad choices.

“Not thinking,” he said. “You?”

Tamara slid into the booth to sit across from him and stole a sip of his coffee. “Thinking.”

“Shame.”

The waitress was equally unimpressed by Tamara’s pancake order, but left syrup at the table anyway. Tamara started fiddling with the bottle cap.

“Wild Friday night we’re having,” Tamara said. Call huffed a laugh.

“What’re you thinking about?” Call asked, because that seemed like the thing to ask. Tamara hummed, flipped the syrup open and closed again.

“The heroes,” she said. Irony.

“Caped Justice is quite the guy,” Call said.

“Not those heroes. The earlier ones, before our time. Auto, Miri, the whole deal,” Tamara said.

“Ah,” Call said, “the doomed heroes.”

“The very same.”

The pancakes came, and Tamara ate them quietly. No lights flickered ominously. No danger pulled Call away. No Havoc wagged his tail viciously against Call’s leg.

“Could you imagine betraying somebody like that?” Tamara asked.

“Patriarch and Parable were evil,” Call said idly, Call said bitterly, Call said ironically.

“They were all friends,” Tamara said. “Miri and Decline died.”

“And Auto?”

“I thought he survived.”

“I thought he died.”

“It was hard to tell the body count.” Tamara’s voice was quieter. “An army of mind controlled zombies were dead, civilians were dead, the heroes were dead.”

Call realized he didn’t know the story very well. His dad had lived through it, but avoided any conversation about it, so Call dropped it after a while. And Call officially didn’t trust anything his dad had told him anymore.
“I’m fuzzy on the details,” Call admitted.

“Well, they were all a team,” Tamara said. “They worked together, fought crime, the whole superhero package. But Patriarch and Parable, the twin brothers, both started getting power hungry. They thought that they could take over the city as long as they took out the only superheroes defending it- which happened to be their teammates. So they lured them to this hotel downtown called La Rinconada and made an uproar.”

“And then the three heroes died,” Call finished. Tamara shook her head as she took another bite of pancake.

“Everybody except for Auto.”

“But—”

“But authorities are still fuzzy on the official deaths due to the amount of bodies and the nature of superheroes keeping their identities secret, yes,” Tamara said. “It’s all a big mystery. But mostly a tragedy.”

“And then there weren’t heroes in the city for a few years, I remember this part,” Call said. Tamara nodded. The AC shuddered off, lessening the amount of white noise. Call asked for a refill on his coffee.

“Why are you thinking about the doomed heroes?” Call asked by the time the AC was clambering back on.

“Better than thinking about how doomed the current ones are,” Tamara said.

“Cheers,” Call responded, and took another sip of coffee. After some more healthy silence, Tamara sighed.

“What are you not-thinking about?” she asked.

“Inherent morality.”

“Heavy. Wanna talk about it?”

“Can you define evil?” Call asked. It was mostly a joke. He lingered on his coffee to give her time.

“The want to make other people miserable,” Tamara said, wrinkling her nose slightly. “That’s generalized, though.”

“Can good people be evil? Can evil people be good? Is everybody a little bit of both?” Call asked.

“Heavy stuff,” Tamara said again.

“You have no idea,” Call responded.

“I know Patriarch and Parable were evil, so don’t be them,” Tamara tried. She had finished her pancakes and was flipping the syrup cap again. She had no idea how hard what she just said hit Call, like a sack of bricks, or a sack of locomotives.

“Hey Tamara?” Call said after a second where he was pretty sure he couldn’t breathe.

“Wassup,” Tamara responded.
“What’s your favorite color?”

Tamara laughed, stopping with her fiddling for a second. “Why do you want to know?”

“I realized I didn’t know it,” Call reasoned, like he wasn’t obviously and quickly changing the subject.

“Scarlet.”

“Like strawberries?”

“Like the glow of a fire.”

“Well, what do you know,” Call said. “I seem to be in the presence of somebody that passed English class.” Tamara laughed again.

“Okay, well… favorite food?” she asked.

“Easy. PB&J with cornflakes.”

“You’re a monster,” she said.

“And you’re close minded,” Call said easily. “Favorite animal?”

“Albino tigers, because they’re just cooler polar bears.”

“Hard to be cooler than polar bears, they live in the arctic, it’s so-”

“Don’t finish the pun, I already get it and have already rolled my eyes.” She rolled her eyes for proof, which made Call laugh. “Favorite cryptid?”

“Bigfoot.”

“Basic.”

“He’s like a polar bear, but warmer, and bipedal,” Call said. “Also he lurks in the woods, similar to me. And he has the best beard known to man or cryptid.”

“But mothman has the best ass,” Tamara said, pointing at him with her fork.

“You make a compelling argument. Favorite book?”

--

Call went home when it was late, danger itching in his gut the closer he got to his dad. Nothing was any better, Call was still evil, Alastair was still evil, the city was still dying. But there was always some satisfaction that came from staying out late on a Friday.

The fire escape was worse going up.

Havoc was hovering next to the window, and growled at Call when he crawled in.

“I know it’s late,” Call murmured, unable to focus on much past the room down the hall. Except, there was space enough in his head to worry about Jasper’s lost superpower while Call turned the light off. Space enough for Call to think about Tamara’s favorite bad Instagram caption while he fell into bed. Space enough to drown in the feeling of Caped Justice’s kiss on his cheek while he went to
sleep.

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