When Jen first started out, she liked how the suit made her feel. There was something very exciting and sexy about slipping into latex, no matter how uncomfortable the process itself felt. She much preferred the trappings of her suit to school uniform. The latex fit like a sleek, shiny glove, showing off parts of her body that would usually be hidden by poorly fitted blouses and lumpy blazers. Jen no longer looked like a shy, confused teenager. She looked *powerful*. This way she could do good, under Megaman's guidance and tutelage, of course.

Jen remembered taking her oath with a fondness that most teenagers her age reserved for their first love. It happened on the day that Mr Johnson's spiel in IT class took a brief turn towards the righteous. She'd begun to have her suspicions after the computer museum incident a few months ago, but that day she finally saw their supposedly meek, mild-mannered teacher for who he really was. She stayed behind to thank him. She didn’t expect to be thanked in return.

Mr Johnson offered her the job with a twinkle in his eye. It was an unpaid position, he'd noted, but it would do both him and the school a world of good. Jen swore that she would do everything in her power to stop the spread of evil there and then in that very classroom. It was *their* mission now.

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Jen had always been a good student. Even in her early days of working for Megaman, back before her suit measurements were correct, and before he'd taught her much of anything other than rhetoric and the three sidekick rules, she played her part well. She observed her master and rolled with the punches as best as she could. Her movements were clumsy at first and the bruises concerned her parents, but she was a fast learner. Jen didn't mind aching if it meant that she could help a superhero eradicate evil from Bunin City.

Then people started dying.

The first to go was her Spanish teacher, of all people. He'd been, as her father had once put it, “a cranky cantankerous bastard”, but he hadn't deserved to go that way: partly crushed in the local art school bombing and crying for help as he bled out. Jen was pretty sure that his last words had been some kind of curse; it was what had alerted them to his presence. She thought they'd saved the day again until she saw what remained of Mr Sanchez.

 Mr Johnson, clad in bright blue tights at the time, had gently reminded Jen of her oath, and how not everyone can be saved from the ramifications of evil, before turning his rage onto the hunt for the culprit. Jen nodded her agreement, extremely thankful for the mask hiding her expression when they found the other bodies hidden amongst the rubble (she had to take it off to throw up later).

 The man responsible was behind bars by the end of the day. The arrest seemed to quench Megaman's righteous rage but it did nothing for the unease lurking in the pit of Jen's stomach.

She stripped out of her suit in a hurry that night, desperate to be free of the constricting fabric. Without the latex she was just Jennifer Brooke, the quietly devoted daughter of Guinevere and Martin Brooke. Jennifer Brooke kept to herself, studied hard, and got As in everything except Spanish (although that might now change). Jennifer Brooke didn't have to save anyone except herself.

The Scorpionette and Scorpio came to town later the week after the art school bombing. Jen’s classmates scoffed at the unoriginality of a name like “Scorpio” for the unpowered sidekick to a woman who could literally summon scorpions, but Jen paid little attention to the name. Skill was more important than appearances, and it was easy to recognise in the glimpses she initially caught of the boy with the purple eyepatch on the local news channel.

 Mr Johnson politely extracted Jen from an English lesson that week, and the next thing she knew they were facing off against the two purple suited rogues in an old warehouse. Jen rapidly found herself on the receiving end of the knowledge that a lack of depth perception didn't make her opponent any less capable.

The week after that found Jen missing a maths lesson for a showdown in a playground, and a week later she was fighting Scorpion-related mayhem in the city library instead of doing PE (thank God). The Scorpions, as the media called them, were the first persistent enemies that Megaman had had in a long time and Jen quickly grew accustomed to sparring with Scorpio as their masters fought.

“Not so mega no-w!” Scorpio would screech whenever he managed to successfully land a blow, his voice always cracking on the drawn out vowel.

Jen’s typical response would be to roll her eyes as visibly as she could under her mask before turning his strength against him. As Megaman had told her many times before: “Evil is not a word; it's an action”. The near-constant robberies, hostage takings and venomous scorpion infestations were blatantly evil, but it was still difficult to take the cheesy exclamations of a prepubescent accomplice seriously.

The Scorpions’ attacks were random, but paradoxical in the way that they were predictably so. Jen started to miss the same maths lesson almost every week, but each move the villains made was at a right angle to their last. If they had some sort of game plan it wasn't obvious. Scorpio certainly seemed to give off the impression that he just wanted to have a good time. And possibly someone to talk at.

“The weather's really lo-vely today isn't it?” he remarked as the scorpion horde rose to block out the sun. He paused a little awkwardly, half-turning to appreciate the spectacle. “Well, I mean, it was. Actually it wa-s pretty sunny yesterday -”

Jen saw the opportunity and took it, just like Megaman had taught her. Scorpio was on the ground in two seconds flat.

Over time, Jen grew more creative with her methods of cutting him off.

“Did you kno-w that a group of scorpi-ons is called a cyclone? I mean, that's what Goo-gle said. Honestly I th-ink that's a cooler name than what the pa-pers have been -”

Scissor kick to the gut.

“I wish I could reme-mber the guy's name. He's in my fav-ourite film. It's called -”

Pushing him into a river.

“I’m go-ing to be a doctor. My mu-m says that -”

Locking him inside a cupboard. Jen had been particularly proud of that one.

Scorpio gave as good as he got, but he somehow managed to do it while mentioning his job prospects, favourite colour, ideal day out and God knows what else. Jen imagined that she could successfully find him on Facebook based on likes and dislikes alone if she wanted to; she only refrained out of respect for a fellow sidekick’s privacy.

The Scorpionette wasn't as talkative as Scorpio but she was equally playful. As Megaman grew more aggressive with his attacks, the Scorpionette grew more spirited. She'd dangle hostages left, right and centre off Bunin bridge, teasing the heroes with the promise of venomous scorpion stings while her sidekick did a mixture of assisting and looking on admiringly.

The Scorpions never succeeded; Megaman always saw to that, but they wouldn't be captured easily either. After a month or so of consistently failed attacks, the local media tired of treating the purple-suited pair as anything other than what they were: a minor local menace. There hadn't been a single murder since their arrival.

Jen's weekly combat became a dance that she knew the steps to by heart. Swing right, kick left, duck - “Not so mega now!” - wait.

“What happened to your voice?” Jen asked, half way through the process of flipping Scorpio onto his back.

“She speaks!” he cried. “I was starting to think that I was fighting a mute! Not that there's anything wrong with thaaa-”

Jen completed the maneuver and Scorpio hit the ground with a satisfying thud. She loomed over him and placed the heel of her boot on his chest.

Undeterred, he continued, “Do it again! Say something else!”

Jen contemplated knocking him out. She'd done it many times before; it was practically standard procedure at this point.

“No,” she said.

Scorpio grinned and, despite herself, Jen grinned back.

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“HAVE YOU BOUGHT YOUR TICKET!?” Izzy screamed at the monitor.

Jen couldn’t help but laugh at her friend’s enthusiastic greeting.

“Hello to you too,” she smiled, waving at the WebCam.

Jen spent a moment searching a desk drawer until she was unable to unearth her e-ticket printout, and then waved it in the direction of the webcam. Izzy let out a piercing squeal and produced her own.

“Fizzy Ashtray here we come!” she shrieked. “Oh my God I can’t wait!”

Jen smiled as she watched her best friend practically jump up and down with excitement. Her energy was infectious but tempered by the fact that Jen was viewing it through a screen. The teenager on the other side was definitely Izzy. The crappy hair dye and large grin were indication enough of that, but the setting of their conversation still felt somewhat unreal and distant to Jen. Izzy had always been larger-than-life. It felt wrong to experience that anywhere other than by her side. Jen was struck by a pang of sadness that must’ve shown on her face, judging from her friend's reaction.

“Don’t give me that look,” Izzy said knowingly, a note of concern in her voice. “You’re living in the posh part of town and you’ve got tickets to see the best band in the history of bands with me: you’re living the high life now! Also, you have to tell me everything about Poshtown. I don’t make the rules. What’s it like?”

Jen’s smile wavered but she just about managed to keep it in place. She decided to start off with school.

“There’s not much difference between the school here and school back home,” she said. “I mean, it’s bigger but it’s still a school.”

“Well duh.” Izzy paused and Jen could tell that she was internally debating her next words. She held her breath, hoping that Izzy wouldn’t ask after the one thing she didn’t have yet. Then, finally Izzy spoke. “What’s the art classroom like?”

Jen smile became more genuine at the question. She could see the light in her friend’s eyes at the mere possibility of a more extensive arts facility.

“They have an art *department*,” she replied.

“WHAT!?” Izzy screeched, her eyes the size of saucers.

Jen simply nodded and waited for the barrage of question she knew would follow. It didn’t take long to answer them, partly because she had prepared for this moment and partly because it was difficult to get information out of the art department without artsy friends. Jen’s lone artsy friend no longer lived anywhere near her.

“God I’m so jealous!” Izzy exclaimed. “It almost sounds like college if they’ve got those sort of resources.”

Jen shrugged and carefully refrained from saying what was on her mind: it was not difficult to find something better than the art facilities at her old school.

“Hey, you better fucking appreciate that department on my behalf,” said Izzy, catching the expression on Jen’s face with an ease that came from years of practice. “I’ll be with you in spirit.”

Jen tried to smile but the talk of art facilities only reminded her now of the

“Hopefully it’ll last longer than the art school did,“ Jen said quietly.

The words came out more bitterly than she’d intended but Izzy brushed them off with a simple eye roll.

“Of course it will! Who’d bomb an art department?”

"Yeah well, who'd bomb an art school?" Jen retorted.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Embarrassed, Jen quickly changed the subject.

“How is everyone back home?” she asked.

Izzy’s eyes narrowed slightly. She could see what Jen was doing but, thankfully, decided to not question it for the time being.

“Mr Nielsen’s still an idiot, in case you were wondering,” she said. “Alana keeps pretending that he isn’t but we all know he is. Olivia keeps messing around in his lessons trying to prove it to her like one day she’ll come to her senses, but it hasn’t happened yet and I doubt that it will happen any time soon.”

Jen listened quietly as her friend continued to explain the dynamics of the friendship group she’d left behind her when she moved home. They were more Izzy’s friends than hers anyway. At least, that was what Jen told herself. It was easier to leave them behind if she thought of it that way.

“You’re being real quiet about your friends you know,” said Izzy suspiciously.

“I’m always quiet,” Jen muttered.

Izzy rolled her eyes again.

“You know what I mean.”

“*You* guys are my friends.”

There was a moment of silence as the two teenagers stood off. Izzy wanted more information but Jen wasn’t sure if she was ready to give it just yet. It was like a staring competition and, as usual, Jen was the first to break.

“I don’t know that many people here,” she admitted eventually.

Izzy sighed.

“Tell me you’ve at least been trying. Every high school has group work, right?”

“Yeah,” Jen said sheepishly. It wasn’t that she didn’t get on with people, it was more the fact that she didn’t know how to develop that bond outside of school work. She was a workaholic through and through. It made for good grades and a terrible social life. In times like these, Jen felt it was more of a problem than a blessing. “My IT lessons are pretty good," she added, thinking of Megaman.

“I guess we can work with that. Have you joined any clubs?”

“Sort of.”

“What does that even mean?”

“There’s this extracurricular thing I’ve been doing for my IT teacher, kinda like an internship, and I guess I know a few people through that.”

“That’s a start. Tell me about these people.”

“Well…” Jen paused to think. She could hardly talk about the Scorpionette or Megaman. That left with one obvious remaining choice. “There’s this one guy there who never shuts up. He's a - um, lowly technician, but he wants to be a doctor.“

Izzy grinned.

"Ooh get you with the cute techie! He's cute right? The look on your face says he is."

Jen frowned and considered that for a moment. Scorpio wasn't bad looking. By some of her classmates definitions he was definitely "cute", but it wasn't something she'd really thought about before. She didn't care how he looked beneath the mask; appearance seemed irrelevant when most of the time she spent with him had her preoccupied with defending and attacking. Izzy however, misinterpreted Jen's silence.

"Hey, I'm just joking Jen."

"Right. Yeah," Jen replied, pulled back into the present by the contrition in her friend's voice. "It's not like that,” she mused, “It's just nice to listen to someone who gets it.”.

"Gets what?" Izzy asked, looking more than a little hurt at the admission.

"Oh uh, just boring techie stuff we do for our teacher," Jen said quickly. "My teacher, I mean. You'd honestly find it so dull."

Izzy hummed her acknowledgement, seemingly assuaged by Jen's improvised explanation.

"How did this guy end up as a lowly IT technician then?"

Jen responded with an inarticulate noise of confusion, still busy reacting to how easily Izzy had bought into her explanation. Maybe her work with Megaman truly was turning her into a better liar. Either that, or Izzy was too tired from the day's hard work to question her friend with her usual zeal.

"Seems like he's in the wrong line of work if he wants to be a doctor," she continued.

Jen opened her mouth and closed it when she realised that she didn't know the answer.

"Yeah," she said slowly. "You're right."

The first sidekick rule of being a sidekick is to ensure that the master can do their job effectively; Megaman had insisted from the very start of their partnership that Jen let him do the talking, and she'd been only too willing to oblige. They both knew it was safer that way. Besides, she knew she'd never be able to generate zesty one-liners as well as him. The result was that, no matter what the enemy screamed, Jen didn't respond to combat banter.

“Not so meg-AAAAAH!”

Scorpio crashed into the wall of the empty swimming pool and crumpled to the floor. Jen strode towards him with a smirk on her face.

“You were saying?”

Scorpio felt easier to talk to than most people.

He remained silent and Jen frowned. For a moment she simply stared at the purple-suited human lump on the floor. An image of Mr Sanchez flashed into her mind and her confident stride turned into a frantic sprint. She couldn't have thrown him *that* hard. Megaman was the one with super strength.

Jen crouched beside Scorpio and leaned over to check his pulse. A hand grabbed her wrist and the next thing she knew she was on her back seeing stars.

“Not so mega now.”

Jen blinked. She could hear the smug grin in his freshly deepened voice, but she'd never felt so glad to receive a concussion before.

The second sidekick rule was to be careful; to fight smart rather than dragging it out.

True to his profession, Megaman always emphasised how important it was to evaluate personal progress and, according to him, Jen was slipping. He wasn’t wrong, but sometimes it felt more like she was being chided by a teacher than cautioned by a superhero with meticulously organised mission notes. Either option resulted in an equal amount of guilt.

Scorpio’s fist sailed past her face, catching the edge of her chin. Jen reeled back and narrowly avoided bumping into the sarcophagus behind her.

“How old are you?” he asked, moving forwards to take advantage of her momentary weakness. “I figure if we're going to keep meeting like this we might as well get to know each other a little.”

Jen sighed. It felt like she already knew everything there was to know about Scorpio. He clearly did not understand the concept of the “secret” in secret identity.

Scorpio stepped towards her and she spat blood into his uncovered eye, pleased at how well she was able to aim in the dim lighting of the museum. Scorpio screeched in disgust and stumbled backwards.

“Ew! I know it's like forbidden to ask a woman how old she is but did you have to do that!?”

Scorpio rubbed his face hard enough to muffle his words. Smears of red were drawn across his skin like liquid crayon and Jen touched her lip as she straightened, wondering just how badly her mouth was bleeding. Her jaw felt sore, and her chin would probably be bruised in the morning, but her hand came away clean.

Reassured, Jen settled into a fighting stance and waited for Scorpio to look at her. She was ready to answer his question with her most dangerous smile, the one designed to send opponents running. It was not a skill Megaman had taught her directly, but Jen's observations and careful practice in front of a mirror usually combined to produce the desired effect.

Scorpio didn't look up.

Jen frowned, more than a little disappointed, and lunged towards him. Scorpio held up one blood-streaked hand in surrender.

“Time out!”

Jen froze half out of sheer surprise and half out of pity. Scorpio was smart enough to realise that he wouldn’t have long to stall the ensuing fight.

“I'm seventeen,” he said conversationally, but there was an edge of nervousness to his voice. It almost sounded like it was ready to break all over again.

Jen unfroze but refrained from attacking. She folded her arms. He’d told her when his birthday was last week.

“No you're not.”

Scorpio walked over to the nearest tapestry in the museum. He patted it placatingly, murmured something to it and, just when Jen was starting to think that she should step in, ripped off the tapestry corner. Jen inhaled sharply as any lingering pity she felt for the fellow sidekick evaporated.

“No, I'm not,” Scorpio agreed. The mixture of relief and sheepishness was blatant in his voice as he rubbed the blood out of his eye with the ancient cloth. “Now, how old are you?”

“Younger than that tapestry,” Jen replied, eyes narrowing.

“Good to know.”

The light of the museum grew darker, drawing their attention to the window. A tower of scorpions was consuming a building across the street from them.

“I think that's my cue,” Scorpio said, carefully avoiding Jen's gaze. “Rain check?”

She didn't bother to respond as they instinctively set off in search of their respective masters.

Rule three was to always make time for a post-mission debrief. It was this rule that found Jen waiting expectantly at the usual rendezvous point after several hours of what had felt like never-ending scorpion removal. It had taken her longer than she'd expected to fully chisel the purple coating of creatures off the 10-storey building, even with the help of some very brave window cleaners, and she was surprised that she'd managed to get back to headquarters before Megaman himself..

Jen sighed and tried to ignore the lingering unease in the pit of her stomach. She always seemed to feel like this after missions lately, but it would pass. She tried to shift her attention to the dull ache of her arms, hoping that the pain would ground her. When that failed, she settled for dwelling on her surroundings instead of feelings.

Jen stood by the entrance to Mr Johnson's office, facing the small desk at the far end of the room. Beside the desk was a large noticeboard covered in papers of all shapes and sizes. A long length of thread ran between them, drawing a bright red web across the board that hurt her tired eyes.

Jen skimmed the papers absentmindedly, taking in the corrections from their last mission. Any other student could be forgiven for thinking that Mr Johnson marked papers on a noticeboard, but she knew better. They were mission notes, but it was an easy mistake to make. Few people bothered to examine his almost illegible scrawl unless it was demanded of them. Not for the first time, Jen wondered why her IT teacher seemed to prefer doing everything by hand.

 The noticeboard took up most of the room, and the little space that remained was dedicated to books, a single desk chair and towering piles of school work. The first time Jen had entered the  office she'd been struck by both how orderly the room was and the virtual non-existence of IT equipment. There was still a surprising lack of IT equipment in the office given the man's official job title, but the orderliness was gone.

Focusing on Megaman's writing felt harder than usual. Jen swayed on her feet and then began to inch forwards, wading towards the desk chair as the words blurred together in her periphery.

It was difficult to make out the surface of the desk itself but she did notice an odd lump beneath the layer of paper. The lump was moving. Jen started to peel the paper away, methodically organising it into a small pile in her arms, and found her eyes drawn to the angry red lines of text sprawled across the half-marked worksheets. She squinted at the writing, forcing her eyes to focus. The supposed comments and corrections looked remarkably like thinly veiled mission notes to her.

A hand grabbed her wrist and Jen was embarrassed to admit that, in spite of her training, she let out a sharp shriek. She looked down and barely managed to avoid dropping the pile of paper back onto Megaman’s head. He stared blearily up at her from the desk, his face half turned to make eye contact. Jen's frown deepened. Without the mask, she could easily see the bags under his eyes.

  “Are you -”

“What are you doing here?” he interrupted, not unkindly.

“Debrief?” Jen reminded.

  Megaman let go of her and sat up, knocking stray pieces of paper onto the floor like snowflakes as he moved.

  “Right.” He sighed. “Hang on, I've got the mission notes around here somewhere.”

  He glanced down at the desk and started to sift through the paper around him. Jen returned the pile she was holding to the space where his head had been and waited.

  Megaman swept his fingers through the papers fast enough for Jen to be impressed that he hadn't given himself a paper cut. He was strong but not invulnerable, as far she knew.

  Megaman stood and turned to confront the noticeboard. Jen's eyes drifted to the myriad of papers carpeting the floor. She wondered for a brief moment if Scorpio experienced similar feedback delays.

“Jennifer.”

Jen's head snapped up and she wiped the thought from her mind. Scorpio had nothing to do with this.

“Sir?”

The teacher offered her a weary smile.

“I can't seem to find my notes on today's mission, so why don't *you* tell me what you think went well and what could have gone better?” he suggested, sinking back into his chair.

  Jen hesitated. It was standard marking procedure for teachers to both give and encourage students to come up with 3 good things and 3 points for improvement on their work, but this was different. Her work with Megaman affected people outside of the classroom. It felt wrong to be generating the feedback for herself, especially given how specific and detailed his notes tended to be on the subject. Today however, was evidently the exception.

  “Jennifer? I don't have all day,” Megaman reminded. He kept his voice light but he looked like he could easily fall asleep at the desk again. His fingers drummed against its surface and the paper crackled rhythmically.

  “Are you okay?” Jen asked.

  “I'm fine.” The conciliatory smile didn't reach his tired eyes. “Please answer the question.”

  Jen didn’t believe him, but he wasn't the only person who was tired. Jen’s arms throbbed from her painstaking efforts at scorpion removal and it was getting late. She didn't have the energy or will to question her master. He knew best.

  “Okay. What went well... I successfully removed scorpions from an entire building, I didn't tell Scorpio anything identifying and uh -”

  “You spoke to him?” Megaman interjected. His voice sounded taut, like an elastic band waiting to snap. His fingers stopped tapping.

  “He just asked me how old I was,” Jen said quickly. “I didn't tell him anything.”

  Megaman nodded and the tapping resumed.

  “Good. Go on.”

  Jen paused, trying to think of another positive that had come out of what felt like a routine fight.

  “I know how old *he* is?” she added.

  Megaman’s mouth stretched into a genuine smile this time.

  “Well done. We might be able to use that.”

  The compliment for information so freely given to her felt unearned, but Jen didn't object. She racked her brains for more useful information that Scorpio might have unwittingly admitted but nothing came to mind. Knowing what colour he wanted to dye his hair next was hardly indicative of a larger evil scheme. She decided to move on.

“And, um, I think I was better at fighting smart this time around. I took him by surprise.”

  “How?”

 “Uh, I spat in his eye.”

 Megaman let out a startlingly loud guffaw of laughter and something seemed to loosen in him. If it hadn't been for her training Jen would have flinched at the noise. As it was, she swayed slightly in surprise before returning his smile.

  “Well done,” he chuckled, rubbing at his eyes. “And what do you think could've gone better today?”

  “It took forever to get the scorpions off that building,” Jen said instantly, starting to feel the tension in her stomach lessen. Megaman hummed in sympathy. “And - uh -”

  Jen hesitated as her mind returned to the tapestry incident and her smile faded. If only she hadn't frozen. If only she'd -

  “You should've spent less time fighting,” Megaman answered, leaning back in his chair with an air of calm nonchalance as he delivered his critique. “I wasn't able to time you like I did last week, but I still notice these things Jennifer. A few months ago you would've been able to deal with that boy in under a minute. You're distracted.”

  “He talks a lot,” she muttered weakly.

  She knew immediately from the look on Megaman’s face that it had been the wrong thing to say. His back was ramrod straight now, at an uncomfortably direct right-angle to the seat.

  “What have I told you about talking?” he said pointedly.

  “To leave it to you,” she replied meekly, shrinking slightly beneath the judgment of his gaze. “But isn't it useful to know who we're fighting?”

  Megaman exhaled slowly and leaned forwards in his seat. The smile he offered her was half-knowing and half-apologetic.

  “Yes Jennifer, but there are better ways to find out, especially with these people. Words mislead; actions demonstrate. You're still young and I don't want you being led astray. I don't care how much he yabbers on; you leave the talking back to me. ”

Megaman didn't raise his voice, he wasn't that kind of teacher, but there was a firmness to his words that Jen knew better than to challenge.

“Sorry,” she said, trying to make the word sound more heartfelt than it was. Judging from his sigh, she hadn't succeeded.

  “You're a good student Jennifer,” Megaman continued. “I just don't want to see you or anyone else at this school hurt because of a poorly chosen comeback.”

  Jen openly winced at the thought. The body of Mr Sanchez flashed into her mind as it was prone to doing these days.

  “I understand,” she said. “I'll do better.”

  And this time she meant it.

Jen had never cared much for parents evening. She didn't hate or enjoy it; she tolerated it. It was one of the few evenings that she would willingly let her parents parade her around like some sort of academic show dog.

She knew how the evening would go: the teachers would compliment her work ethic, her father would beam at her and fondle his moustache in the odd way that he clearly thought was charming, and her mother would boast about her daughter's genetically-inherited talent to anyone that would listen. Jen would typically spend most of the evening trying to convince herself that she was not in fact present, and that she knew how to astral project; she could not be experiencing this combination of extreme boredom and embarrassment because she was literally above it.

This time however, everything was different. Jen had no friends at Bunin High to exchange passing uncomfortable glances with, and the school had an unfamiliar parents evening procedure which seemed to have thrown even her parents out of their normal patterns. It felt like they were signing up to a series of doctors appointments instead of parent-teacher consultations, and Jen was too nervous to summon her astral projection fantasy as a distraction.

She felt more nervous than she had been prior to any of her exams. She could predict what most of her teachers were going to say (it would be the usual "your daughter works very hard but she really must contribute more in class"), but there was only one teacher whose feedback she cared about.

"Let me see!"

Guinivere Brooke snatched the evening schedule from her husband’s hands. They looked immensely uncomfortable sitting in the cavernous corridor; Martin Brooke’s moustache drooped cartoonishly low on his face. As a five year old, Jen had spent almost a week trying to remove the offending facial hair before its presence had been explained to her. Now, she couldn't imagine her father without it. The moustache made his face. Right now, it was making his face look sad.

Guinevere quickly scanned the schedule and sighed. Her hands fell into her lap cradling the paper.

"It's going to be a long evening," she said, leaning her head onto her husband's shoulder almost apologetically.

He nodded and wrapped one arm around her waist. Jen wished she was five again so it would be socially acceptable for her to clamber into their arms and force a group hug. Her parents were supposed to be at work earning the money necessary for them to live where they lived. Instead, they were here. Jen hoped that she was worth it.

"When do we see Mr Johnson?" she asked.

Her parents glanced down together at the schedule, her mother squinting in the way that meant she'd forgotten to bring her reading glasses.

"Looks like Mr Johnson is the last person we'll be seeing," Martin answered eventually.

Jen sank back into her chair, closed her eyes and tried to steady her breathing. Her mother was right: it was going to be a long evening.

Over half an hour later, the Brooke family was finally ushered into the office of Jen's English teacher, a startlingly enthusiastic young woman who claimed to be fuelled by coffee and a love of literature. Jen took a seat and tried to focus but, when they left the office, she barely remembered a word.

She glanced up at her parents, trying to gauge what had happened from their expressions. They looked tired. It was not the same as the bone-tired weariness she felt after an exhausting mission, but a sense of burnout that she sometimes felt was unique to her parents. Small time business owners couldn't afford to waste time. Though neither of them said it, Jen knew they were still thinking about work. She looked away.

"Honestly, I don't know why they bother with a schedule if they can't follow it!" Guinevere complained.

Jen made a noise of acknowledgement. Apparently there were some things about schools that never changed, no matter their location. Martin looked equally frustrated but merely patted his wife's shoulder.

"I think these people treat them more like guidelines," he replied, shooting a wink at Jen. “Isn’t that right?”

Jen squirmed. She was attending the school, but that didn't mean she was part of it.

"Jennifer Brooke?"

The family stood up to greet the volunteer parent-fetcher. The parent-fetcher looked to be about Jen's age and wore a pristine white blouse and a black not-quite-mini skirt. The smart casual look was completed by a denim jacket that swamped her shoulders. It suited her better than school uniform, but that could be said about most items of clothing. Bunin High was just as capable of roping students into casual event management as Jen's previous school had been.

Jen was pretty sure that she'd had classes with the denim girl before, maybe even sat next to her once or twice, but she couldn't remember her name. Denim had a nice smile. Jen made an effort to return it.

"Yes?" said Martin after a moment, when it became clear that his daughter wasn't going to respond verbally.

Denim glanced down at the sheet of paper in her hands.

"Mr Sanch- oh, right. Miss Frederickson is ready to see you now."

Jen's fists clenched. Her smile twisted into a grimace as the Spanish teacher's broken body flashed into her mind. Denim looked up and Jen quickly schooled her expression.

"You're the new girl right?" Denim said cheerfully. "Come on, it's this way."

Time ticked by painfully slowly and the reminder of Mr Sanchez did nothing to shake the weight of Jen's nerves. They settled uncomfortably at the base of her spine, seeping into her posture and speech. The few words she was capable of uttering came out too fast and uncertain, so she said as little as possible.

She tried to focus on her teachers but the distraction wasn't working. The evening was proving to be far less predictable than she'd originally envisioned and, while the familiarity of her academic praises being sung seemed to return her parents to their default parent's evening setting, there was a new element to the unnervingly specific academic feedback that Jen knew she should have predicted.

"Jen's a great student," said Mr Thorshall, "but she'd do even better if she spoke up more often and didn't miss so many lessons. Is there something going on that I should know about? I'd love to have her in class more frequently."

Martin and Guinevere exchanged glances and looked down at her daughter. Jen’s nerves jumped from her spine to her stomach. She wanted to throw up and it was all she could do to stop herself from shaking.

"As much as I love Harry, sorry, Mr Johnson, it seems like he's seeing a lot more of you than I am!" the maths teacher continued, oblivious to Jen’s plight.

Guinevere’s eyebrows rose and Martin’s moustache took on an air of distinct disapproval.

"*Is* he now?" Guinevere asked, an edge to her voice that dared to creep into something Jen did not want to think about.

Jen looked from her parents to her bemused maths teacher, aware of how horribly wrong the next few minutes could go. For a bizarre moment, she thought of Scorpio.

"I've been getting extra tutoring!" she squeaked.

"Oh?" Martin said, a note of interest in his voice.

Guinevere still looked suspicious.

"Yeah," Jen said quickly. "Mr Johnson thinks that I have great potential as an IT –" She paused. "– support person. I always forget what it's called."

Jen stared at her parents and waited. She could imagine few things worse than her mother storming into Mr Johnson's office demanding to know what he was doing with her daughter outside of lessons. Jen wasn't sure which outcome would be worse: the assumption her mother would make, or the truth.

Thankfully, Guinevere latched onto the words "great potential" and no longer looked like she was preparing to commit murder. Martin's moustache seemed to settle in tandem with his wife's appeasement.

"Ah well, I can't argue with the IT expert!" Mr Thorshall said affably. "Just make sure you keep your grades up and you'll be getting no complaints from me."

Jen returned her gaze to the maths teacher. He smiled at her encouragingly, completely unaware of the nightmare scenario she had narrowly avoided. She forced herself to smile back and tried not to look too pleased when they finally left his office.

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After what felt like days instead of hours, Jen finally found herself waiting outside Mr Johnson's office. She stared at the faded lettering on his door and tried to pretend that this was just another regular debrief after another regular mission, instead of an annual review which would determine the future of her work by his side. There was no need to be as mind-numbingly on edge as she felt.

"He's late," Martin noted. He sounded surprised.

Guinevere muttered something obscene under her breath and Jen tried desperately not to shudder at the sound. She forced herself to remain focused on the lettering, as if staring at the simple sign would summon her master. She read the words over and over again until they lost all meaning, till the simple statement of "IT office" felt surreal. It wasn't really an IT office anyway; no student was stupid enough to come to Mr Johnson for IT assistance. She had no idea how the man had managed to stay employed for as long as he had.

"Sorry I'm late."

Jen felt like she was turning in slow motion. She wrenched her gaze away from the lettering to look at her master and, for a moment, she thought she'd successfully been able to achieve astral projection; watching Megaman shake hands with her parents was the closest Jen felt she would ever come to having an out of body experience.

The IT teacher flashed a charismatic smile at Jen's parents before turning it on her. The smile held every ounce of warmth that had been there on the day she'd taken her oath, and it almost hid how ragged he looked. The bags beneath his eyes were larger than Jen had ever seen them and the look was accompanied by a weariness etched deep into his brows. Jen didn't know how long it had been lurking there for, but it didn't do anything to ease the tension in her body. She couldn't bring herself to return the smile.

"Oh I hope it's nothing serious!" Guinevere said, managing to sound annoyed, concerned and appeased all at once.

Jen blinked and forced herself to tune into the conversation.

"Oh I’m fine. It was just a poorly timed checkup. I don’t have anything that a few pills won't handle," Megaman responded good-naturedly. "I hope you haven't been waiting long; they didn't have any other slots available I'm afraid."

Jen stared at him blankly, unable to tell if he was talking about the parent-teacher consultation slot or the doctor’s appointment he'd apparently been stalled by. He was lying about *something*. She missed her mother's response, but heard her master's words clearly.

"Well you'd better come into one of the classrooms. I don't know why reception sent you to my office; they know it's having some work done." He lied smoothly and offered the family an apologetic smile. "The paint fumes nearly knocked me out the other day!"

Jen frowned, internally translating his words to mean that the office was as uninhabitably messy as it had been during her last visit. Guinevere made a noise which was a cross between sympathy and irritation but petered out into a noncommittal hum. She was skilled at walking the line between passive and aggressive to her advantage, but Megaman's expert smile disarmed her in an instant.

He led them away from the office into an unremarkable, grey classroom and they pulled up chairs around the front desk. Guinevere jumped straight to the point as they sat down.

"You must tell us about Jenny's extra-extracurricular work," she said. "She's hardly told us anything!"

Megaman's lip twitched but his expression otherwise remained impressively impassive. It was as if his face was frozen in his greeting smile. Jen couldn't bring herself to look away from it, desperately trying to communicate via eye contact alone that it wasn't what he was thinking, that nobody knew the truth apart from them.

"In fact, if that Mr Thornhill hadn't mentioned it I doubt we'd even know she was getting extra tuition!" Guinevere continued. "Right dear?"

Jen faintly registered her father nodding in her periphery.

"She's very humble our Jen," he agreed.

Jen gave up on the hopeless endeavour of a telepathic explanation via eye contact, and reluctantly decided to attempt speaking. She tried to clear the nerves from her throat and broke off into a coughing fit. All eyes were on her by the time she'd finished. Martin gave her a gentle pat on the back. Her master looked faintly concerned.

"The IT support thing," Jen gasped, eyes streaming. "She means the extra tutoring for the IT support thing."

The change in Megaman's expression was subtle but clear to Jen, his brow slightly less furrowed. He offered her a tired smile.

"Of course Jennifer, what else would your mother mean?"

He chuckled. There was a slight edge to the sound and Jen barely managed to suppress her wince.

"I want to hear all about it!" Guinevere exclaimed, wearing a more genuine version of the determined eagerness she put on for business meetings.

Jen held her breath and waited. Megaman settled back in his chair.

"Well," he began. "Jennifer's done some great work for me both in and outside of lessons."

Jen let out a long, quiet breath. So far so good.

"I saw the potential in her after only a week of teaching, and knew she'd benefit from extra tuition."

Jen smiled and finally felt herself start to relax.

"What does this "extra tuition" involve exactly?" Martin asked.

"Well, I would call our work together more of an apprenticeship than tutoring per se," Megaman continued, flashing Jen a knowing grin. "Though teaching does come into it -"

"You've been giving her work experience?" Martin interrupted.

Guinevere looked more frustrated by the interruption than Megaman did. The teacher schooled his features into a professional mask of amicable courtesy. Friendly but distant. He sat a little straighter.

"In effect, yes. Jennifer has been supporting me in the office with technological problems. I know she hasn't been at the school for long, but I can't recall how I managed to handle the IT department without her!" He chuckled. "It's an additional learning experience to put on her CV."

Martin frowned and Jen felt the nervous tension starting to creep back into her body.

"If you're going to be taking her out of lessons for grunt work I'd prefer that she gets paid for it," he said gruffly, moustache bristling.

"Oh Martin don't kick up a fuss!" Guinevere sighed.

Jen had to work hard not to roll her eyes at the irony of her mother telling her father *that*.

Megaman raised his hands appeasingly and used what Jen liked to call the Teacher Look on her parents. Guinevere begrudgingly fell silent and Martin closed his mouth.

"I understand your concern," Megaman acknowledged. "I've been trying to negotiate a budget with HR that takes Jennifer’s assistance into account, but I'm afraid that we haven't had much luck as of yet."

He looked at Jen meaningfully and she shook her head in agreement, trying to look less like how she felt.

"At the end of the day, Jennifer and I agreed to treat the situation as a learning experience. She benefits from learning techniques and knowledge for her future career, and I get some desperately needed assistance in the office."

Martin hummed contemplatively for a moment before turning to Jen, his expression serious.

"Is this what you want?" he asked.

His voice was gentle but it made the question no less pertinent. Jen thought back to her oath and how the suit made her feel. She thought of her first mission and the countless criminals she'd helped Megaman take down since then and, inevitably, she thought of Mr Sanchez. The memory of his body still haunted her, but it also served as a reminder: she needed to keep fighting, to become better. Evil wasn't going to unspread itself.

"Yes."

Megaman nodded approvingly and Martin sat back in his chair. He didn't look particularly comfortable in the seat of the hard, purple plastic but seemed satisfied with Jen's response. The chair was almost the same shade as the Scorpions' costumes and, for a moment, Jen struggled to look away from it. She could imagine Scorpio sitting lazily beside her, ready with his usual brand of rambling, unnecessarily detailed commentary. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips. She wished she could see how he would react to this.

"- only area that Jennifer needs to improve on is efficiency," said Megaman. "To some extent that will come with time but, at the moment, she can be quite easily distracted from the task at hand. That's a big problem in our line of work."

"Distracted?" Guinevere and Martin chorused, sounding confused and bemused in equal parts.

"Yes," Megaman replied. "She seems to like having chats with a certain classmate."

Guinevere's eyebrows rose into her hair and Jen shrank into her seat guiltily, not entirely sure whose judgment was worse. The image of Scorpio had vanished from her mind as quickly as it arrived. Megaman was barely looking at her but she felt the full force of his words like an anchor forcing her back into the present.

"Who is this classmate and why haven't we heard of them!?" Guinevere cried.

Megaman looked between Martin, Guinevere and Jen, paused, and quickly recalculated.

"Sorry, I mean the technician. The kid's so young that sometimes I forget he isn't still in school," he explained apologetically. "I would normally get him to help me out in the office but he's recently gone part time."

Even through her embarrassment, Jen was impressed by the speed of the impromptu lie. Megaman looked exhausted but he still managed to sound utterly convincing. It was a skill she had yet to master.

"In essence, Jen needs to spend less time talking and more time working."

Jen's parents exchanged a look of surprise.

"Well you're certainly the first teacher to tell us that!" said Guinevere.

Megaman smiled, relaxing into a faintly weary but not undignified slouch against the table.

"I'm not surprised. The world of IT is quite different to others," he said, pausing briefly before the word "IT" almost as if he'd forgotten it. "If Jen wants to pursue this line of work she needs to learn how to block out distractions."

He turned his gaze to fully focus on Jen for the first time since entering the classroom. Now that they were only a desk apart Jen could see her master clearly. His hands that had been so loosely clasped together at the start of the consultation were now gripped tight enough to whiten knuckles.

"You're a fast learner Jennifer, but you need to put what I've taught you into practise every day. Can you do that?"

There was an intensity to his voice that Jen hadn't heard before. He almost sounded desperate. She met his eyes and nodded slowly and deliberately.

"Yes."

He'd trained her well. She would be ready for what he wasn't telling her, whatever it was.

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Izzy proudly presented her art board to the WebCam.

“What do you think?”

Jen squinted at the painting. It was large enough to barely fit into the frame of the video screen. Izzy had characteristically described it as both her latest masterpiece and work in progress but, no matter how hard Jen stared, she had no idea what the abstract series of blobs was supposed to be, let alone represent. She wondered if it would look better from a distance.

“Um.”

Izzy’s smile fell and her eyes narrowed.

“I like the colours,” Jen said quickly.

“You don’t like it.”

“No, I just - what is it?” Jen asked.

Izzy sighed and glanced down at the art board before looking back up at Jen.

“It’s supposed to be Megaman.”

Jen looked at the painting again, trying to work out how the series of strange blue shapes resembled her master. She tried tilting her head to one side, hoping that something would into place. Izzy was very protective of her artwork.

“Oh. I can see it now.”

Izzy turned around to safely stow the painting away in her bedroom.

“Don’t lie to me Jen. You’re a crap liar.”

Now that the monitor was no longer filled with the painting, Jen could properly see her friend’s room. It was small and cramped but Izzy had taken advantage of every nook and cranny. Her walls were plastered with artwork charting from childhood to the present. There was barely enough space for it all, and Jen knew that some of it was stored in Izzy’s drawers, stuffed in with a collection of art supplies, and some of her unfinished works. Izzy’s tiny bedroom had been defined by her passion for art for as long as Jen could remember.

Izzy turned back to the camera, sat down on a paint splattered beanbag and folded her arms.

“You not supposed to ‘see it’. The whole point of abstract art is that you can’t ‘see it’! You *know* it,” Izzy explained. “Megaman does so much of his work in the shadows to protect the public. He hardly ever speaks to reporters. You know how many times he’s been asked to comment on the increasing number of suicides at Bunin bridge?”

Jen shrugged as if she hadn’t been by his side for every occurrence of that question in the last year.

“He never answers,” Izzy continued, as if speaking to a particularly slow child. “He only talks to the people he’s saving or fighting. Or Megagirl I guess. I’m going to try painting her next –“

Jen raised an eyebrow. She could imagine it now: Izzy would cheerfully present her with a colourful, abstract mirror of herself and she’d have to find some way to comment on it that didn’t reveal how severely weirded out she was by the whole thing. It would be an experience.

“- Megaman is in the public eye but we hardly know anything about him. This piece represents that.”

“Okay,” Jen replied, torn between annoyance and amusement. “Why are you painting Megaman?”

Izzy rolled her eyes.

“*Because* I’ve finally chosen a theme for my final year art project. We had like three options and this one was definitely the coolest.”

Jen waited expectantly but Izzy didn’t elaborate.

“What were the options?” she asked after a moment.

“Fungi and the land, weather patterns, or heroes and villains. We get to interpret them however we like. Guess which one I went for.”

Jen tried to smile.

“I bet a lot of people went for that one.”

Izzy nodded.

“Most of the class did. I think one person picked fungi and the land but that was Amy and, you know, Amy’s weird.”

Jen nodded. She wasn’t entirely sure what to think about a whole classroom of students painting caricatures of herself and Megaman, but if there was one thing she could agree on it was the dullness of fungi.

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Things were different after parents evening. Jen could feel it in her master’s gaze. Megaman no longer seemed so at ease on missions. He’d always had a certain intensity to him, a certain depth hidden beneath the veneer of charisma he presented to cameras and parents alike, but that intensity was growing more and more visible to her every day. It came out in how his eyes burned when he spoke of their mission, and in his increasingly angry responses to the teasing Scorpionette. His focus had narrowed and every mission started to have the same aim: find Scorpions HQ.

         Megaman still only took Jen out of lessons once a week for missions, but any time outside of school became fair game for their extracurricular work. Jen discovered new depths of creativity in herself as she scrambled to maintain her grades and come up with adequate excuses for her parents. She alternated between saying that she liked the walk home so much that she would linger in the park and pretending to be part of a non-descript after-school study club. They seemed to be most satisfactory excuses in her parents’ eyes. She had considered testing a few others, most of them being far closer to the truth, but none seemed as believable.

*I met up with a friend.*

Jen hesitated to say the words. Even thinking them felt like a betrayal of all that she was helping Megaman to achieve. Scorpio wasn’t allowed to be her friend.

         “I met up with a - the technician,” she tried once at dinner.

         Martin, who was taking up half of the table with paperwork, barely looked up. Jen wasn’t entirely sure of its relevance but, based on the familiar harrowed look in her father’s eyes, she assumed it was to do with finances.

         “That’s nice dear,” he said absentmindedly.

         Jen sighed and returned to picking at her takeaway. If her parents really were concerned about money, she didn’t understand why they got Chinese takeaway so often. Her family ate it with enough regularity that Jen was beginning to resent a meal which had once been her favourite.

         Guinevere however, perked up at the sound of her daughter’s voice.

         “Technician?” she said, pausing in the process of slurping up her chicken noodle soup. “Is that the young man that Mr Johnson mentioned?”

         There was a look in her eye that instinctively made Jen feel uncomfortable. She hesitated in her response, wondering how to tackle the subject in a way that might make that look go away.

         “Yeah. He’s been showing me some more IT stuff,” Jen replied, internally cursing her inability to quote specifics.

         Guinevere nodded. The look in her eye had yet to fade.

         “And when are we going to meet this boy?” Martin asked, still not looking away from the paperwork.

         “Um…”

         Thankfully, Jen was saved by the sound of her ringtone. She’d taken to having it on the loudest setting outside of school hours, not wanting to miss out on important missions updates from her master.

*You don’t know what you’re getting into baby*

*but don’t worry I’ll show you the ropes*

*You’re so pessimistic but I say maybe*

*we can get your hopes up…*

Martin groaned loudly.

“You’d better get that before your father’s brain explodes,” Guinevere chuckled. “You know how much he hates Fizzy Ashtray.”

Jen made a beeline for her phone in the living room as her mother put her chicken noodle soup to one side and went to join her husband in staring at the incomprehensible sea of paper.

“Hello?” Jen said a little breathlessly.

Megaman’s voice sounded almost as breathless as he uttered his reply down the phone.

“I think I’ve found their hideout. Meet me at this address in 10.”

Jen opened her mouth to respond but her master had already hung up. The Google Maps location arrived on her phone a few seconds later with a small but piercing beep. The noise was loud enough to make Jen glad that her suit had no pockets; there was literally no space for her phone to disrupt a mission. She checked the message and winced. It would be difficult to get to the outskirts of town in that sort of time she could make it if she left now and ran in between catching various forms of public transport.

She slipped the phone back into her jeans and ran up the stairs two at a time, not bothering to present the latest of excuses to her parents. They’d be too occupied with the paperwork for tonight to even notice her absence. As a child it had frustrated her, but these days their preoccupation with work was becoming increasingly useful.

Jen dived into her bedroom, plastered the “Do Not Disturb EVER” poster to her door, locked it behind her and wasted almost half of her precious time searching for her costume. She had to hide it somewhere different each day to reduce the likelihood of her mother coming across it during a session of what her father liked to call “procrastination cleaning”, but the precaution sometimes made it difficult for Jen to locate the item of clothing later on.

By the time Jen had finally unearthed her suit she knew she was going to be late. She pulled it on over her clothes, impatience and anxiety mixing together to provide a surprising amount of speed and dexterity to her movement. Miraculously, she got the suit on in record time and managed to avoid adding any extra rips to the fabric.

She checked the bus schedule briefly on her laptop, donned her mask and opened the bedroom window. Jen climbed out into the cold evening air and hurriedly scaled down the tree by her window, grabbing onto a combination of pipes and branches as handholds for her descent. She internally scolded herself at the harsh grip, but she didn’t have time to be careful. Normally she was more careful, her father had been complaining about the new house’s shoddy plumbing ever since they had moved in, but they couldn’t afford to repair it yet.

Jen dropped lithely onto the front lawn and started to run.

“You’re late.”

Jen gasped out an apology in response. She bent down, hands pressed against her knees, as she tried to catch her breath. The run from the bus stop to the relatively isolated location had taken longer than Google Maps had predicted.

Megaman sighed a little impatiently, but waited for Jen to straighten up before he spoke again. Jen’s eyes widened as she took place in and she let out a small gasp. It reminded her a little of the warehouse she had first fought Scorpio in. It certainly looked like a villainous hideout: it was huge, dark and foreboding. It wasn’t quite in middle of nowhere, but the backdrop of the Bunin’s forest-filled nature reserve behind it gave off that impression.

“We just going to see what’s inside,” said Megaman. “I don’t know who or what is going to be in that building though so keep your eyes peeled.”

Jen nodded, but could feel the frown starting to form on her face.

“How did you – “

“I just know,” he said brusquely. Jen glanced down awkwardly at the irritation in his voice and Megaman sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It was something the Scorpionette said to me in our last fight – it led me here.”

“Oh.”

Jen carefully decided not to question her master further, noting the weariness of his eyes as he spoke, and followed him forwards to the ominously padlocked door.

Megaman seized the padlock in his fist and squeezed. The actions didn’t seem as effortless as usual, there was a slight tremor in his arm as he crushed the metal in his hand, but he still successfully managed to crush solid metal into a smooth pulp. It was something that Jen still hadn’t got used to. She knew that her master was strong, but knowing it and seeing it were two different things.

Megaman brushed the material that had once been padlock off his fingers and opened the door with one swift yank. Jen winced as the hinges creaked and strained in response. She couldn’t tell if the door needed oiling or if it was protesting against her master’s strength. Either way, it sounded like a puppy was dying.

Together, they stepped into the gloom. The building was almost silent apart from the steady drip of lingering rainwater leaking through the roof. There was just enough damage in the roof to shine a tiny spotlight into the room. It was not enough to illuminate the area. Jen knew what to do before Megaman told her; it was routine for her now. She pressed her body against the wall of the building and slowly began to scout out the perimeter, one hand searching for a light switch and the other held out in front of her to check for obstacles in the darkness.

The wall was coarse to the touch and the smell of mould was in the air. Jen was partly relieved by it; she had smelt many things on missions and mould truly was the more pleasant option out of them.

A trickle of water hit her hand as her master found the light switch. Jen very nearly jumped at the sudden brightness. The lone lamp standing at the centre of the room was not particularly strong but it was a sharp contrast to the previous inky blackness. She blinked several times, waiting for her eyes to adjust as Megaman surged forwards. She acknowledged his reaction in her periphery before fully seeing what he was reacting to.

There were cages in the room. Jen was amazed that she hadn’t already bumped into one. The cages were each about half a metre wide and a metre tall and were laid out in a neat grid of rows throughout the room. Every single cage was draped in mould of varying colours. Jen hadn’t known that mould could come in so many different colours quite frankly and she started to rethink her original assessment of the smell. Megaman however, was already ahead of her. He stood by the cage underneath the lamp. It was covered in the widest variety of mould colours and, as Jen approached it, she realised that it smelled of more than just mould. There was something else there and it was emitting one of the bad smells.

Megaman’s gaze was fixed on the cage and his hands were balled into trembling fists. She had a feeling that she wasn’t going to want to see whatever it was that was in the cage, but she forced herself to look anyway and peered through the gaps in the mixture of fungus and rusted metal.

There was a child inside. The girl couldn’t have been more than 9 or 8 years old but the cage barely contained her. Her body was forced into an awkward position of half collapse against the bars of the cage, her head resting on one corner and her legs bent into a half crouch. Jen opened her mouth before she knew what she was doing.

“Hey,” she said quietly. “Can you hear me? We’re going to get you out of here.”

         She turned to face Megaman but her master was already elsewhere, his attention drawn by the far wall of the dimly lit room. That side of the room was covered in reams of paper and was almost as full as his own office noticeboard. Jen walked over to join him, nervously glancing at each cage she passed, afraid of what she would see this time, but all the other cages were empty.

         “We have to get her out of here,” said Jen quietly when she reached her master.

         He continued to silently squint at the papers and Jen instantly found herself following his lead. The wall was covered in diagrams and annotations which seemed to grow increasingly erratic the more detailed they became.

         “Trial one, trial two, trial 16 –“ Megaman mumbled under his breath as he deciphered the scribblings. “It was an experiment,” he breathed.

         “We have to get her out of here,” Jen repeated.

         The words finally seemed to break her master out of his horrified trance.

         “She’s dead Jennifer. She couldn’t have survived this kind of testing,” he explained, gesturing at the wall.

Jen swallowed down the revulsion which followed that thought and tried again.

“Her family deserves to know,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper now.

Megaman finally turned to face her.

“Yes,” he sighed. “I can tip off the police in the morning. You should go home; I’m sorry you had to see this.”

“No,” said Jen.

“No?”

Megaman raised an eyebrow and even Jen had to admit that she was surprised by her sudden defiance.

“I have to know what happened here,” she replied. “Scorpio would never –“ she paused and took in her master’s expression. “I just want to know why this happened,” she mumbled.

Megaman smiled but it was not a pleasant smile.

“Tonight should be a good lesson for you.”

Jen wasn’t sure how long they spent in the strange building that night, examining the wall and cages in turn. They carefully refrained from touching any of the cages with their bare skin, unsure of how to treat the strange fungus and wary of the lone dead girl. Once Megaman had stated the obvious fact that the child was dead, Jen didn’t know how she managed to miss it before. No human alive had skin that shade of grey, or eyes that empty. It was the smell that she hated most however. At first the stench of mould had blocked it from her senses, but now she knew it was there, the smell was all too pungent.

Jen kept close to the wall of paper, refusing to let her eyes drift away from the information displayed. She already knew who Megaman would blame for this; he had traced the scorpions to this address directly from the Scorpionette’s battle banter, and yet the experiments were so unlike anything the Scorpions had done before. They’d never killed. They’d taken hostages and raided various buildings at seemingly random intervals and locations within the city, but they’d never hurt anyone. Not directly. This didn’t line up with their M.O. Jen was certain that there was more to this than met the eye.

She stared blankly at the diagram in front of her. It was difficult to read the annotations in the dim lighting but the meaning of the loosely sketched drawing was pretty clear. The mould was supposed to do something to the child. She wasn’t supposed to be dead but Jen wasn’t quite sure what she was supposed to be instead. It was just like Megaman had said, the girl couldn’t have withstood this kind of long-term testing, and it made Jen nervous about the other cages. Were there other children out there who were still undergoing this ordeal?

“Jennifer.”

Her master’s voice came from the far end of the room. They’d searched for someplace separate to the cages but the entire building appeared to be dedicated to them. There was no desk or workspace for whoever had made these notes, simply wall space. They had silently agreed to work from opposite ends inwards with their reading and Jen hurried over to him, wondering what he had discovered.

When she reached him, he pointed at a large mind map. It sprawled out across several different sheets of paper like a malevolent spider. It was titled “CHAOS THEORY” but Jen struggled to decipher any of the writing outside of the central bubble.

“This is why this happened,” Megaman said solemnly.

Jen squinted harder at the writing, still struggling to make sense of it.

“I don’t –“

“This is why their attacks are so random. This is why they strike somewhere different every week. They’re trying to encourage it.”

Jen stared at him blankly, annoyed by his sudden enigmatic responses. Although Megaman wasn’t a great IT teacher, he was normally better at making himself understood then this.

“It’s late,” he said with a sigh. “You should go home. I’ll stay here to brief the police.”

Jen nodded uncertainly. Part of her wanted to stay and see whatever this was through, but it was a school night and she couldn’t afford to be late to English again if she wanted to stay off her parents’ radar.

She headed back towards the doors they had entered through and tugged them open. The bright light of sunrise was a shock to the system and, for a moment, she simply stood there staring at horizon’s glare. Out here, the city was eerily quiet. What time was it? Would the buses still be running?

Once she’d grown accustomed to the sunlight, she started to move sluggishly towards the bus stop. Part of her wanted to run, to shake out the nervous energy through sheer physical exertion, but her weariness was like a physical weight bearing down on her. It felt like she was wading through mud and she couldn’t help but wonder how Megaman managed to work as hard as he did when he always looked so tired.

When Jen finally reached the bus stop her phone went off and she nearly fell over at the loudness of the alarm. She unzipped the front of her suit and spent 10 minutes trying to find the source of the noise before remembering that she’d left her phone in her jeans pocket. She pulled it out of the pocket with considerable difficulty and stared at the screen. It was 7 AM. How was that possible? It was going to be a race to reach school on time.

Jen stripped out of the suit, thankful that she was wearing clothes underneath it in the cold morning air. She got onto the next bus and settled into her seat like it was a blanket. She stared out of the window and tried to focus on keeping her eyes open. She couldn’t afford to miss her stop if she wanted to get any sleep before school or get to school on time.

Bunin City was rather beautiful in the right lighting. The nature reserve ran along the outskirts of the city and was large enough to almost line the outside of Bunin in trees. It was illegal to camp there without a permit, but that hadn’t stopped many a student from trying and, more often than not, needing to be rescued when they stumbled too far into the forest and inevitably got lost. In the morning sunlight the dappled trees looked familiar and welcoming. It was easy to forget just how extensive the forest was and very easy to find yourself pulled in by its beauty. Megaman had been enlisted a few times to help search when foul play had been suspected, but usually the bulk of the work was left to the park rangers.

The bus left the city outskirts and the next thing Jen knew it was passing through her old neighbourhood. She had to hold herself back from automatically pressing the button to get off as she passed her old flat. It looked even more decrepit than she remembered it being, but some part of her longed for it. She wanted to go inside and see what changed, but she knew the answer would be at best, unsatisfying. It wasn’t her home any more no matter how much she sometimes wished otherwise. Izzy was no longer just around the corner and, if Jen was honest with herself, the only thing about her old home worth missing was Izzy.

As the bus edged closer to the centre of the city the land seemed to transform. Decrepit flats became sleek, modern buildings and grotty parks started to look less unkempt. There was still just as much graffiti as there had been in Jen’s old neighbourhood, but the city itself looked brighter and cleaner.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, the bus reached Jen’s neighbourhood. Jen got off with a weary nod of thanks click file click file click file to the bus driver. He looked vaguely curious but also looked as tired as she did. He said nothing and Jen was grateful for it.

Scorpio's knee met Jen's abdomen and she struggled to stay upright.

“Not so mega ever!” he cried, looking oddly proud of his latest variation on the traditional comeback.

Jen’s eyes narrowed. She'd lost count of Scorpio’s wordplay experiments over the last few weeks but each version somehow managed to be more annoying than the next. She knew he was only doing it because her silence upset him in ways that a simple, bone-crushing kick could not, but that didn’t make it any less frustrating.

“No?” he said, his sole visible eye wide and innocent. “Well what would you suggest?”

Jen snarled (Megaman hadn't said anything about snarling) and leapt forward to return the attack with one of her signature flying kicks. Scorpio grabbed her outstretched leg and twisted.

Jen collapsed onto the ground with a grunt, barely able to gather her wits fast enough to roll away from Scorpio’s impending fist. It hit the concrete with a loud crack and his pained cry echoed around the car park.

Jen got to her feet, pawing at the Mercedes beside her for balance. She staggered deeper into the car park, unable to remember the last time she'd felt this tired during a fight. Exams were coming up soon but her training was equally important, if not moreso. It was supposed to keep her alive, but right now she just wanted to sleep. The echoing rhythm of Megaman and the Scorpionette exchanging blows in the distance was soothingly familiar, and the darkness of the dimly lit space reminded her of her bedroom. Jen could feel her eyelids drooping.

She reached out for the nearest surface and let her body press against the cool metal. She slid down to sit on the ground. Maybe if no one saw then -

The car alarm went off.

“Hey, Megagirl!”

Jen forced her eyes open and found herself staring at the ground. Fresh blood dripped onto it. She followed the drip upwards to a familiar fist.

Scorpio stood directly in front of her, almost shouting to make himself heard over the noise

He sounded more confused than anything else and crouched down to meet her eyes.

“Meg? Snap out of it.”

Jen stared blearily at him. The mask hid most of his face but she had grown accustomed to interpreting his gaze. There was a strange look in his eyes which she couldn't quite place.

Scorpio raised his uninjured hand to rest upon her forehead. She reacted to the touch with an instinctive left hook and he folded backwards like a paperclip. Jen's lip curled upwards as he tried to right himself with his good hand. His movements reminded her of a dying beetle.

“Are you alright?” Scorpio gasped, finally managing to sit up successfully.

She shrugged. The small movement felt like it required a monumental amount of effort.

“Exams,” she said, remembering with a flicker of annoyance a second later that she wasn't supposed to talk to him.

“Ah.”

Scorpio's expression shifted as Jen sighed and forced herself up into the proper combat stance. He mirrored her posture a second later and their fight recommenced, this time with him babbling on about how he bad he was at maths and needing private tutoring. Jen barely listened through her haze of exhaustion. If Scorpio pulled a few punches or missed a few more openings than usual neither of them said anything, and Jen most certainly did not smile when her designated mortal enemy wished her good luck.

Jen didn't know why her master knew his way around the city sewers this well, and she didn't particularly care to find out. It was cold enough to warrant the difficulty of trying to fit multiple layers on beneath her suit, and it was only the thought of her bed and a hot shower that kept her on her feet. Jen hated these kinds of missions where her sole purpose was to watch, wait and follow in the grossest possible circumstances, but it was still an important job to do. Jen reluctantly followed her master, nose to the ground and wrinkled against a smell she feared she'd never be able to remove from her suit.

Megaman froze in front of her and she nearly walked straight into him.

"What is it?" Jen asked.

She spoke quietly but her voice was clear enough to reverberate in the cavernous space. Megaman glanced over his shoulder with one finger pressed to his lips. Jen nodded guiltily and fell silent.

At first, all Jen could hear was the sound of water dripping but then she heard something else. It was distant but unmistakable. Footsteps. They were getting closer. And then -

"Remind me why we're doing this again?"

Jen would've recognised that voice anywhere. She didn't know how Megaman had managed it, but they'd found the Scorpions.

"You know why," the Scorpionette replied, her voice smooth and deep and dangerously fed up. "It's one of the last places on the list."

Megaman gestured to the wall and Jen nodded, moving to press herself to the brickwork opposite him.

"Okay I phrased that badly," Scorpio continued, either completely oblivious to the buttons he was pushing in his master or simply choosing to ignore her tone. "Yes I know and I want to help, but a sewer? Really? It's going to take weeks to get this smell out of my suit!"

Jen tried to hide her smile and barely succeeded. Fortunately, Megaman was otherwise occupied trying to peer around the corner to see how far away the enemy was. His body moved in a slightly jagged motion, and when he relaxed back against the wall a look of pain flashed across his face. It was a solid minute before he could school his expression into something neutral and Jen was instantly concerned.

"Are you okay?" she mouthed at him.

He offered her an uncomfortable smile that Jen had a feeling was meant to be reassuring. It was anything but, but they didn't have time for questions now. Scorpio and the Scorpionette could come round that corner any second now.

Megaman gestured to the torches and Jen nodded her understanding. He started to count down with his free hand.

"Why would we find him in a sewer?"

Three.

"What could we possibly gain from this other than, you know, stink?"

Two.

"Seriously, why did we even put this place on the list? Nobody in their right mind would build their HQ down here!"

One.

The torches went off with a quiet click and Jen was plunged into foul-smelling darkness. The footsteps stopped.

"And another thing -"

"Shut up."

Scorpio fell silent. All Jen could hear was the sound of drips and her breathing in the darkness. The Scorpions couldn't be far now but what little light they appeared to possess had yet to reach her or Megaman. Jen couldn't see a thing. The darkness coupled with the sewer atmosphere made for a considerably disconcerting feeling.

"What is it?" Scorpio whispered and Jen nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound.

When the Scorpionette spoke there was a smile in her voice that made Jen shiver.

"I think we're close. Keep quiet and stay close to me. Be ready for anything."

The footsteps started up again and this time Jen could see the accompanying light begin to arrive with them. Flecks of torchlight cast briefly across Megaman, giving his skin a sickly white glow, but his eyes were focused on the Scorpions, ready for the moment they'd turn the corner. Jen closed her eyes, pictured her bed once more for good luck, and braced herself. She and Megaman would have the upper hand this time. And then -

*You don’t know what you’re getting into baby*

*but don’t worry I’ll show you the ropes*

Jen’s surprise was significant enough that it took her an embarrassingly long time to recognise the sound of her own, extremely loud ringtone. Her master however, was not as slow. Megaman leapt blindly round the corner into action with a snarl of rage as Jen fumbled with her torch and clothing, trying to unzip and unwrap enough layers to reach and turn off her phone. She cursed under her breath as she heard the Scorpionette giggling, knowing it would only be a matter of time before Scorpio found her.

“I like the music. Gives the sewer a nice vibe.”

Jen let out an irritated groan, still focused on searching her clothes for the rogue phone. Her other hand flipped her torch round to shine the light where she imagined Scorpio’s face was, hoping that his momentary bedazzlement would give her time to turn off her ringtone. Jen seized the phone from her blouse pocket and stared at the screen.

*Izzy is calling.*

She stared for a second too long. Scorpio’s fist swiped through the air and knocked Jen onto the ground coated incoated in sewer water. She dropped her torch, gasping in a mixture of shock and disgust as her phone came into contact with the dirty liquid.

Jen had barely enough time to decline the call before Scorpio's boot connected with her side. She rolled to avoid a second kick and came to crouch beside the wall, one hand clutching her ribs and the other holding her finally silent phone. She stood there shivering, keenly awaiting Scorpio's next move. Now she was finally looking at him she could see that he was wearing a head torch. Their height difference was great enough that it didn't blind her, but it did make it difficult to see Scorpio's expression. He wasn't moving.

"I'll give you a minute to get decent," he said awkwardly. He almost sounded embarrassed.

Jen blinked. She glanced down at herself and realised that her suit was still half open. There was now sewer water dripping from her costume and the clothes she was wearing underneath it. No wonder she was cold.

Jen took a step away from the wall and turned her back on Scorpio, ignoring virtually all of her combat instincts in favour of trying to wring the sewer water out of her blouse. A dark, pungent stain was spreading across the pink fabric and Jen's actions only seemed to reinforce the muddy mark. This was going to be a nightmare to explain to her parents and she didn't even want to think about how she'd clean her suit. There was also the matter of the sewer water on her phone, but that might be for the best right now.

"It sucks down here," Scorpio said conversationally.

Jen nodded her agreement, staring down at her ruined blouse in despair. She turned her attention to her bedraggled hair and contemplated wringing it out as well, but eventually decided that it would be too much effort for something that may only get wet again in the ensuing fight.

"I like your ringtone," Scorpio continued. "What's the song called?"

As if on cue, Jen's phone lit up with another incoming call and the music blasted into the tunnel once again. This time the tinny lyrics were too distorted to be distinguishable but that didn't stop the noise from being amplified by the cavernous space.

"I like it less now!" Scorpio said, raising his voice to be heard over the din.

Jen tried to mute the ringtone but the touchscreen chose to answer the call instead.

"FUCK OFF!" Jen yelled at her phone and it fell mercifully silent. She didn't bother to check the caller ID this time. The only people who called at this time of night were insurance salesmen.

Jen held down the side button and was relieved to note that her phone would at least turn off properly, though she wasn't at all confident that it would turn back on again. She pocketed it, zipped up her suit and turned around to face Scorpio.

Jen's eyes had had enough time to adjust to the lighting now, and she could see his startled expression. She smiled sheepishly, patted the lump on her chest where her phone now resided and settled into a fighting stance. She was about to beckon Scorpio forward when the ground started to shake. They looked at the floor and then each other.

"This isn't us," Scorpio said, responding to the question in Jen's eyes. "And I'm guessing it's not you guys."

Jen rolled her eyes but there was enough of a lilt at the end of his sentence for her to shake her head as confirmation.

"Well this day just keeps getting better and better!"

The ground jolted and the two sidekicks lurched into the wall. Jen very nearly fell back into the sewer water but Scorpio grabbed her wrist and pulled her upright before she could hit the ground. It felt like he was trying to yank her arm out of her socket, but at least she was no longer about to get a mouthful of sewer water. Jen yanked her wrist free and frowned at him, placing one hand firmly against the wall while the other rubbed at her sore shoulder.

"What?" he said, a little bdefensively. "I felt bad about the first time."

 Jen couldn't quite stop the incredulous smile from spreading across her face. The guy who helped his master take hostages on a weekly basis, who Jen fought against as naturally as she breathed air, felt bad because he'd got sewer water on her? What did he think was going to happen when they recommenced their fight? She'd been ready to return the favour tenfold but now - it was ridiculous. He was ridiculous. Jen pressed her hands to her mouth so she wouldn't laugh out loud. She'd never hear the end of it from Megaman if she did.

"Yeah yeah laugh it up."

Scorpio made a show of sounding annoyed but there was a twinkle in his eye that said otherwise. The ground shook harder and Jen barely noticed.

"Scorpio!"

"Megagirl!"

Their masters' voices were distant but the reminder of their respective duties was enough for both sidekicks to look away from each other. Jen was familiar with the guilt of fraternising, but it was the first time she'd seen it on Scorpio. She wished she knew what his sidekick rules were. She knew that she wasn't allowed to be Scorpio's friend, but she had no idea if he was allowed to be hers. He was trying very hard if he wasn't.

"Guess that's our cue," Scorpio muttered.

Jen nodded, already missing the twinkle in his eye. His expression was far too serious for her liking.

The ground rumbled again and they both moved towards the tunnel Scorpio had entered through, occasionally grabbing hold of the walls and each other for balance. The tremors were getting worse. They didn't have far to move but movement was difficult. Jen eyed the ceiling warily. Intimate knowledge of a sewer network's structural integrity was not information she'd ever felt the need to know before. She tried to pick up the pace. Maybe Megaman would know. He seemed to know everything else.

"Megaman?"

"Scorpionette?"

Jen and Scorpio exchanged glances as they finally reached the corner. Scorpio gave Jen a mock salute.

"See you around Meg."

The cheer in his voice sounded painfully false and Jen hesitated a moment. Something more had to be wrong but, if that was true, there was nothing she could do about it. She held back from turning the corner just long enough to return the salute, and moved forward before she could see Scorpio's  reaction.

She could see Megaman sitting on the floor at the far end of the tunnel but there was no sign of the Scorpionette. Jen glanced over her shoulder and her eyes widened when she saw Scorpio pulling the Scorpionette out from a human-shaped hole in the wall. Jen cursed. She may know little about the integrity of sewer tunnels, but it didn't take a genius to know that the extra damage probably wasn't good for any of them right now. Jen started to run towards her master.

She could hear the wall starting to come down behind her, rubble throwing large splashes of water at her heels. Why wasn't Megaman running and why was he sitting down in the sewer water? His tights would be absolutely ruined.

A brick caught the back of Jen's leg and she half fell, half skidded to a halt beside her master.

"Megaman!" she gasped. "Are you injured?"

He stared blankly at her. He was wearing what had presumably been the Scorpionette's head torch and she couldn't tell if she should be concerned about the blood on its strap or not. There was a nasty looking bruise forming on her master's cheek and Jen could almost see the texture of brick in it. She called his name again and, after a moment, he finally responded.

"No."

He slowly began to stand and Jen manoeuvred herself under his arm, ready to take his weight if necessary, but the ground lurched again and she was thrown against the opposite side of the tunnel. Jen yelped as she head smacked into the wall, and fell onto all fours in the sewer water, trying to blink away the stars. Scorpio was right. This *sucked*.

She looked up desperately in search of Megaman.

"We have to get out of here!" she cried, head ringing at the sound.

 Jen started to crawl towards the side of the tunnel where she'd last seen her master, not trusting herself to stand despite the grossness of the ever-moving ground.

"MEGA-"

The next thing Jen knew she was being hauled upright until she stood face to face with Megaman.

"I heard you the first time," he said calmly. "Follow me."

Reassured by her master's smooth, if slow, footsteps, Jen nodded and made an effort to mimic his aura of determined unflappability. They'd been in far more dire situations. Hadn't they?

Megaman grabbed Jen's hand and yanked her forwards. A second later a large piece of the ceiling crashed into the space where she'd been standing.

"Stay close to me," he instructed.

Jen nodded frantically and tried not to think about how they might very well die in the exact same way as Mr Sanchez, excepting the fact that *nobody would know*. It would be weeks before their bodies would be found. What idiot would decide to search the sewers for survivors after an earthquake when there were thousands of populated buildings above ground to search through? Jen could die here and her parents - God her parents -

"There it is."

Jen took a deep breath and tried to focus on what her master was saying. She missed most of it through her panic riddled haze but got enough of the gist from context. There was a large grating about two metres away from them and she could vaguely make out stars on the other side of it. They were nearly free. That was fast.

As they approached the grating the ground finally stopped rumbling. It was too late to make much of a difference to the damaged tunnels though, Jen could hear the splashes as bricks fell onto the tunnel floors and wondered how much of the journey she'd been stuck in panic mode for. Part of her felt that she was being incredibly unprofessional, but she couldn't quite bring herself to care.

When they finally reached the grating Jen practically fell upon the metal, pushing and pulling at it with all her might. It wouldn't budge. She stepped to one side and looked at Megaman expectantly. She could see the tunnel falling to pieces in the distance behind him. The walls were collapsing into a darkness had they'd be part of all too soon if they didn't hurry up.

Megaman reached out towards the grating, latched onto the metal, and pulled with all his might. Nothing happened. Jen stared at him in horror. He added his other hand to the effort and Jen was unnerved to note that it was trembling. Her master's expression was a mask but she could see the strain in his rapidly darkening skin. Megaman, the superhero with literal superstrength who had treated his nemesis like a javelin not that long ago, was struggling to open their exit door.

The sound of the tunnel collapse was drawing closer and Jen found herself joining her master in assaulting the grating, hoping beyond hope that they wouldn't become the next tragedy of Bunin City.

The metal made an ear splitting noise as Megaman's grip settled and the next thing Jen knew they were toppling out over one another into the cold night air.

Jen flopped onto the grass and lay there pending until her breathing evened out. She could hear Megaman doing the same next to her and couldn't decide whether it was reassuring or terrifying that he sounded equally exhausted. She sat up before he did and discreetly scanned her master, checking for any sign of external injury, but he looked no worse for wear than normal after a fight with the Scorpionette. None of the marks on him were significant enough to justify what had happened.

A moment later he sat up.

"Are you okay?" Jen asked, watching him closely as she waited for his response.

Megaman sighed. It was not his tired sigh or his teacher sigh. This sigh sounded more weary than the two combined. The look in his eyes told her that this was a question her master would rather not answer but she hoped that he would. Something had been off for a long time now and this felt like proof.

"No."

There was a pregnant pause. Megaman looked at her and Jen felt as if the weight of his gaze was boring holes in her body. He was seizing her up, judging whether she was worthy of whatever explanation he was about to give her. Jen's mobile suddenly felt heavy against her chest.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about this but - well, I hoped I'd never have to."

Megaman went to scratch the bridge of his nose but his hand started shaking halfway there. He brought it down again fast enough to give Jen whiplash.

"I'm sorry about my phone," she blurted out, the words leaving her mouth before she could stop them. "I'm so sorry. I completely forgot that it was in my pocket. I promise I'll never bring it on mission again."

Megaman blinked.

"Good."

There was a moment of silence. Jen waited. She imagined that her master was carefully choosing what words to relay to her, though his pokerface was as impenetrable as ever.

"Do you know how old I am Jennifer?" he said eventually.

Jen hesitated, unsure whether she was supposed to answer or not.

"Um."   
 Thankfully, Megaman provided the answer to his own question before Jen could put her foot in her mouth.

“I’m technically the oldest teacher at Bunin High School.”

Jen frowned. As far as she was concerned, that statement said more about Bunin High’s employment strategy than anything else. She could imagine that he was approaching his mid 30s or early 40s at the latest.

“I’m older than your grandparents.”

Jen blinked and stared at her master. Even with a mask on, the shock on her face was clear enough that she didn’t need to articulate it. Megaman smiled at her but it didn’t reach his eyes. There was a certain hardness to his face now and he looked like marble in the dim light of the stars.

“I’ve been around for a very long time,” Megaman continued. The smile faded from his lips, allowing his face to resume the state of an emotionless mask, but his voice shook as he spoke. “I’ve seen cities rise and fall. I’ve seen loved ones be born and die of old age. I lived through the years of persecution before Powered People were fully accepted into society and, when we were finally welcomed in with open arms, I made my mission clear."

Megaman turned to face Jen and she could see tears in his eyes. He'd answered her question but he still hadn't told her what was wrong.

"Nothing about our mission has changed," Megaman said. "I want you to understand that."

Jen stared at him, shocked into speechlessness at the genuinely emotional display. She'd seen her master perform for parents and villains alike but this wasn't pretend. Something was horribly wrong and she was about to find out what.

"Do you understand?" Megaman snapped.

Jen nodded vigorously, eyes wide.

"Good."

He raised his hand once more. It was still shaking uncontrollably, the tremors more violent now. He raised his other hand so it was level with the shaking hand and tried to clench them both into tight fists. He only managed to do it with one.

"Do you know what the earliest symptom of Parkinson's disease is?" he asked.

Megaman spoke quietly but Jen could hear the anger in his voice clear as day. She could guess what the answer to that question was. If the incident with the grating had been any indication, this disease was affecting her master's powers. Jen’s mind started to race. How long had he been like this for and just how bad was it? How long would it take for her master to get back to full strength when he had this to take into consideration? She needed more information.

"W-what is Parkinson's disease?" Jen asked, teeth chattering against the cold she'd long since forgotten about.

Megaman stared blankly at the broken grating they'd tumbled past before, not really seeing it. When he spoke his voice was level and quiet. Jen wondered if this was the first time he had spoken to a non-doctor about his condition aloud.

"It's a progressive neurological problem that no one knows how to cure. Symptoms can include insomnia, tremors, slowness of movement -" Megaman reeled off a long list that he clearly knew by heart, the volume of his voice increasing with every symptom. He wasn't yelling; Jen didn't think that she'd ever heard him yell, but this was far from his normal speaking voice. It was as if her master was trying and failing to rip off a bandaid. They both knew that the wound was there but it wouldn't be revealed so easily. "It won't kill me but it won't get better."

Megaman fell silent, his gaze fixed on the grating. Jen wasn't sure what to say but she she knew she had to say something.

"H-how c-can I help?"

Megaman looked at her with a frown, finally seeming to notice her shivering. He stood up and Jen followed suit. He placed his steady hand on her shoulder and offered her his first genuine smile of the day.

"I became a teacher before I became Megaman," he said. "I spent my life following my mission even before I knew what it was. I have never faltered and I refuse to falter now: you know what my rules are. Keep following them. You can help me by focusing on our mission.”

Jen nodded. She tried to return his smile as she started to go over the list of symptoms in her head. She was his sidekick and that meant being prepared to support him through anything. Rule number one was simple: ensure that Megaman can do his job.

The next few days were uneventful. They felt strangely anticlimactic in the wake of Megaman's diagnosis confession and it made Jen uneasy. She watched him like a hawk in her IT lessons and her gaze was drawn to him like a moth to flame whenever she caught sight of him in the school corridors.

Had Jen had any friends at Bunin High, it wouldn't have been unfair for them to assume that she was crushing on her teacher, but it was an assumption that couldn't be further from the truth. Megaman's words had stuck with her and Jen couldn't help but wonder if she should be doing more outside of lessons to help, if teaching was also a part of his mission.

She had little time to contemplate the thought, however. Jen couldn't afford to waste any of the time that she spent off-mission if she wanted to maintain her grades, and she found herself scrambling to make headway in the work that had been slowly piling up during missions. It felt a little as if she were trapped in a bottomless pool of homework; the rigors of school plus her newfound depths worry felt relentless. She didn't have time to research Parkinson's disease and she barely had enough time to sleep in between completing assignments.

Jen was halfway through writing a history essay about the Powered Persecution when her Skype ringtone went off. The icon was flashing with Izzy's avatar and Jen cursed quietly. She'd completely forgotten that it was that time of the week again. She stared at the icon, debating whether to pick up or not. She had a lot of work to do and having this time to get it done was rare but the last few days had felt like several months combined. She couldn't remember when she'd last spoken to Izzy, let alone what they'd talked about. It had been too long.

Jen answered the call with a click of her mouse and lounged back in her chair as she waited for Izzy's face to appear. She was looking forward to the feeling of respite that usually accompanied seeing her best friend.

After the obligatory two minutes of a black screen and the sound of swearing, Izzy's face popped onscreen. Her expression was stormy.

"Technical difficulties?" Jen said sympathetically.

Izzy let out a short, sharp bark of laughter.

"That's the least of my problems right now. We need to talk."

Jen sat up straight. She didn't know what Izzy was mad about but she knew that tone well. That tone preceded a verbal beat down back home. Izzy always protected her and hers.

"Okay," Jen said carefully, unsure where Izzy was planning to aim her ire. Did her friend want to vent or had Jen done something to put her on the offensive?

Jen wracked her brains, trying to remember the subject of their last Skype conversation. It had been so long ago that it was hard to recall. She was fairly certain that she hadn't questioned Izzy's appearance, her latest dietary fad or said anything about them that could be misconstrued. Experience had taught Jen to recognise which of those lines could and couldn't be crossed and she had always preferred to err on the side of caution. She didn't think that she'd done anything, but desperately hoped Izzy wasn't angry with her all the same. She needed this out.

Izzy quirked an eyebrow and Jen's heart sank like a stone. She knew that look.

"I get that you're busy with your fancy new school and fancy new boyfriend but that doesn't mean you get to blow me off."

"What?"

Izzy wasn't finished.

"You're not better than me just because you've got a nice house and a nice internship in the nice part of town," she continued. Jen hadn't known it was possible to spit the word "nice" but Izzy was managing it easily enough. "I know you think you're above it all but you're not."

"I never -"

Izzy talked right over Jen as if she hadn't spoken.

"You're not better than me because your parents have finally managed to scrounge together some money out of their stupid "Foodies" delivery service."

Jen's wide-eyed look of bewilderment hardened into a glare. No one was allowed to make fun of her family's business apart from her family.

"You're not better than me full stop!" Izzy yelled. "We're from the same place Jen, you just got lucky. You got out into the real swish part of town! But I guess you're not that lucky because it's turned you into an entitled, selfish -"

"I'm not the one doing the name calling right now," Jen said, surprised by the steadiness of her voice; she might not be allowed to speak to the opposition on missions, but she still got to observe and learn from the best. It was enough.

Izzy ignored her.

"I don't know what you think you're doing over there but you're a high school student same as me, Jen. You're not exactly saving the world so stop acting like you're too good to talk to me!"

Finally, Izzy paused for breath. Jen seized her chance to speak.

"How do you know I'm not saving the world?" she said, barely managing to keep her voice under control as the words tumbled from her lips.

"You? Please!" Izzy scoffed. "Even if that was a thing, even if by some miracle you knew Megagirl or Megaman or someone important, how would you help them? You can't even make a friend without me! It's pathetic. I actually feel sorry for you. Well, I did before you told me to fuck off, and now I really don't care. In fact, this is me fucking off. Goodbye Jen. I've had enough of your bullshit."

Izzy hung up before Jen could say anything else and, for the first time in a long time, Jen felt as if she'd been winded without a single punch being thrown.

"I'm going to a conference at the weekend and I'd like you to come with me."

Jen looked up from the pile of books on the floor. She'd offered to help her master clean his office over the lunch period so she could keep an eye on him. He'd accepted the helping hand with far less of a fuss than she'd expected. Now she wondered if this was why.

"It's a national conference for Powered People," he said, answering the obvious question on Jen's mind. "I wouldn't normally go but I've been asked to speak at this year's event."

Jen frowned.

"But I don't have -"

"It doesn't matter. We're allowed to bring - *allies*." Megaman said the word with distaste, as if it had personally shat on his foot. "It's not unusual for sidekicks to attend and I need someone to help cover up my issue, should it arise."

Jen wasn't sure whether to be flattered or concerned. She could understand the logic of Megaman trying to keep his symptoms under wraps but helping him with the secret made her uneasy. Where there was a will there was the media. The truth would come out one way or another; it was simply a matter of time.

"Okay."

Megaman flashed Jen a brilliant smile. It almost hid his exhaustion. If he could keep that up for the weekend then Jen's job would be easy.

"Thank you."

The bell rang.

It was a small conference in a small building, but it was very difficult to reach. Megaman warned Jen to pack her suit and at least one book for the journey, as they would be travelling in plain clothes for a significant amount of time. Jen chose to pack her remaining homework but, in practice, spent most of the journey listening to songs on her iPod, revelling in the laziness of the activity. After the week she'd had it felt good to do nothing.

Jen and Megaman travelled north first on a three hour train ride. Jen gazed out of the window, appreciating the weirdly warm weather. It was nearly November but, somehow, it temporarily felt like the middle of summer. However, the further away they got from her hometown the colder the air grew and the sun faded into the clouds.

When they finally arrived at their stop the weather was positively miserable and Jen felt about the same when she realised that their journey was not yet over. She followed Megaman to the city bus station, pausing only to raid a vending machine for lunch. She was starting to feel like the excuse she'd given her parents for this weekend getaway was actually valid. It certainly had the air of a school trip.

The bus they caught from the station took them to a small village in the east. As Jen stepped off the bus she couldn't help but feel that this place was a small farm rather than a place where people lived. Jen stepped off the bus first only to have her hand shaken violently by a caped stranger.

"Welcome to Danatown!" the man greeted.

Jen tried not to stare at him as her hand was relinquished but it was difficult. His costume was so garish that he looked like a literal beacon of light. Behind her, Megaman received the same enthusiastic greeting.

"My name's Sparky and I'm regent hero for this here land."

"Great," said Jen, utterly nonplussed. She'd heard of having one hero for an entire region but she'd never met one before, let alone someone with such a ridiculous name.

"Nice to meet you."

Jen glanced back at her master. He looked perfectly at ease but she could tell from the way he relaxed slightly on hand release that he too was unnerved by the stranger's friendliness.

"If you ever get into trouble I can explode it but you gotta remember, I ain't got superhearing so you'll have to yell my name nice and loud if you want help, you hear?"

Jen couldn't see much of Sparky's face behind the mask but there was something desperate in his eyes. Something scared. She wondered how many people hadn't yelled loud enough for him.

"Um."

"I think we'll be fine, thank you," said Megaman and smoothly ushered Jen in the direction of a new bus stop.

"Okay, but don't you forget my name!" Sparky yelled after them.

"Is he okay?" Jen asked once they were out of earshot.

"Probably not," Megaman replied. "Regent superhero is a difficult job to do without back up."

Jen glanced back over her shoulder. The distant glow that she assumed was Sparky looked like it might be wringing its hands. She made a mental note to stop on their way back, if they had time.

The second bus led them to a nearby mountain with a visitor centre at its base. As soon as they got off the bus it started to rain and they both ran inside.

"Is this it?" Jen gasped, looking around hopefully.

"No," Megaman sighed. "This is a changing point. We have to hike the rest of the way."

Jen and Megaman went into the toilets and emerged in their costumes. There was virtually no one in the visitor centre but Jen still felt the uncomfortable urge to tell the bored looking receptionist that they were cosplayers heading off to a roleplay session. She ignored it when she realised that the woman was playing a game on her phone.

Jen looked expectantly at her master as they approached the automatic doors. If anything, the rain had gotten worse since their arrival and she was thankful that she'd brought her mackintosh with her. Megaman glanced down at a piece of paper in his hands that looked suspiciously like a map, squared his shoulders and left the building. Jen followed him out into the rain.

In total, the hike up the mountain and into the forest beside it was the shortest portion of the journey. In practise, it felt like the longest part. The wind ravaged Jen's hair and the rain beat down hard enough to feel like nails on her skin. By the time they finally arrived at the conference centre Jen was soaked to the bone, despite her coat, and Megaman was similarly drenched.

"Is this it?" Jen asked, shouting to make herself heard over the wail of the wind.

"Yes," Megaman replied and held out his elbow.

Jen could tell it was more for his benefit than hers; he'd been unbalanced on his feet for the last stretch of the walk, but she took his arm and said nothing as he opened the door with a shaking hand. She had a feeling that the weather was going to be a good excuse for many symptoms this weekend.

Together, they staggered into the building and the large door swung shut loudly behind them. About a metre in front of them was another pair of large wooden doors that spanned the width of the room, a coat rack and a small desk. A young woman popped out from underneath the desk and hurried across the floor towards them. Megaman rubbed his boots against the welcome mat beneath them and Jen followed suit.

"Hello!" the woman chirped. "Gosh I'm so sorry about the weather! You must be freezing, poor dears. If I could just take your Powered names and then you can head on into the main room with the others."

Once again, Jen looked to Megaman for guidance. He simply nodded and followed the woman over to the desk. Jen trailed after him, pausing to hang up her coat.

"Megaman. I'm one of the speakers."

The woman flicked through a clipboard thick with paper, ticked something, scribbled something, and then turned to Jen.

"Great thank you, and who are you?"

"Megagirl," Jen said, struggling to mimic her master's calm authoritative aura. Mostly she just tried to get her shivering under control.

"She's an ally."

The hesitation was so small that it was almost imperceptible but Jen could just about make it out. She wasn't sure why, but her master really didn't like the a-word.

The woman eyed Jen's costume with a raised eyebrow and Jen blushed, wishing that the latex wasn't so skin tight.

"Sidekick?"

Megaman nodded.

"Great. If you could just turn around for me - "

Megaman rolled his eyes but did as he was told. The woman gazed at him intently, raking his body with her eyes. When her pupils turned red Jen nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Thank you. Now you."

Jen nervously obliged. When she turned back to face the woman her irises were fading back to their natural blue.

"Great! Just a few more things before you head on in. Here's a schedule for the evening -" She handed Megaman a laminated card. "- I'm afraid we're running a bit low so it's one between two for now. We should have more ready by tomorrow. Here are your room keys -" She handed these to Jen. "You're on the second floor near the fire doors. If you experience any trouble at all just call for Jared; he's got great hearing and has volunteered to be on duty tonight. He's a real sweetheart and we're very lucky to have him here tonight so try not to abuse his poor ears if you can help it. Erm what else…"

The woman put her clipboard down and tapped her beautifully manicured fingers loudly against the desk.

"Oh yes!" she cried. "Please do take a name tag if you'd like one, but there's no pressure to put a label on anyone tonight. If you'd prefer to be anonymous that's perfectly okay and we ask that you respect each of our guests' wishes."

Jen looked to Megaman again. He made no sign of reaching for a name tag and by the time Jen considered getting one for herself the woman was already moving on.

"Great. I think that's just about everything. Any questions?"

Jen had plenty but she knew that if she asked them all they'd never leave the entrance room.

"Okay, have a lovely conference!"

The woman bent down again and Jen noticed that she was wearing her own name tag on the front pocket of her jacket.

There was a small click and the huge doors swung open, releasing a gust of refreshingly warm air. Jen could glimpse fire and a scent that reminded her of hog roast was drifting her way. She breathed it in with glee as Megaman strode inside. Jen spared one fleeting glance for the woman with x-ray eyes.

"Thanks Ella."

And then she followed her master into the warmth.

Jen didn't know what to expect from the extremely remote conference centre. She'd been dragged to a few conferences by her parents back when she was too young to be left home alone and when the childcare costs had been too difficult for her parents to afford. As she grew old enough to avoid the conferences, her parents told her stories about the effects of bringing a small child to networking events. Jen remembered very little of such things. If she closed her eyes and concentrated, she could recall dull grey of the conference centre walls and how the strong smell of coffee had stung her nose. She had a feeling that the full memory would be of no interest to her.

This was different.

Jen felt like the building had expanded to accommodate this meeting room. The room was by no means large but, at the same time, it didn't look like the kind of room that would fit into such small building. There was a fireplace integrated into the lefthand wall and its bright flames painted the room a comforting orange hue. The carpet was soft underfoot and a shade of deep red to complement the walls. The only sign of grey in this conference centre was in the hair colour of a few guests.

There was only a handful of people present but, even with the majority of chairs stacked tightly against the wall, the number felt significant enough to verge on crowded. Some wore plain clothes but most wore costumes of varying colours. Jen was sure that they could make a human rainbow if they lined up in the right order.

Jen tried hard not to gawp and to stick to Megaman's side. He hadn't offered her his arm this time so she assumed that he was feeling steady enough on his feet to not need too much assistance. She kept a wary eye on him nevertheless, half out of concern and half out of necessity. She had no idea who the people around her were. Name tags were few and far between, though Jen tried to read as many as she could spot.

"Wine milady?"

Jen stopped to stare at the server. She wasn't sure what weirded her out more, being offered alcohol or being called "milady".

"Um I -"

"No thank you," Megaman said smoothly grabbing Jen's arm and pulling her away before she could clear the fog in her brain well enough to accept the offer of free booze.

His grip was stronger than it needed to be and Jen looked up at him sharply, trying to determine whether she should be concerned or not, but it was difficult to know. His perfect poker face was in place.

"Well look who finally decided to show up. It's Captain Megapants."

Megaman's impenetrable expression abruptly broke into a wide smile and Jen span round, trying to divert her attention to whoever had had such an effect on her master in so few words.

"Lisa!"

Megaman moved forward to embrace a silver-haired woman in a stylish grey suit. Jen couldn't quite work out if the woman was in costume or simply had peculiar fashion sense. She was wearing something which could be either a cape or a shawl. It was difficult to tell.

Lisa returned Megaman's smile as the pair finally split apart.

"It's good to see you here Harry."

Megaman's hands fell to his sides smile slightly brittler than it had been before. Jen, quite frankly, was amazed at the sudden depth of emotion on her master's face.

"Where's Chris?" he asked.

"She passed away."

As soon as it had arrived, the emotion was shuttered from Megaman's face. Jen blinked and wondered who the hell Chris was.

"Sometimes I still hear her trying to get extra vodka out of HELPLESS WAITERS."

"Oh fuck off Lis! I would've got you one too."

The voice came from behind them and Jen had to step back in order to avoid being bowled over by the hug Megaman and the new woman, presumably Chris, exchanged. Chris laughed and stretched her arms out past Megaman to avoid spilling her drinks. She held a glass in either hand. Both contained a liquid that nothing like the wine Jen had been offered earlier.

"You should know better than to listen to my sister by now, Harry," she said when he eventually let go of her. She glanced over his shoulder to raise an eyebrow at Lisa. "Just because she can see dead people doesn't mean I'm one of them."

Lisa rolled her eyes.

"And just because you can sway anyone with a word doesn't mean you should," she chided, the retort falling easily from her lips.

Jen watched the two sisters with barely disguised interest. It was clear that this was an argument familiar enough to have become more of a ritual pleasantry than anything else. Megaman chuckled.

"It's good to see you both," he said.

He shifted to one side, allowing Chris to join their small circle in amongst the room full of guests. Jen now had a clear view of the woman. Her long hair was dyed ebony black and dotted with occasional strips of silver. Unlike her sister, Chris was dressed in colourful plain clothes. However, on closer examination, Jen started to doubt her initial assessment. The words "Christine the Great" were plastered across the woman's baggy pink jumper in letters large enough for Jen to wonder if she was in fact wearing a truly terrible homemade costume.

"And who is this?" Chris exclaimed.

All eyes turned to Jen and she tried not to shrink at the attention.

"I'm Megagirl," Jen said, hoping she didn't sound as nervous as she felt.

The sisters exchanged glances and Jen held her breath. Chris lazily slung one arm over Megaman's shoulder.

"Oh Harry!" she cried. "Could it be true? Have you really succumbed to the fad and brought an *ally* with you?"

"She's my sidekick," Megaman said a little gruffly.

Chris let out a loud mock gasp.

"Well fuck me. I never thought I'd see this day!"

"Oh hush up you," Lisa scolded, but she was smiling just as widely. She looked at Jen. "How's he treating you?"

"Uh -"

"Terribly, obviously," Chris announced. "She doesn't even have a drink."

Before Megaman could protest Jen had a glass in her hand. She sipped at the beverage uncertainly and was startled by the sour taste. The glass was full of pink grapefruit juice. The women chuckled at her expression while Megaman looked on with fond exasperation.

"How did you get this?" Jen asked, realising the answer barely a second after she'd voiced the question.

Chris tapped her nose with one finger.

"I have my ways."

Jen wondered how drunk Chris really was. Her movements managed to appear both sloppy and refined. She seemed to lurch and sway across the room but her hand never left Megaman's shoulder. Jen wondered if that would be a problem but her stomach rumbled loudly enough to derail that trail of thought before she could consider it fully.

"Oh you poor thing! Has he not been feeding you?" Lisa sounded sympathetic but Jen could tell that the old woman was teasing her master.

Torn between amusement and feeling deeply uncomfortable, Jen turned away in search of food. That hog roast smell had to be coming from somewhere and Megaman would be perfectly fine on his own with two old friends for five minutes.

As Jen set off into the crowd she couldn't help but think about the strange predicament she now found herself in. She was about to spend an entire weekend learning about Powered People problems despite having no powers herself. Some part of her imagined that it would be like an extended history lesson in real-time and on top of that, this would be the most time she'd ever spent with Megaman in one go. This was more than a mission. This was his culture she was being introduced to. It was one thing to work alongside a hero but being an "ally", whatever that meant, seemed to mean something different altogether. Jen wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not yet.

There was no sign of a blog roast and Jen was eventually forced to admit that it was probably the scent of the fireplace confusing her senses. There was hardly space to serve a significant meal, so she settled for consuming an inordinate amount of canapés before returning to Megaman and the sisters. The room was crowded enough with mingling strangers that Jen heard them before she saw them.

"Harry there are rules! You can't just go around recruiting willy nilly -"

"She's just as capable as we are."

Jen frowned, looking for the tell-tale signs of her master's blue tights or Chris' bright jumper. It was difficult to spot them in amongst the myriad of colours that filled the room.

"You mean she does whatever you say."

Jen caught sight of a grey suit and started to make her way towards it.

"Exactly! With enough practise in the field she'll be -"

"Severely traumatised. She's far too young for this."

The person in the grey suit wasn't wearing Lisa's cape/shawl. Jen paused and turned, searching for the voices that she could hear so clearly. She couldn't be far from them.

"And how old were you when you first started out? How old were any of us?"

Jen tried jumping up and down but, asides from attracting a few curious looks, the effort got her nowhere. She felt ridiculous. The room wasn't even that big.

"That's not fair. She doesn't have powers and this is a different world to the one we grew up in."

Jen closed her eyes and tried to focus on the sound of their voices. Maybe she could follow that.

"That's funny because people seem exactly the same to me."

There was a moment of tense silence. Jen cursed quietly, hoping it would let up soon. She had a nasty feeling that she was missing out on an important conversation.

Chris was the first to break the silence. Jen started to move through the crowd again as soon as she heard the woman's voice.

"Harry," Chris said carefully. "When I told you that you needed someone, this was not what I meant. This isn't healthy."

Finally, Jen could see the three of them again. Their posture was all wrong and a far cry from their prior merriness. Megaman looked furious and Lisa had her arms folded, an upset look on her face. Chris stood between the two of them. Her hand was still on Megaman's shoulders but the gesture now looked more placating than flirtatious.

"That means so much coming from you," Megaman replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Chris removed her hand as if she'd been bitten.

"Right," she said. "Okay then."

She turned and started to wade into the crowd, brushing past Jen as she made her way towards Megaman. There were tears in her eyes.

"You're desperate and hurting and you're not telling us something," said Lisa, her arms folded tight enough for her skin to lighten. "That doesn't mean I'm going to let that slide."

Finally, Jen reached her master. Lisa glanced down at her and when she spoke there was a warning in her voice.

"Be careful with this one. He never knows when to stop."

Lisa followed her sister into the crowd and Jen found herself missing the infectious merriment of before. It had felt nowhere near as uncomfortable as this and Megaman no longer looked so steady on his feet. Jen held her arm out to him but he shook his head.

"I'm fine."

Jen grinned. She couldn't help but think that if the entire conference was going to be like this, then she might have a genuinely good time.

Jen was on cleanup duty again. Megaman was off chasing the Scorpionette and, with Scorpio nowhere to be seen, that left her to handle the remaining scorpions in the area. It was her least favourite part of the job but she knew from experience that the mission aftermath was just as important as the immediate crime fighting, possibly even moreso. She hadn't needed Megaman to tell her that. The area of Bunin city that her family lived in now was far more pleasant than their home had been the year before. Jen had been able to witness the importance of Megaman’s work first hand on several occasions.

Nevertheless, mission cleanup tended to be a tedious task. This time the Scorpionette had set her creatures loose on a local picnic area. The tree that Jen was currently attempting to deal with was badly infested, and had been dropping scorpions onto unsuspecting civilians like rain. It was a miracle that no one had been hurt.

The police were dotted around the cordon erected earlier, testily awaiting confirmation of scorpion clearance. Jen couldn't help but feel that an exterminator of some kind would be more efficient than her Google-based approach to scorpion removal, but the bizarre effects of the venom had led to a considerable price hike of exterminator services, leaving the local heroes and those who were brave (or stupid) enough to pick up the slack.

Jen had spent a considerable amount of time researching scorpions since the arrival of Scorpio and the Scorpionette. She'd come across a debate over whether the creatures should have parts of their body lopped off, recommendations for various different scorpion-removing sprays, and at least one documentary. According to everything that she'd seen, these scorpions *shouldn't be* poisonous. It felt silly and time consuming to have to kill them after every single mission, but it was also necessary. Scorpions didn't act like scorpions around the Scorpionette, and it was unclear how long-lasting the woman’s effect was.

Jen felt something tickle her shoulder and froze. She debated whether it was worth turning her head to look at whatever was there (some part of her desperately hoped that it was just a leaf) or if she should try to shake it off.

“Careful! Gerry is a mite poisonous.”

Scorpio announced his presence by flicking the scorpion from Jen's shoulder. Gerry scuttled back into the tree and Jen wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or annoyed. She opened her mouth, closed it, and then remembered that Megaman had super strength, not super hearing. One question couldn't hurt.

“You name them?” she said eventually.

Scorpio started at the response and then grinned. Jen took a step back, recognising it to be the grin that preceded either a beatdown or an infodump or often a combination of the two. She had learned to be very wary of that grin.

“Of course I name them!"

Scorpio launched into an explanation of scorpion anatomy and ways to recognise individual scorpions, following it up with an exceedingly detailed description of the scorpion family tree. Jen waited a moment but, when it became clear that she would only be receiving the infodump, she returned to scanning her surroundings. Scorpio’s voice was relegated to a not altogether unpleasant background noise as she worked. His words faded in and out of her awareness like a bad radio signal.

“- anyway, sorry I'm late. My ex wanted to “talk” and he has an interesting definition of what exactly that means.”

Jen's eyes shot back to Scorpio. The few sprouts of hair (dyed electric blue this week) that she could see poking out above his mask did look slightly more ruffled than usual, and there was something off about his costume. The scorpion symbol that normally stretched across his chest was missing, but she could see something that looked suspiciously like its tendrils creeping across the back of his shoulders. She raised an eyebrow.

“You do realise that your suit is on back to front?”

Jen couldn't see Scorpio's cheeks but she would've bet money that they were as red as his ears were. She allowed herself a small smile before taking a knife from her belt and skewering the scorpion nearest to her. Scorpio watched, quiet for once.

By some sort of unspoken agreement, they rarely fought in the aftermath of missions but, on occasions like these, Jen almost wished that they were fighting. You knew where you stood in a fight.

“Your ex,” she said, searching for anything to break the silence as she approached the next creature within her field of vision. “Does he know about -”

“Ha, no,” Scorpio replied, the relief clear in his voice. “No one knows, except mum of course.”

Jen blinked. Scorpio continued before she could comment, his usual motor mouth capabilities returning to him.

“I've thought about telling my friends a few times but it kinda seems like a bad idea whichever way I cut it. What about you?”

Jen stabbed the closest scorpion with more force than was strictly necessary, thankful that she had her back to Scorpio. She hadn't seen Izzy in person since her family had moved. Every now and then her mother would drop the hint that she should invite people over, as if they hadn't left everyone behind, as if her quiet, awkward daughter was capable of befriending complete strangers within the space of a year.

“No. No one knows.”

“You don't have to kill them you know,” he said, after a moment of silence.

Jen whipped around to face him, knife out in front of her.

“What?” she said menacingly.

"The scorpions!" Scorpio quickly clarified. "I'm talking about the scorpions, Jesus! Do you know how long it took me to recover from your last stab wound?"

He backed away, hands held in front of him defensively. Jen lowered the knife. She didn't remember ever having stabbed him, but they had known each other for a while now.

 Scorpio’s hands moved from their defensive pose into a placating gesture.

"Look,” he said. “I've obviously missed out on the action-packed part of today. Why don't you let me show you how to stun Gerry?"

Jen frowned but put her knife away.

"Why would you help me?" she asked.

Scorpio folded his arms. He almost looked hurt.

"If you're going to die,” he said. “It's going to be by my hand or the Scorpionette's. Not some stupid scorpion sting. You're too good a fighter to go out any other way."

Jen opened her mouth and then closed it, unsure what to make of something that felt an awful lot like a compliment direct from the opposition’s mouth. She shrugged it off and turned away to stare at the infested tree, not really seeing it. Not for the first time, she felt extremely thankful for the mask covering her face.

"Why don't you just tell me which scorpions are the deadly ones? Then no *human* has to die," she said, hoping that she sounded more composed than she felt.

Scorpio was silent. Jen turned back in confusion and bit her lip to prevent herself from gasping out loud. Scorpio was on the ground and Megaman towered over him. The pattern of blood on his hand matched the stain on Scorpio's forehead.

"Megagirl," Megaman acknowledged coldly.

Jen found herself wishing that her master's mask was more all-encompassing. Even if she hadn't been able to hear the judgement in his voice, she could see it in the storminess of his expression. Megaman hardly needed a mask; no one would suspect Mr Johnson's true identity had they not seen him in action outside of the classroom. Jen had only been able to figure it out because she hadn't always lived in the nicest part of town, or been on the most pleasant school trips. On the occasions that Megaman had swept in to save the day, she had always wanted to know who was behind the mask. She'd been obsessed. Those days felt like an eternity ago now.

 Jen's mouth tasted of copper. She felt like she ought to say something, to offer an excuse for being caught red-handed having a casual chat with the enemy, but nothing came to mind. She opened her mouth but shut it instantaneously as her master spoke.

"New plan."

Megaman reached down and picked Scorpio up in one fluid movement, easily hoisting the unconscious teenager over his shoulder. He looked at Jen and his expression spoke volumes. He was angry with her, but the plan, whatever it was, was more important. He didn't have to say the words for her to know it was time to go.

Jen bowed her head in submission and followed him towards the police cordon. She knew what came next; he would turn Scorpio in. She would probably never see the sidekick again. At least, not in his present form.

 For one brief, mad moment Jen wondered if she'd be able to visit Scorpio in prison, but she cast the thought aside almost immediately. Her presence would raise far too many questions for far too many people. Megaman would never allow it. Besides, she wouldn't know what to say to him no matter what guise she showed up in. Part of her wondered how different Scorpio would be in plain clothes.

As they approached the cordon, Jen found herself gazing at the Scorpio’s limp figure, trying to imprint the details of him into her memory. His suit was covered in grass stains that clashed with the purple, and she could see the scorpion symbol on his back clearly now. The suit looked even more ruffled than it had been when he arrived and Jen was filled with the urge to smooth out the creases. One look at Megaman squashed that thought.

They arrived at the police cordon too soon. The closest officer spotted Jen and let out a loud sigh.

"Please tell me you've finally got rid of those scorpions?"

Jen winced and opened her mouth to reply, but Megaman answered first.

"I'm afraid not," he said, his voice the perfect mix of affable and commanding. "You should close the park down for the night. Megagirl and I have business to attend to."

The police officer gaped at him and, because it was Megaman talking, Jen knew that it was out of awe rather than annoyance. The officer hadn't noticed the costumed teenager strung over the hero's shoulder yet, but it was only a matter of time. Jen stepped back and waited for the inevitable.

"What's your name officer?" Megaman asked.

"F-Fred, Sir," the man stammered. "Fred Wallace."

Megaman smiled. Fred seemed to melt in the wake of it and Jen resisted the urge to roll her eyes, torn between frustration and confusion. Part of her wished that Megaman would get it over with, but another part of her was optimistically curious. Charm wasn't usually required for the simple hand in of wanted criminals.

"Fred. That's a good name," Megaman smiled. "I need you to do me a favour Fred. I need you to get the word out about something."

Fred snapped to attention. Jen could feel a shiver that felt an awful lot like hope trickling down her spine. He hadn’t handed Scorpio in yet.

Megaman leaned forward and Jen stepped closer to the pair, trying not to look at the unconscious teenager.

"I want you to tell everyone you know the words I'm about to say to you now."

"I won't let you down Sir," Fred squeaked.

Megaman smiled and it felt like a promise.

"Good. Tell them this: I have Scorpio. If the Scorpionette wants to keep him out of a jail cell she'd better be on Bunin Bridge ready and waiting for handcuffs. No scorpions, no tricks, just her. If she cares at all about her sidekick she'll turn herself in by sundown ."

Jen had never held anyone captive before and, as she appraised the raw, red marks caused by the handcuffs chaining Scorpio to the railing, she wasn't entirely sure how she felt about it.

Megaman's plan was simple: they would use Scorpio to lure in the Scorpionette and then, once she was behind bars, they'd hand her sidekick over to social services. The plan made perfect sense, but Jen had never felt more uncertain about anything in her life.

She shivered and glanced up at the gloomy grey sky. It was almost as if the weather had predicted a fight and prepared in advance for a cinematic showdown. The clouds looked ready to burst, and it was virtually impossible to see the high struts of the bridge through the murky shrouds of fog. Jen could only make out a faint dot above her that she could only assume was some weather-braving bird. She felt sorry for it as she felt the early spatters of rain begin to douse her suit. The wind groomed her like a knife. Today was a bad day to be wearing little more than her costume.

She glanced at Scorpio long enough to determine that her scarf was still in place around his neck before looking away. It had been a gift from her grandmother and was terribly made, but it was the only thing she'd been able to find on short notice. Scorpio wasn't trembling as badly now but his silence was still unnerving.

Jen dared to glance at him again, this time forcing herself to look for longer. If she wanted to, she could take off his mask. She could take off his stupid garish eyepatch and see the "real" him for the first time. Megaman would hardly mind if she did, and it would drive the media circus clustered around the police barricade behind them wild, but the thought wasn't particularly enticing. She just wanted to remove the gag.

Scorpio's jaw was set. Without saying a word, he managed to seem just as angry as he had when he'd come to during Megaman's plan outline. The gag had gone on soon after. Jen hadn't been able to bring herself to meet his eyes yet but now, as she waited for her master to finish his sweep of the perimeter, she found her gaze slowly drifting towards them.

"How long do we have till sundown?"

Jen exhaled deeply and turned to face Megaman.

"Not long."

He frowned at her.

"And how long is that?"

Jen winced at his tone and replied quickly, not needing to look at her watch to know the countdown she'd been checking every five seconds.

"Two minutes and counting."

Megaman nodded and cast a long, scathing look at Scorpio.

"She'd better come for you."

Jen managed to suppress her shudder more effectively than Scorpio did. As Megaman redirected his attention towards the bridge she forced herself to meet the fellow sidekick's eyes, knowing all too well that this would probably be the last she saw of him in person. His body language screamed of anger and betrayal but there was a surprising mixture of resignation and relief in his eyes.

Scorpio murmured something into the gag and Jen stepped forward, ready to remove it. Megaman placed his hand firmly on her shoulder.

"I think you two have done enough talking."

Jen took a step back but her gaze remained fixed on Scorpio. The rest of the world seemed to fall away as she wondered what he would do in her position. Her lips twitched upwards at the thought of him running his mouth off to the Scorpionette, and she spoke the accompanying thought aloud before she could think better of it.

"This doesn't feel right."

Megaman's grip on her shoulder tightened hard enough to bruise. He spun her around to face him and Jen gritted her teeth through the pain.

"Remember your oath." He was using his teacher voice. The one that never failed to trigger some sort of guilt trip in the unfortunate student on the receiving end. "You swore to help me rid this city of evil. Scorpio is a part of that. He's going to help us give that woman a taste of her own medicine."

The pressure on her shoulder seemed to grow heavier with every word but the pain grounded her. For once, Jen didn't let the voice effect her.

"I remember my oath," she said carefully. "But how is this any better than the Scorpionette holding civilians hostage? You've always told me that actions demonstrate. Right now we're demonstrating that we're just as bad as she is."

Jen waited for her master's response, surprised by the truth of the words. She wondered how long she'd felt this way, how long it had taken her to realise that the uncomfortable feeling at the pit of stomach was something more than nerves.

Megaman sighed, let go of Jen's shoulder and took a step towards Scorpio.

"Right now," he said sadly. "You are demonstrating why we don't talk to the enemy."

The words were clearly aimed at Jen, but his derisive gaze was fixed on Scorpio. Jen fought the urge to tug at her master's cape. He was managing to miss the point without even looking at the person delivering it.

"But -" she began desperately.

Suddenly, the crowd behind them went wild. Cameras started to flash in bulk. Jen blinked the brightness away and turned in unison with her master to face the source of the media’s mounting excitement. Scorpio twisted in his handcuffs beside them as he tried to get a better view of the oncoming fight. They all knew who they were going to see.

Jen squinted at the bridge. Sure enough, she could see a flash of purple and the silhouette of a distant figure, but something felt wrong. The Scorpionette usually stood out like a sore thumb in her bright purple costume but, even with the bright lights of the cameras, she was difficult to make out. Jen hadn’t thought that the fog was *that* thick. There was also something strange about the shape of the supervillain’s body. It seemed to be more than out of focus; it was shifting unnaturally in the light, almost as if it wasn’t human. Beside Jen, Megaman was coming to a similar conclusion. They both reached the obvious answer a second too late. The crowd behind them started to shout as the distant figure dissolved into a scuttling heap.

Jen heard the Scorpionette before she saw her.

“Let. Him. Go.”

Jen turned to find the Scorpionette towering over her. In those mere seconds time seemed to slow down. Jen could see her master readying a punch and Scorpio squirming in his restraints in her periphery, but for those few seconds she was unable to her tear gaze away from the Scorpionette. She’d never had to face the woman head-on before and, as Jen dipped to the ground to kick out the supervillain’s legs from under her, she couldn’t help but be intimidated by her height.

Time resumed and everything happened at once. The Scorpionette ducked Megaman’s incoming punch, grabbed Jen by the wrist and threw the sidekick into the side of the bridge. Jen hit the wall beside Scorpio with a loud clang. She tasted blood at the back of her throat as she tried to get to her feet and resume the fighting stance.

She waved her hand out blindly, half expecting it to come into contact with Scorpio, but hit metal instead. She grasped the strangely circular material and yanked herself upwards in one violent sway. She stood there for a moment in a daze, blinking the rain out of her eyes and waiting for the world to settle. As it did, she finally comprehended the familiarity of the metal in her hand. She looked down slowly, wincing at the headache the movement provided, and blinked again. The handcuffs were no longer occupied.

She turned. Scorpio stood by the Scorpionette’s side at the centre of the bridge as they fought Megaman together. Jen moved forward to join her master.

 In the darkness and fog the three combatants were a flurry of indiscriminate punches and kicks. The speed of their movements and the brightness of the costumes made it look like a cartoon from a distance, but Jen could hear the grunts of pain and the harsh thud of skin against skin. Normally Megaman could hold his own, but she could see his fist trembling.

Jen staggered towards the fight, struggling to keep her balance. How hard had she hit that wall? No sooner had the thought crossed her mind, her foot caught on something dark and purple and she fell over. She groaned and pushed herself up into a sitting position. She squashed the scorpion beside her with considerable relish before attempting to stand again, ignoring the sharp pain pinching her leg.

The attempt was unsuccessful. Jen let out a loud yelp and would have fallen over for a second time had she not grabbed hold of the bridge railing. Her head jerked upwards instinctively and her gaze caught on something. The grey shape she’d spotted before suddenly looked a lot larger. It was far too big to be mistaken for a bird now. Jen stared up at the figure on the highest bridge strut, eyes widening with the horror of realisation, and started to run towards her master. The adrenaline granting her strength enough to ignore the pain.

“MEGAMAN!” she screamed.

She barely registered the fight itself; Scorpio was on the ground to one side of the fray clutching his arm while Megaman and the Scorpionette continued to exchange blows. Jen no longer cared about the outcome of the fight. Capturing the Scorpionette wouldn’t affect whoever was on top of the bridge. Unfortunately, the same sentiment was not true for her master. Jen tried screaming Megaman’s name again but he didn’t seem to hear her.

“THERE’S SOMEONE ON TOP OF THE BRIDGE!” she gasped as she finally reached the fight. “I THINK THEY’RE GOING TO –“

The Scorpionette aimed a kick at Megaman’s torso. He dodged it with a smooth sidestep and the supervillain’s heel connected with Jen’s stomach. Jen let out a sharp cry of pain and crumpled to the ground. She had enough sense to roll to one side to avoid further blows and found herself looking up at Scorpio. There was a grimace on his face and the hand he was clutching his shoulder with was bloody. His gaze, previously fixed on the fight, now turned to her. He raised an eyebrow at her expression.

“What?” he snapped.

“There’s someone - on top of the bridge,” Jen gasped. “We have to stop them. He won’t listen to me. Please.”

Scorpio looked at her hard. Jen closed her eyes, not particularly wanting to see the judgement on his face right now.

“Please -”

“Where?” Scorpio asked.

Jen opened her eyes to see him looking up at the sky, scouting out the struts of the bridge. Jen raised a hand to point him in the right direction. Scorpio’s cursing was loud enough to grab the Scorpionette’s attention and, for one bizarre moment, Jen thought everything was all going to be okay. Scorpio would point out the suicide risk above them, they would temporarily stop fighting to save the person, and then everything could go back to normal. In practice, what happened was this:

“There’s someone up there and if–“

Scorpio didn’t even manage to finish his sentence before the distant grey shape fell from its perch. Scorpionette and Megaman froze, seemingly transfixed by the figure but Jen was up on her feet and running towards the bridge wall, the pain in her leg long forgotten. Dimly, she registered someone running behind her, but she paid them little attention. She couldn’t afford to be distracted. There was still time. Maybe she could do *something*.

Jen desperately reached out her arm as she got close to the bridge wall. Her fingertips brushed against something a second too late. The stranger was falling too fast for Jen to make out any facial details or gender but, for a fraction of a second, she could see the look in their eyes. Jen’s fingers clenched around thin air and the stranger plummeted into the river.

         “No,” Jen breathed but the word was drowned out by the shocked yelp behind her and an even louder shout from her master.

         Jen whipped around, her vision blurred, and she fell into something warm, bloody and purple. She recoiled instinctively, grasping the wall to anchor herself, and tried to remember how to breathe.

         “Ohshitohshitohshitohshit-“

         She wasn’t the only one struggling. The purple shape that was now beside her punched the bridge wall and started to curse louder. The rhythm of the swearing was strangely soothing. Jen matched her breathing to its predictable beat and, after a few minutes of deep inhaling and exhaling, her vision started to clear.

Now able to see Scorpio beside her, Jen squinted at the fight she’d left behind. Megaman stood over the Scorpionette as he had done with Scorpio earlier that day, and Jen felt a chill run down her back. Now that she was paying attention, she could hear her master’s enraged yells.

“WHAT. IS. YOUR. PLAN.”

He punctuated each word with a punch to the Scorpionette’s gut. The supervillain lay splayed out on the ground with one arm bent at an unnatural angle. She twisted and twitched in response to every impact like a dying insect. Megaman’s fist shook as he beat her and Jen wondered how much control he had over his strength now.

“WHY. DID. YOU. DO. THIS.”

Blood coiled around the Scorpionette’s abdomen like a snake.

“ANSWER ME!”

The Scorpionette was no longer moving. Megaman raised his fist and Jen closed her eyes. She knew what was going to happen next but that didn’t mean she wanted to see it.

“MUM!”

Jen opened her eyes to see Scorpio running towards Megaman as if his own life depended on it. Megaman started to bring his fist down for the final blow but Scorpio, less than a metre away from the fight, leapt onto Megaman’s back and held on for dear life. Scorpio kept up the steady stream of curse words as he kicked and clawed at Megaman’s face, trying to draw him away from the helpless Scorpionette.

 Jen let go of the wall, took a step forward, and immediately fell over. She sat on the ground for a few minutes retching, her eyes still fixed on the fight. She had to do something. Scorpio wouldn’t be able to hold onto her master forever.

“Megaman-“ she gasped hoarsely.

Jen cleared her throat and tried again, hoping maybe this time she’d be able to get through to him.

“MEGAMAN!” she shouted. “STOP!”

The subtle change in posture told Jen that her master had heard her this time; he just didn’t care. She would have to choose her words carefully.

Megaman threw Scorpio to the ground as Jen used the wall to hoist herself into a standing position. Scorpio scrambled to his feet in front of the Scorpionette, ready to offer himself up as a human shield. He braced himself.

“Think!” Jen muttered. “What can you say?”

Megaman raised his fist once more and Jen turned away to stare at the space where the stranger had briefly hovered. She looked down at the river.

“OH MY GOD THEY’RE ALIVE!” she screamed.

Jen pressed her body to the bridge wall, leaning over and stretching her arm out as far as possible. She didn’t dare turn around to see what had become of Scorpio and his mother. She could only pray that the footsteps running towards her were the right ones.

“HELP ME!" she cried. "I CAN’T REACH-”

“Move.”

Jen let out a sob of relief as Megaman gruffly shoved her to one side, spinning her around to face the bridge. She held onto the bridge railing tightly enough for her arms to ache, but managed to stay upright. She scanned her surroundings. There was a significant pool of blood where the Scorpionette had been, and several blood spatters from the fight dotted across various parts of the bridge, but the Scorpions themselves were nowhere to be seen.

 The press were starting to leach out onto the bridge now the presumed threat had left the area, and Jen allowed herself to relax. She started to slowly slide down the wall, more than ready to lie down for a bit, but Megaman grabbed her by the shoulders hard enough to lift Jen a few inches off the ground.

“They’re not there,” he said.

“Oh.”

Megaman’s eyes narrowed and the grip on Jen’s shoulders tightened. She could see the camera flashes in her periphery. They were getting closer.

“You knew,” he said.

Jen hadn’t planned on saying anything in response to that, so she was surprised when her mouth opened, and even more surprised when she threw up on her master in front of the approaching media circus. Megaman instinctively let go of her shoulders and she dropped to her knees before him. She made the mistake of looking up to meet her master’s eyes and the camera flashes and questions from reporters seemed to fade away in the wake of his disappointment.

Jen didn’t wholly remember how she got from the bridge to the ambulance, but the next thing she knew she was sitting on the floor of the vehicle with a stranger in a paramedic uniform crouched in front of her. There was a blanket on her shoulders and the paramedic shone a light in her eyes, asking the usual series of concussion questions that Jen had come to know off by heart. She recited her answers, wondering why she had a blanket this time, as the paramedic started to give her painkillers.

Jen gazed numbly into space, only half listening to the paramedic’s angry mutterings about “age” and “shock” and “bloody supers”. She didn’t recognise this particular woman but the paramedic gave off the kindly angry vibe that had grown to feel comfortingly familiar in these situations. The attitude reminded Jen a little of Izzy. Jen winced, quickly trying to dispel the thought from the mind. The paramedic frowned and turned to consult the paramedic standing beside her.

“How long till the road’s clear?” she asked.

The man shrugged.

“Beats me. Search and rescue is still scouring the lake and it’s a media circus out there.”

Jen snapped to attention at the mention of search and rescue. All of a sudden, the world came back into view and she found herself scanning the crowds of police, press and medical professionals for a sign. The crowd had only grown since she left the bridge but maybe they meant that they could succeed where she had failed.

“Have you asked them when they’ll be done?” the woman snapped.

The second paramedic said nothing and the woman made an irritated noise at his silence.

“Jesus Christ do I have to do everything myself?”

She strode off into the crowd, heading towards two large vans and a helicopter. She half turned as she walked to yell out a final instruction.

“Stay with her!”

The man let out an irritated sigh and moved to sit down on the floor of the ambulance beside Jen.

“It’s Megagirl. It’s not like she needs a babysitter,” he muttered as he moved. “Where’s Megaman when you need him?”

Jen's watch alarm went off with a shrill beep that made her head ache. She quickly turned off the alarm, tried to swallow the sense of dread that came with the sound, and turned to face the second paramedic. He was much younger than the woman who had initially treated her, and she doubted that he'd had this job long, but his face looked faintly familiar. She was certain that this wasn’t the first time they’d met.

“Good question. Where *is* Megaman?” she asked, trying to keep her tone light and friendly.

The paramedic let out a long, pained sigh.

“Aren’t you supposed to know that? Don’t you guys keep trackers on each other or something?”

Jen rolled her eyes and tentatively stood up, pleased to note that she could now place weight on her sore leg. She pulled the blanket a little tighter around her shoulders. It had stopped raining but it was still cold. Beside her, the paramedic nervously scrambled to his feet.

 "What are you doing?"

The irritation faded from his voice in favour of concern. Sometimes Jen wondered if paramedics were perpetually pissed off. She could hardly blame them; most of the time it seemed to come from a place of concern.

"You know we can't let you go until you've been fully checked -"

"I'm going to find Megaman."

She took a shaky step forward.

"But -"

Jen carefully placed one hand on the ambulance door and turned to look the increasingly desperate-sounding paramedic squarely in the eye.

"Remember how I *don't* need a babysitter?" she said calmly, fighting to keep her expression smooth and unreadable as a wave of pain radiated up from her leg.

The paramedic opened and closed his mouth a few times. It was a good goldfish impression. Jen had to look away before she started smiling.

"I'll be fine," she said, not entirely sure who she was trying to convince as she scanned the crowd.

There was no sign of Megaman's signature blue costume but he had to be here somewhere. He wouldn't leave without debriefing her first. Jen let her hand drift away from the ambulance door, gritted her teeth and began to hobble into the crowd. It was relatively straightforward to ignore the pain when she had a clear task to focus on and, for once, nobody seemed to be paying her any attention. The reporters were focused on the river, the police were focused on the reporters and the search and rescue team were focused on their work. Jen resisted the urge to glance back over her shoulder at the paramedic to see if he at least was still watching. It would give off the wrong impression.

Jen's determined hobble slowly transitioned to a purposeful, albeit slightly unsteady, stride as the painkillers kicked in. As she scouted the crowd's perimeter she caught glimpses of the traffic queue that had built up behind the bridge cordon. Exasperated drivers sat in their car honking horns and a select few, no doubt new to the superpowered holdups of the city, impatiently clustered around the police cordon. Jen caught snippets of their incensed conversation as she passed.

"How are we supposed to get home if you won't let us!"

"I'm sorry Sir but this road is off limits until the search and rescue team can confirm that they won't need the highway for -"

A hand caught Jen's wrist and wrenched her off the road towards the riverbank. She nearly fell over at the force of the familiar trembling grip.

"You needed to take your medicine about five minutes ago," she gasped, focusing on not tripping over herself as her master yanked her towards the cover of trees.

They came to an abrupt halt beside an oak tree large enough to hide their presence from the crowd and Megaman took his medication. As Jen watched him dry-palm the pills she realised why she hadn't been able to spot him before. He was in his civilian clothing. The glasses and baggy sweater looked more out of place on him than ever and Jen was struck by the odd thought that her master was playing dress up. This IT teacher facade wasn't him. Not really.

Given everything that had happened, Megaman's face seemed unnervingly empty of emotion. Jen wasn't sure if it was a symptom of his condition or a consequence of how horribly wrong his plan had gone. Jen stood up straight, carefully resisting the urge to lean back against the tree trunk.

 "Jennifer," he said once he'd swallowed the pills. "I think it's time to address your behaviour."

Jen nodded and waited expectantly for the What Went Wells and Even Better Ifs, but she received neither.

"I took you on as my sidekick because I could see the potential in you," Megaman continued. "You're a bright girl and you want to help this city just as much as I do, so please tell me this: when did you decide to break your oath?"

"What?"

"When did you decide to break your oath?"

He repeated the question slowly and clearly, as if speaking to a particularly thick student.

"I don't know what you -"

"DON'T LIE TO ME."

Jen shrank back against the tree, startled by the volume of her master's voice. He cleared his throat and continued to speak at a normal volume as if nothing had changed, as if he wasn't accusing her of the unthinkable.

"Not again."

Jen thought back to that fateful day in the classroom and started to replay the crime-fighting activity of the past few days and in her mind. She couldn't see how she had broken her oath. Evil came in many forms but she had always tried to beat it back in any way that she could, just as promised.

"I'm waiting."

"I don't -"

"Do you even understand what happened today?" Megaman took a step towards her. There was an edge to his voice that she never directed her before. "The Scorpions dangle hostages from Bunin bridge on a weekly basis Jennifer; did you really believe that the person who died today was suicidal?" Jen opened her mouth to answer but Megaman continued. "No. That person was another victim of the Scorpions. Just like those caged children."

"But they wouldn't do that," she said uncertainly, unsure how else to explain the feeling in her gut. Something about the logic of his argument felt wrong but she couldn't quite place her reasoning.

"Yes they would!" Megaman cried, a note of exasperation in his voice.

He took a step back and appraised her with one swift, irritated glance. Jen glanced down at her costume and wrinkled her nose in embarrassment. She still smelt of sick.

"I keep telling you: words mislead and actions demonstrate. Today the Scorpions demonstrated what they were capable of and so did you."

Jen looked back up at her master.

"Me?"

"Yes you! I have told you multiple times not to talk to Scorpio but you persisted and just look what happened!"

"But Scorpio tried to help," Jen protested, thinking back to look in the fellow sidekick’s eyes when he’d spotted the distant figure.

Megaman sighed and rubbed his eyes, seeming to realise the difficulty of the task ahead of him. When he spoke again, he sounded tired.

"Scorpio was going to threaten us. He was going to say that if we didn't let him and the Scorpionette leave, they'd kill the hostage which they’d conveniently placed above us all. Something must have gone wrong there though, because Michael wasn't supposed to die early. Maybe he decided to take fate into their own hands; I don't know.”

He paused for a moment, allowing Jen to absorb the fact that the hostage now had a name. A heavy silence of mourning fell upon them. They both knew that the chances of surviving such a fall were slim.

“What I do know is that the only reason Scorpio followed you was out of annoyance and tactical neccessity. When neither of you were able to reach the hostage in time, he resorted to a last ditch escape plan: feigning a familial relationship with the Scorpionette. He manipulated you into caring for him and used it to their advantage. "

Jen’s mind reeled and she steadied herself against the tree. The moments she’d spent with Scorpio flashed through her mind with increasing fervour, from their first meeting to the battle on the bridge. She thought about his incessant over-sharing and the never-ending attempts to engage her in conversation. Scorpio had been very persistent in his attempts to “get to know” her and to learn more about her life. He’d seemed almost desperate times. Jen had assumed that he wanted to talk to someone about his secret life just as badly as she did, what if she was wrong? Could it have all been a lie?

"That boy was only your friend for as long as it benefited him and his cause," Megaman said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "Do you understand now?"

With some dismay, Jen realised that she’d let her guard down. She’d never blurted out random aspects of her life story like Scorpio did, but she’d let grown careless enough to find his endless chatter oddly charming, reassuring even. But what if everything he’d said to her, every pointless little comment, had been carefully designed to draw her in? To trick her into trusting a fellow sidekick over her master?

Jen finally allowed herself to consider the possibility. Although she’d spoken to Scorpio rarely, she knew that she’d given herself away in other ways. Both she and Megaman knew that her fight times had increased when they should have been reducing and, though Jen was loth to admit it, she knew why that was. She’d held herself back in fights, stalling when she should have delivered disabling blows. She’d given Scorpio leeway and he’d run away with it; the tapestry incident was evidence enough of that.

Jen’s eyes widened as the implications started to settle in. She’d been giving the Scorpions extra time to calculate their next move without even realising it and for what, making a new friend? She could see it clearly now; there were far too many discrepancies in Scorpio’s stories for them to be genuine. It seemed glaringly obvious: why would someone who willingly threatened and took people hostage every other week want to become a doctor, and what sane mother would enlist their child in taking on the local police force and Megaman?

Jen gaped, her eyes stinging with unshed tears as she finally understood her master’s meaning.

"Oh my god."

Megaman nodded as he saw the realisation dawn on her face.

"You swore that you would do everything in your power to stop the spread of evil, but that includes trusting my judgment and taking my feedback seriously. I don't think you've done either of those things in a very long time."

Jen stared at him, barely sure of how to process his words in the wake of her realisation. She’d fucked up. Badly.

"To be honest, I'm not angry. I'm just disappointed," Megaman continued, his tone resigned. "It's a shame that our partnership has to end this way."

Jen recognised the look in his eyes. It was the same look he’d directed at her on the bridge. She knew what it meant now. Nevertheless, it still took a minute for his final sentence to register in her brain. When it did, it was as if her body had been jumpstarted into action. Jen found herself searching in vain for the right words, any words, to explain her inadequacy, to apologise for a mistake they both knew she never should have made.

"I didn't know - I didn't mean to -"

"I know you didn't. But you knew the rules and broke them anyway."

Megaman’s voice was surprisingly soft. It only made the disappointment in his eyes more penetrating. He gave off the guise of caring while looking right through her.

"I'm sorry," Jen tried, already knowing that the words wouldn’t be enough.

"It's too late for that Jennifer.”

Megaman turned to leave, took half a step forwards, and paused. He opened his mouth to speak and Jen waited expectantly, hoping beyond hope that maybe her pleading had struck a chord.

“Please clean the suit before you return it to me.”

As Megaman headed towards the main road, Jen sank back against the tree trunk and finally let her tears fall. She slid down the rough bark until she was pressed up against the crook of the tree in a crouch. She reached for the zip at the back of her suit, slowly peeling herself out of the wet latex.

*You don’t know what you’re getting into baby*

*but don’t worry I’ll show you the ropes*

*You’re so pessimistic but I say maybe*

*we can get your hopes…*

Jen fumbled around the suit until she was able to retrieve her phone, cursing herself for accidentally bringing it along again. She checked her notifications and saw a message from her mother on the family group chat.

*Just saw the news. How's the traffic?*

Jen looked up at the road that led to Bunin bridge and grimaced. It was still heaving with angry commuters. She muted her ringtone and typed out a quick response.

*Not gr8*

A few seconds later both of her parents replied at once.

*When do you think you'll get home?*

*Can you pick up dinner on your way?*

Jen sighed. It must've been another long day at the office if she was now the one responsible for selecting their takeaway of the evening.

*K but im getting pizza this time*

Jen put her phone down so she could dedicate her thoughts and energy towards pulling off the remainder of her suit. She took it off with more force than was entirely necessary (Megaman wanted it back clean; he hadn't said anything about needing it in one piece) and removed her mask. She stared at the sturdy blue faceplate for a moment. Part of her wondered if this considerably more durable section of her costume could be destroyed, but the buzz of her phone was a significant enough distraction for her to not put such thoughts to the test.

Jen picked up the phone and shoved it back into her jeans pocket, not bothering to check the series of messages that followed her pizza announcement. She knew the family order off by heart and, at this rate, it would only be a matter of time until the nearest Domino's did too.

With Bunin bridge out of commission for the unforeseeable future, Jen had to go home the long way around. That meant tracing the city traffic to its tail end, and then trying to find a bus that was prepared to take an alternate route. Finding an adequate bus service proved to be virtually impossible and Jen soon realised that she had enough money for pizza but not a taxi. Not for the first time she found herself wishing that her costume had pockets. There was only so much she could fit into the clothing she wore underneath the latex and this time she'd forgotten to bring her debit card with her.

Jen staggered into the nearest, cheapest pizza shop she could find, and lurched towards the counter. The teenager behind it eyed her warily. He looked to be around Jen's age, perhaps a little older, and wore a plastic name tag that said "Dorothy" on it. Jen decided not to comment and leaned heavily against the counter as she rattled off the order. The teenager nodded and inputted the information onto the screen in front of him.

"It should be ready in about 15 minutes."

Jen made a muffled noise of acknowledgement and rested her head gently against the counter. The plastic menu was refreshingly cool against her forehead.

Dorothy stared at her.

"Are you okay?"

"Jus' sore," Jen mumbled.

It was an understatement of epic proportions. Whatever painkillers the paramedic had given her had worn off during Jen's fruitless search for public transport. Now, the pain in her leg was agonising, the air felt stiflingly warm and her head was throbbing with the force of an EDM rave. She could barely think straight.

"Maybe you should sit down?" Dorothy suggested, gesturing at the uncomfortable looking chair by the window.

Jen nodded and instantly regretted the movement. She slowly made her way towards the chair and half-sat, half-collapsed onto it.

Fifteen minutes seemed to pass in 15 seconds. The next thing Jen knew her name was being called and she had to elbow her way past several glaring customers that she didn't remember arriving in order to pick up her order. It belatedly occurred to her that she must look like a bag lady. She was carrying her suit in a grotty plastic bag she'd found in amongst the traffic trail and she didn't exactly smell like a basket of roses. Jen left the shop feeling embarrassed and only slightly less disoriented than she had felt before entering.

The process of getting from the pizza shop to her house was a blur. Jen couldn't have said if she'd found a bus that took her to the correct destination or had walked the rest of the way there. She chose to focus on finding figuring out which pocket she'd put her house keys in instead.

She unlocked the door and slowly limped into the dining room where she knew she'd find her parents. Sure enough, Martin and Guinevere stood at the table pouring over reams of paper. Both emitted grunts of acknowledgement but neither looked up. Jen stared at the table, searching for a paper-free spot to place the pizza boxes, but the surface was thoroughly covered. She moved towards the kitchen work surface behind her parents and dropped the pizza boxes onto it with shaking hands. Her fingers wrapped around the edge of the work surface, desperately trying to hold herself upright. Jen focused on her breathing and waited for her head to clear. She was home now. Everything would be fine.

Guinevere's stomach growled and she let out a high pitched peal of laughter that made the ache in Jen's head worsen. She narrowed her eyes, trying to focus on the increasingly blurry outline of her parents' backs.

"Sounds like you arrived at just the right time!" Guinevere chuckled, slumping into a chair beside her husband.

Jen struggled to make out the words despite her mother's proximity. It sounded like she was speaking underwater.

Jen picked up Guinevere's pizza box, took a step towards the table, and then everything went black.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"Jesus Christ it's not -"

"But how did this even -?"

*Beep*.

*Beep*.

*Beep.*

When Jen came to she didn't know where she was. The low voices around her were unfamiliar and the blinding white ceiling was even less so.

"Scorpion poisoning again," a woman's voice muttered. "You'd think that Megaman would have dealt with those menaces by now."

The woman spoke quietly but her tone was one of barely restrained rage.

"I think he leaves that sort of thing to Megagirl," said a second voice contemplatively. "He can't be expected to deal with everything."

The first woman snorted derisively.

"That explains it then."

The sob was wrenched out of Jen's throat before she could stop it. The first of the two women standing next to the bed loomed over her.

"Hello honey, how are you feeling?" she asked, her voice now a far cry from bitter.

Jen continued to sob. The first woman exchanged glances with the second, as if internally debating something, and then it was the second woman's turn to loom over Jen.

"You're in the Intensive Care Unit at St Barnes Hospital," she said gently.

Jen made an ugly gulping noise as she tried and failed to stop crying. The second woman continued, unperturbed.

"Can you rate your pain on a scale of one to ten for me, with ten being indescribably horrible pain and one being virtually non-existent pain?"

Jen thought about it for a moment. She felt lightheaded but not in an unpleasant way. Her head was no longer throbbing and the dull ache in her leg felt manageable for the first time since she'd left Bunin bridge.

"T-two."

The woman smiled and straightened up, going to write something down on a clipboard.

"That's good."

"W-where are my parents?" Jen sniffled.

"They're at work right now," the first woman answered. "But we can call them now to let them know you're awake."

Of course they were.

"P-please do that now," Jen said, finally managing to wrestle her emotions into control at the slight anger the word "work" provoked in her.

When Jen's parents arrived, Jen almost lost control all over again.

"Oh honey!" Guinevere cried pulling her daughter into a tight embrace that Martin joined only moments later. "How are you feeling? Does it hurt? Are you -"

The second woman, whom Jen had come to know as Martina over the last hour or so, seemed to sense Jen's impending overwhelment, and promptly stepped in.

"She's doing fine, medically speaking, but we want to keep her here under observation for a couple more days just to be on the safe side."

"Two more days?" Guinevere exclaimed. "You're going to get a full week off school at this rate young lady!"

Jen frowned at her parents and thought back to the earlier woman's words.

"How long have I been here?" she asked.

"Well, the ambulance brought you here on Monday and it's almost Thursday now," Martin explained, tears building in his eyes.

"You were unconscious for two days," Guinevere added. "We weren't sure if you'd -" she trailed off.

Jen reached out to squeeze her hand and turned to look up at Martina.

"What exactly happened?" she asked, fighting to keep her voice steady.

"You were stung by a venomous scorpion and got here in the nick of time," Martina replied. "It was a bit touch and go for a while during the early treatment stages but our antidote hasn't let us down yet. We need to do a few more tests to be certain, but I for one think that you'll make a full recovery."

Jen's parents smiled at her tearfully and Jen made an effort to smile back. She could recover physically, but she wouldn't be able to recover the title of Megagirl.

Time in the hospital passed slowly. Jen's parents visited when they could but they were her only visitors and their visits were significantly restricted by their extensive work schedule. They seemed even busier than normal and sometimes her father would have to leave the room to take business calls during their visits. Jen wondered if something had happened to the business in her absence, as nonsensical as the idea seemed to her.

Sitting in the hospital was boring and lonely. She would have seen such boredom as a luxury only the week before, but so much had changed since then. Jen considered texting Izzy several times but couldn't quite bring herself to. If she did it would mean having to admit just how wrong she'd been. Her friendship with Izzy was the first bridge she'd burned while serving as Megaman's sidekick, and for what? Scorpio had never been her friend and Megaman was no longer her master. She'd been wrong about everything. She hadn't even had the sense to stay with the paramedics.

 Jen tried to distract herself with TV. It didn't work very well; every news channel was talking about the "Battle of Bunin Bridge". In her desperation to gain some respite from her mistakes, Jen found herself watching cartoons on a channel aimed at a much younger audience than herself. She watched several back to back episodes of a show called *Spot and the Great Carrot* with a mixture of bemusement and genuine confusion over how a lone carrot could have such a wide range of magical powers, and why the natural best friend for said powerful carrot was a talking dog.

The show had clearly been designed to promote healthy eating; each episode involved Spot and the infuriatingly cocky carrot rescuing another form of veg from the evil rabbit that lived down the road, and returning each character to their rightful place in Spot's owner's kitchen. Not only did the show seriously stretch the limits of a rabbit's diet, the whole "rescuing" to be eaten by the right person at a later date was downright disturbing when Jen thought about it in too much depth. However, most of the time she found herself occupied with swearing at the carrot. It had story-breaking powers that it hardly used and, as if that wasn't enough, it was a very arrogant carrot. For a split-second Jen wished that she had Megaman's superstrength so she could show the damn carrot how to be powerful *and* resourceful.

Jen spent more time than she was willing to admit watching *Spot and the Great Carrot*, but the show served its purpose as a distraction well enough. After her first day of binging cartoons she finally felt ready to find out what was happening in the world outside of the hospital. Jen picked up the remote and, with bated breath, switched to the news channel.

"And back to you in the studio, Karen."

The camera cut to the studio. A woman sat behind a large desk in a crisp blue blouse. Her fake smile was so wide it almost looked like plastic.

"Thanks Fred," said Karen. "We'll be hearing more about those strange weather patterns later so stay tuned for future updates on the mist situation."

Jen frowned. She'd hardly call mist a "situation". Her father had complained a little about having to drive through fog on the way to the hospital but it hadn't sounded serious. She wondered if it was a slow news week now that the Battle of Bunin Bridge was no longer a talking point. It was a relieving thought.

"Now, more on the story everyone wants to know more about. What exactly happened on Bunin Bridge?"

Speak of the devil. Jen winced and braced herself.

"I have here in the studio with me now Dr Marsha Kendrick, an expert psychiatrist who specialises in the workings of the criminal mind."

The camera zoomed out to reveal a grey-haired, serious looking woman in a suit and tie. She sat to one side of the presenter and looked immensely uncomfortable.

"Thanks for coming on the show today Marsha."

"Pleased to be here Karen," Marsha said stiffly, looking anything but pleased.

"What can you tell us about the Battle of Bunin Bridge?" the presenter continued brightly. "There's been a lot of talk about Michael Chapman and how he got mixed up in all of this. What do you think the Scorpions were trying to accomplish with such a blatant murder attempt?"

Attempt? Jen sat bolt upright in her hospital bed, ready to hang onto every word the pair might utter. Had the search and rescue team actually managed to save Michael?

Marsha smiled thinly at Karen. It was not a pleasant smile but it seemed to change her entire demeanour. She was in her element now. It was as if a switch had been flipped and Jen waited eagerly for her response.

"I don't think it was a murder attempt, Karen."

"Don't tell me you subscribe to the suicide theory those conspiracy theorists have been spreading!" Karen scoffed, but Jen could tell that she was unnerved. Her wide plastic smile slipped slightly.

"Well, I'd hardly call it a conspiracy theory," Marsha replied. "The man left a suicide note, which was confirmed by his own family to have been written in his handwriting."

"The Scorpions could have forced him to write it!" Karen protested, a hint of nervousness in her voice as she tried to direct the interview back towards her original angle.

"Well they wouldn't have had to try very hard," Marsha continued, unperturbed. "The man was clinically depressed. If his family is to be believed, this wouldn't be the first time that he's made an attempt on his own life. I think we're placing an emphasis on the wrong thing here. Where are the services that are supposed to support people like Michael Chapman? Suicide prevention should not be delegated to random individuals with superpowers. I appreciate all that Megaman and Megagirl have done for this city but some things should be left to the professionals, and those professionals need better funding if they want to help people like Michael avoid tragedy."

Marsha looked like she had a lot more to say but Karen finally managed to cut in.

"I guess we'll never really know what happened to Michael Chapman."

The camera cut away to show a series of clips of the search and rescue team around Bunin Bridge. The voice over that accompanied the clips had clearly been pre-recorded; the hint of panic in Karen's voice was now nowhere to be found.

"Search and rescue teams found Michael Chapman within an hour of his fall from Bunin Bridge -"

Shaky footage distantly showed a man on a stretcher being transferred into a helicopter.

"- he was taken directly to St Barnes Hospital in the centre of Bunin City for treatment where he was placed in a medical coma, but his injuries were severe. Doctors are unsure of when or if he will wake up."

Jen gaped at the TV. The stranger she'd failed to save was not only alive (for the time being), but in the same hospital as her.

The camera cut back to the studio. Karen's wide smile was firmly fixed back in place and Marsha  looked furious. Jen wondered what had happened behind the scenes.

"Marsha, what can you tell us about the Scorpions' motivations? Why would they do such a thing to an innocent man?"

"Well," Marsha said through gritted teeth. "In order to understand their present behaviour we need to look at their past behaviour."

Karen nodded encouragingly.

"The Scorpions have a very distinct behavioural pattern when it comes to how they commit their crimes."

"They do?" Karen and Jen chorused.

Jen leaned forward in her hospital bed to ensure that she heard whatever explanation came next.

"Randomness."

"That's hardly a pattern -"

"They attempt to commit multiple crimes a week but each crime has little in common with the last. The Scorpions are only predictable in one sense," Marsha continued. "They don't kill people." Karen's smile started to droop. "They take a lot of hostages but every one escapes unscathed, they rob banks with scorpions instead of guns -"

"Venomous scorpions," Karen reminded, but it was clear from Marsha's grim smile that she was planning to win whatever fight they'd had behind the scenes

"And yet no one has died from being stung."

"Yet."

Marsha continued as if Karen hadn't spoken.

"Do you know many serial killers kill at random?" she asked and quickly continued when it looked like Karen might attempt to answer the question. "I don't. That's because murder doesn't happen without intent or motive. I don't know what the Scorpions are playing at but I think that they are trying very hard *not* to kill people."

Jen sat back in bed, her mind whirling as the interview continued. The sounds of the TV became background noise as she thought back over her interactions with the Scorpions. Scorpio had flicked a venomous scorpion from her shoulder before, and where could the hospital have gotten the antidote from if not the source of the strangely behaving scorpions themselves? But that couldn't be right. Her master had said -

"Megaman has refused to comment on the situation so we've really been left to speculate -"

Jen returned attention to the TV automatically at the sound of her ex-master's name. Marsha was gone and Karen was now surrounded by a group of young to middle aged men.

"That's typical of Megaman though," piped up the youngest of the group.

"Yes, but in a situation like this people need reassurance," said the eldest. "The last outright murder we've had in Bunin was the art school bombing and that was a long time ago. People are scared and they want Megaman to step up and say that he'll protect them - protect us - like he's always done but, aside from preventing a minor burglary yesterday, we've seen virtually nothing of him. "

"What I want to know is where Megagirl has been since the battle," the third man mused. "She looked like she was in pretty bad shape on the bridge and she wasn't with Megaman yesterday."

The others made various noises of agreement and Jen pressed herself deeper into the bed. She couldn't bring herself to watch, but she could force herself to keep listening.

"Maybe she's recovering. We still don't know how old she is but if we go by her height she's either very young or ancient."

The group chuckled.

"If it's the latter she's going to need all the recovery time she can get."

Jen turned off the TV.

Sneaking into Michael Chapman's room was surprisingly easy considering that it was Jen's first time doing hospital reconnaissance as a patient. She'd had plenty of practise at making her bedroom look occupied and, fortunately, it wasn't difficult to achieve the same effect in a hospital room. Besides, it was late and nobody would expect the perfectly well-behaved patient to start breaking rules now.

 Despite the debate surrounding the circumstances of Michael's fall, there were no guards posted outside the room and Jen was able to slip inside like a shadow with a slight limp. She sat down beside the bed and appraised the unconscious stranger. His body was a misshapen mess of bruises; the only part of him that she recognised were his eyes. Jen let out a long sigh.

"I'm sorry this happened to you," she said quietly. "It's a mess out there. Everyone on the news has some sort of theory about what happened on Bunin bridge but I don't think any of us actually know what really happened except for you and the Scorpions."

Jen paused to gather her thoughts. It was strange how easy it felt to talk to Michael, given how their last meeting ended.

"I'm sorry I couldn't save you but I can promise you this: I'll find out the truth. If you didn't commit suicide your family deserves to know and if you did -" Jen trailed off. What exactly would that mean? That the Scorpions were being blamed for the one crime they hadn't committed? That Megaman was wrong? "If you did, I'll cross that bridge when I get to it."

 The silence was punctuated only by the slow, predictable beep of the heart rate monitor and the low hum of the equipment. She stared at the equipment displays. Jen understood heart rate but the other readings felt as incomprehensible as a foreign language. She briefly wondered how much of it Scorpio would understand before realising what she was doing. She wanted to trust Scorpio. She wanted him to be her friend and not a killer, but that didn't mean that he was. She needed evidence. Perhaps Megaman would even welcome her back as Megagirl if she could prove it to him.

"The doctors don't know if or when you're going to wake up but I promise you that I'll set the record straight, whatever the truth may be. Please just hang in there until then."

Jen brushed her fingers very gently across Michael's nearest hand (if it hadn't looked so bruised she would have squeezed it), stood up and left the room. She didn't see Michael's fingers twitch in response.

"Just sign here and you're free to go," said Martina cheerfully.

Jen laughed as she scribbled her name down, her parents echoed her smile a little anxiously.

"You make it sound like I'm a prisoner."

"Well you've done your time."

Jen handed the clipboard back to the doctor and walked towards her parents.

"She still has a limp," Martin said uncertainly.

"Yes, I'm afraid there's not much we can do about that except apply physiotherapy and keep our fingers crossed. I've never seen scorpion poisoning progress as far as Jen's did so there may be some long-term damage to the leg."

"It's fine dad," said Jen as chirpily as she could manage without sounding like a cartoon animal. Being able to go home was filling her with a new sense of appreciation for life. "It doesn't hurt."

Martin opened his mouth but Guinevere put a hand on his shoulder.

"Come on honey, let's get you home," she said. "The house has felt empty without you."

Jen blinked. Her mother was reigning her father in now? She wondered what exactly home had been like in her absence.

They started to walk towards the exit. Just as they were about to reach it, Martina came running after them.

"JEN!"

The family paused and turned to face the panting doctor.

"Sorry," Martina gasped. "I almost forgot, there's one more form that I need you to fill out."

Martin rolled his eyes and Guinevere's grip on his shoulder visibly tightened.

"I'll meet you outside," Jen told her parents and started to follow Martina back towards reception.

She expected them to stop there to pick up the forgotten form but Martina walked straight past reception, only pausing to confirm with one of the nurses that a particular consulting room was empty. Feeling increasingly nervous, Jen followed Martina through a series of winding corridors until eventually they arrived at consulting room 10. Jen entered the room and her stomach sank. She couldn't see any forms. Still, Martina seemed nice so she'd play along for now.

"What‘s this form for?" Jen asked.

Martina sighed.

"There is no form. I just wasn't sure how to ask you this in front of your parents."

Jen tried not to panic. Martina could be referencing any number of things. Maybe she was curious about Jen's excessive cuts and bruises. Maybe she thought her parents were abusive.

"Are you Megagirl?"

Jen blinked and focused on maintaining her poker face as she tried to determine the most appropriate response. Part of her had always known that this day would come eventually, but she hadn't predicted these circumstances.

"What makes you think that I am?" Jen asked carefully.

"My wife works as a paramedic. She was at Bunin bridge."

Jen tried very hard to look nonplussed. She wasn't entirely sure if it was working.

"She told me that she left Megagirl with a particularly stupid new recruit while she went to get more information on the traffic situation. Megagirl was gone when she got back. Olga was furious because she was convinced that Megagirl had scorpion poisoning. Nothing else would explain her symptoms and Olga knew that if Megagirl didn't get treatment within the next few hours she could die horribly from something that could've been easily fixed in the ambulance. She's been giving that man hell ever since." Martina smiled fondly and went quiet. Jen raised an eyebrow and the doctor sheepishly continued. "Then you showed up almost dead with a scorpion sting. I didn't put the pieces together until Olga came home started whining about the new paramedic when she got off shift last night. And you haven't denied anything yet."

Jen stared at Martina, desperately searching for something, anything to say, but her mind was blank. Blaming it on coincidence wouldn't sound convincing unless Jen could deliver the line confidently, and she didn't think she had it in her. It had been a long two days. She just wanted to go home.

"Anything you say to me is completely confidential -"

"- unless you think I'm in danger of hurting myself or others," Jen finished.

Martina paused as if she hadn't previously considered that part of the ethical clause.

"Megagirl doesn't *intend* to do either of those things," she said carefully. "I'm sure that she tries very hard not to get injured and she certainly hasn't put anyone into a coma!"

Jen was unable to help her flinch at that final statement but she saw it for what it was: a proffered loophole. She sighed.

"I was Megagirl. I'm not anymore."

"Oh," said Martina, her eyes round with surprise.

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"I really don't want to talk about it."

"How long was that form?" Guinevere asked conversationally when Jen finally left the hospital.

"Longer than I thought it would be," Jen muttered. "Can we go home now?"

Guinevere chuckled and Martin stepped on the gas. His knuckles were white against the steering wheel and Jen got the nasty feeling that maybe the home environment wouldn't feel as comforting as she hoped it would.

The drive home was silent and strangely awkward. There was a tension in the air that Jen couldn't decipher and, even when her mother turned the radio on, it didn't entirely dissipate. When they finally arrived at the house Jen wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or paranoid.

She kicked off her shoes and wandered into the kitchen. One thing she'd definitely been looking forward to was eating non-hospital food. However, no sooner had she stepped into the kitchen she was hit with a waft of the most amazing smell. She knew what it was before she saw it.

Her parents followed her into the kitchen and Guinevere laughed at the delighted look on her daughter's face.

"We thought you might be hungry for some good home-coming food," she said, her hand slipping into Martin's.

"You've been *cooking*!" Jen breathed.

If there was one thing her parents excelled at, it was cooking. It was what they'd based their business on, after all. Food, to some extent, was work for them.

 Jen wasted no time in seizing the nearest plate and starting to pile food onto it. Her parents sat down opposite her and watched Jen wolf down a number of Italian dishes with all the grace of a horse. Even Martin smiled at her enthusiasm. All that could be heard was the sound of cutlery clattering and food being demolished.

Jen found herself waiting for the catch. Her parents were watching her eat with an unnerving intensity. It was almost enough to make her question whether they too had figured out her secret. She couldn't remember where she'd left her costume. Her father spoke first.

"Jen, your mother and I owe you an apology."

"Smlf?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full dear."

Jen fought to quickly swallow her meatballs and almost instantly regretted it when they went down the wrong way. Eyes watering, she tried to speak again.

"What?"

"We've been very busy with work lately now that the business is really getting going, and anything unrelated to work has just gone straight over our heads," said Guinevere. "We've been working so hard to stay on top of it all and have enough money just to live here - "

"I know, mum."

"But because of that we neglected what's important."

Jen frowned, wondering where this was going. Her mother looked like she was about to burst into tears. Martin squeezed Guinevere's hand and continued where she had left off.

"When you collapsed it was a wake up call for us. If we'd been paying more attention we could have gotten you to the hospital sooner."

Jen's hand instinctively went to her leg. She hadn't lied when she said it didn't hurt but it did feel a little strange, like it had been numbed in one very specific area. Had her parents spent the past 4 days blaming themselves for her own stupidity? She was the one who'd ignored the rather alarming in retrospect pain. Jen opened her mouth to state as much but her father continued before she could get a word out.

"Things are going to be different now. We're hiring our first employee tomorrow."

Jen's eyes widened in shock.

"Dad -"

"We can afford to do it now. I was stubborn to think that it wasn't necessary. When product demand grows a business must grow to meet that demand. We already have a series of interviews lined up. Starting from tomorrow, we are going to have time to cook at home for ourselves and spend time with our daughter."

"I - I don't know what to say."

"Eat your food then," her father advised, a twinkle in his eye.

As Jen dug into her remaining meatballs she couldn't help but note that her father's moustache looked happier than it had in years.

Jen unearthed her phone and her thumb hovered over the lock screen. For a moment she simply stared at the background image of her and Izzy. It was an old picture that her mother had accidentally rediscovered a few months ago and it had been on Jen’s phone ever since. The picture had been taken in the aftermath of Jen’s eighth birthday party. She didn’t remember much about the party itself, aside from really enjoying copious amounts of ice cream, but she didn’t have to remember when she looked at the picture. The two 8-year-olds stood side by side with matching grins. Jen knew from the location of the picture that they were most likely dropping Izzy off, but the young girl’s arm was wrapped snugly around Jen’s shoulders like a warm blanket.

Normally, just looking at picture was enough for Jen to feel that familiar warmth in her chest but looking at it now brought about a different kind of feeling. Still, Jen couldn’t bring herself to change the picture. She loved it almost as much as she loved Izzy, which left only one real course of action open to her.

Jen unlocked the phone and sent off a quick text.

*im sorry 4 everything. Cn we meet up?*

She waited patiently for Izzy’s response and, sure enough, her phone buzzed only a minute later.

*K*

Jen winced at the one letter response. It was shortly followed by a suggested time and address. She recognised the as one of Izzy’s many workplace cafes. Jen sent a thumbs up, not wanting to push her luck by insisting on a less public place for what might be a rather loud conversation, and put the phone down. She turned to the pile of homework beside her and flexed her writing hand. She had a few hours to spare for the first time in months.

It wasn’t difficult to find the café. It was small but covered in bright enough colours to be immediately obvious to any onlooker. Jen still remembered Izzy moaning to her about the arduous process of being enlisted to help repaint the place in such naff colours but Jen had seen the smile beneath her words. Izzy had been glad to be doing something even vaguely related to art. It made a nice change from the usual mixture of waitress and retail work.

Jen paused outside the building. She took a deep breath, trying to calm the nerves churning her gut, and stepped inside. She didn’t have to look hard for Izzy; her friend sat at the table nearest to the window and have most likely seen her hesitation entering the building. Jen tried to smile at her as she walked towards the table but she had a feeling that the expression came out as more of a grimace. Izzy folded her arms as Jen sat down opposite her.

“Hi,” she said awkwardly. Izzy continued to glare at her, one eyebrow raised as if to say *get on with it.* Jen promptly moved on. “I owe you an explanation,” she continued.

“No shit.”

Jen paused to look around the café. The place was packed of students and harried -looking parents from the after-school rush. The sheer number of people did nothing to settle nerves.

“It might be better if we do this somewhere more private,” she said hesitantly.

Izzy snorted.

“We’re staying right here,” she said firmly.

“It could take a while.“

Even as Jen spoke, she knew that she’d lost this argument. Izzy’s answer was written all over her face.

“You’ve got until my shift starts.”

“Okay.”

Jen took a deep breath. For a moment she considered buying something, or simply asking for a glass of water, but one look at the hoard of young families swarming the counter persuaded her otherwise. Besides, she would only be delaying the inevitable.

“I was Megagirl.”

Izzy sat back in her chair looking more angry than she had when Jen first sat down.

“Bullshit. Megagirl is at least an inch taller than you.”

Jen blinked. All the counterarguments she expected, height discrepancies had not been one of them.

“She – I am the same height – it’s –“ Jen gave up on finishing the sentence and let it peter out into a sigh.

“Well, if that’s everything, I’m sure there are better ways for me to be wasting my time right now.”

Izzy started to move away from a chair but Jen caught her hand.

“Wait. I can prove it.”

Izzy reluctantly stayed put as Jen reached beneath the table and pulled out her handbag. She dumped it on the table surface, unzipped it and pushed it across to Izzy. Izzy stared at her and then down at the bag.

“What is this?”

“My costume.”

Izzy snorted.

“You could have bought this at a fancy dress shop,” she said but, nevertheless, her hands started to explore the bag, softly pressing fingers into latex.

Jen shook her head.

“If this was that kind of costume it would be more comfortable,” she said a little bitterly.

Izzy’s hands continued to roam through the fabric. Jen could see the look of confusion in her eyes, part of Izzy was clearly willing to believe her friend’s story. Now it was only a matter of convincing her.

Jen stood and moved her chair so she could sit beside Izzy. She gently took the costume from her hands and turned it over to reveal a small hole.

“That was from when Scorpio kicked me onto the sewer floor. I was lucky to get the smell out, but I still haven’t got around to sewing it up.”

She shifted the fabric her hands again, lifting it out of the handbag slightly. She knew the curves and lacerations of her suit better than anybody, but she wanted Izzy to be able to see what she was talking about. She pointed at the nearest example of stitches. Preferring to focus on the suit than her friend’s expression.

“I got this from training. I was learning how to do a decent scissor kick and it kept ripping in the same place.” Jen smiled. At the time it had been more than frustrating, but the memory of it seemed almost funny now. “It was embarrassing but it taught me how to sew very quickly.”

She smoothed out the creases in the fabric, searching for more examples of her work in the field, but Izzy caught her hands in her own.

“Okay.”

Jen slowly looked up to meet her eyes and knew that she’d succeeded. Izzy’s eyes were wide and, it hadn’t been for the lingering anger in them, she might have looked impressed.

“I wasn’t trying to avoid talking to you,” Jen said, allowing the relief to finally enter her voice. “I just - I couldn’t –“ She sighed again. “I really am sorry.“

“Okay,” Izzy repeated.

For a moment neither of them said anything. Jen simply watched as the remaining anger in her friend’s eyes dissipated and morphed into understanding.

A loud crash from the kitchen made them both jump and Jen inadvertently yanked her hands away from Izzy. Izzy laughed. It was a little too high-pitched for her normal laugh, but Jen was glad to hear it nonetheless.

“I get why you wanted to do this somewhere private now I guess.”

Jen let out her own nervous laugh in response.

“Yeah. So, um, how have you been?” she tried.

Izzy glanced down at the suit and backup Jen before seeming to come to some sort of decision. She swung Jen’s handbag over her shoulder and stood up.

“Come on.”

Jen stood, more than a little surprised by the sudden kidnapping of her handbag, and followed Izzy out of the café. No sooner had they stepped out of the garage doors, Izzy turned to face her. Jen fought the urge to run back into the building.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Izzy announced. “We are going to walk to my house very slowly and you are going to tell me everything. You’re going to answer all my questions and you’re not going to lie to me. Ever. Again. And then maybe you’ll get your costume back. Capiche?”

Jen nodded.

“Good. Let’s start from the start then: what do you mean you *were* Megagirl?”

The walk from the café to Izzy’s house was a long one, but Jen’s story was longer. It felt as if a weight was lifting out of her body as she spoke, and the light, elated feeling that came with the sensation was almost breath-taking. Izzy would never know what she’d been through, not like Scorpio would, but it felt good to get it off her chest all the same. She’d forgotten how great it felt to vent to a friend. For the first time since Bunin bridge, Jen felt happy.

Izzy was a good listener the most part, only interrupting occasionally with questions about Megaman and the Scorpions. Jen tried to paraphrase as best as she could without lying, but Izzy seemed to have a sixth sense for when she was missing out certain details. Sometimes Izzy would question it, but she generally had the common sense to leave certain subjects well alone, with the exception of one.

“Are you seriously not going to tell me who he is? You told me who you were!” Izzy exclaimed as they reached her house.

“It’s safer if you don’t know and it’s not my secret to tell.”

Izzy huffed but she sounded more amused than irritated as they dwindled on her doorstep. They fell into a comfortable silence that was refreshingly familiar. The air of awkwardness from Jen’s initial confession had slowly transformed back into their normal equilibrium over the course of the walk.

“What’s the time?” Izzy asked.

Jen glanced down at her watch.

“Nearly 8 PM.”

“Huh,” Izzy said contemplatively. She smirked. “I guess time flies when you find out your best friend is a super-sidekick.”

Jen groaned.

“Please don’t call it that. Technically I’m not anymore.”

“That’s his loss,” Izzy said, suddenly serious. “Seriously Jen, it sounds like you’ve got more morals than he has.”

Jen opened and closed her mouth. Half of her wanted to defend her ex-master, but the other half wanted to agree with Izzy. Izzy watched her squirm for a few minutes before giving in and changing the subject. She dumped Jen’s handbag onto the porch, plucked the house key from her pocket and began the process of wrestling with the old lock.

         “Do you want to come in?” she asked, managing to sound surprisingly casual as she battled with the door. “We’ve got a lot of friendship time to catch up on.”

         Jen stared at her handbag. If she wanted to, she could take it and leave. She’d told Izzy everything; she didn’t have to stay. This conversation didn’t need to delve any further into fresh wounds than it already had.

“What about your shift?”

“Oh I’ve got today off,” Izzy replied, finally managing to wrench the door open. She stepped into the darkened house. “I’ve actually been earning enough that I can take days off now; shift work is just my get-out-of-this-conversation-free card, which it looks like I didn’t have to use after all.” She paused and sighed, finally seeming to notice the handbag on the ground between them and Jen’s expression. “Are you coming in or are you just going to stand there?”

Izzy stepped back onto the porch and Jen was instantly reminded of the picture on her phone. Izzy was much older now but she was still distinctly Izzy. Her smile could be just as bright and her hugs just as warm. Jen picked up the handbag and stepped towards her.

“Lead the way.”

The weekend breezed by in a series of shopping trips around the largest mall in Bunin City. Jen and Izzy visited as many clothes shops as they could find, posed for selfies with the mall Christmas decorations, and spent a lot of money on makeup. The extensive bout of retail therapy was so soothing that it felt surreal to Jen.

When their feet grew too tired to shop any further, they left the mall and made a beeline for the milkshake shop opposite the building. It was a small shop with limited seating; Jen and Izzy's knees practically knocked together underneath the rickety table they sat at, but the cramped seating arrangement felt more cosy than uncomfortable. Besides, they were more than happy to sit down after a long day of perusing the clothes aisles.

They nursed their milkshakes in a companionable silence. Jen had picked her favourite strawberry flavour while Izzy had gone for the most exotic option on the menu, a sickly sweet, rainbow-coloured milkshake whose name neither of them was entirely sure how to pronounce.

For a while all that could be heard was the sound of the two teenagers quietly slurping their milkshakes and the mechanical hum from behind the counter. Jen made quick work of her milkshake and started to fiddle with her straw, allowing her gaze to aimlessly peruse their surroundings. She glanced at the TV screen shoved into a corner of the shop, half wondering why it was there, but looked away instantly when she saw Megaman on the screen. Izzy frowned and craned her neck to see what her friend was reacting to.

"Is it weird that I miss it?" Jen asked, ducking her head so she could see nothing more than her side of the table.

Izzy turned back round to face Jen.

"No weirder than anything else you've told me."

Jen glanced up at Izzy. Her friend's expression was sympathetic.

 "I just -" Jen's sentence trailed off into a sigh. Izzy waited. "I miss helping." Jen said after a moment.

"There's more than one way to do that," Izzy said gently.

"I know, but with him I felt like I was actually making a difference, or at least trying to."

Izzy frowned.

"You don't need some stupid muscle man to -"

"I don't know how I did this before," Jen continued as if Izzy hadn't spoken. "This all feels so *normal*. I know I should be glad that I have my ordinary life back, we're even doing cooking Wednesdays again, but something just feels wrong."

"Jen, you know you can be super without Megaman, right?"

"I've never been on a mission without him."

"Are you trying to play dumb? Don't tell me that you seriously never considered being a hero on your own schedule!"

Izzy took in her friend's look of genuine bewilderment.

"Seriously? Never?"

Infiltrating the lair alone had, in retrospect, perhaps been a mistake. Jen had next to no idea of what exactly she was looking for, and her memories of the blueprints Megaman had been hoarding no longer seemed so clear in her mind. Nevertheless, she was determined to make something of the situation. Maybe if she managed this well he would stop treating her like a child. She'd taken down murderous thugs by his side before, she was perfectly capable of doing the same solo.

The Scorpions’ lair was, generally speaking, not what Jen had expected. As she crept into the small cottage, the first thing she noticed was the mud brown carpet. Some part of her had naively expected outfit themed colour coordination like in the movies but, as she progressed into the first room, she noted that there was a distinct lack of the Scorpions’ trademark purple.

The room was small, barely the size of Mr Johnson's classroom, and its contents fought for space beside an old Victorian fireplace. The fire was low, but still burning. Jen felt her way towards it.

Her hand latched onto iron and she stoked the lingering flames, willing her eyes to adjust to the wavering darkness until the shadowy shapes of her environment came into focus.

She stood directly beside a large table. The furniture around it looked well-used in a manner that combined cheap decrepitude with comfort, the fire casting a warm glow across an aging, mould-coloured sofa and a small wooden chair. The place looked and felt like a living room if you ignored the blood spatter. It was cosy. Unnervingly so.

“What are you doing here?”

Jen whipped around to see Scorpio leaning heavily against the door. He sagged firmly in between her and the exit, still wearing his suit from the morning. The blood was harder to see in the dim light of the fire but she knew it was there.

“Is she okay?” Jen asked, the words escaping her lips before she could think to say anything else.

Scorpio scratched around the string of his eyepatch. He looked tired.

“What do you care?”

Jen flinched. It was a good question. She wanted to say that she didn't care at all, and yet here she was. This went against everything that Megaman had taught her.

Scorpio sighed. His slouch grew more pronounced.

“Sorry. I know you're not responsible for what he does.”

Silence fell and Jen found herself squirming against her hero-trained instincts. She shouldn't be here but, since she was, she had to say *something*.

“She killed someone.”

Scorpio frowned.

“No she didn't.”

“I saw it!”

Jen didn't like how shrill her voice sounded. She sounded uncertain. Desperate, even. It was the kind of sound that Jennifer Brooke would make, not Megagirl.

Scorpio arched an eyebrow.

“You and me both saw a suicidal teenager take the plunge,” he said. “My mum had nothing to do with it. It was just bad timing.”

“Oh.” Jen breathed. So she had done the right thing. The relief hit her harder than expected and she found herself leaning against the table for support.

“Yeah, *oh*.” Scorpio mimicked, some of the venom re-entering his voice as he walked towards her.

Jen straightened, preparing herself for battle, but Scorpio was more focused on the table beside her. He grabbed a half-full cup of cold coffee from its blood-spattered surface and sank onto the brittle wooden seat as if it were an old armchair.

“Why are you here?” he sighed.

He didn't ask how she'd found him. Some part of her wondered if he knew already or simply didn't care.

“I wanted - I want -” Jen trailed off. Why *was* she here? Megaman hadn't told her to come, she knew that the Scorpionette had survived, and she now had a better idea of what exactly had happened on the bridge. Surely there were no questions left to ask?

Scorpio wearily raised his gaze to appraise her. He looked so different now compared to when they had first met. There was an edge to his words and a heaviness in his eyes. He wasn't a kid anymore. Neither of them were.

“I wanted to check on you,” Jen said finally, surprised to note the truth of the words.

Scorpio smiled at her but it was a brittle smile, one that she knew would fall from his face at a moment's notice. Jen walked towards him and he sat up a little straighter, a mixture of mild confusion and weariness spread across his face.

“Will that involve punching, because I'm kind of all punched out at the moment.”

Jen bristled but tried not to take his words personally. It was not an entirely unfair assumption to make, but it was one that she suddenly found herself keen to disprove.

She placed one hand on his shoulder. It felt strange to touch him without trying to cause bodily harm, and Scorpio looked almost equally unnerved by the contact. Almost. There was something else lurking in his visible eye but it was difficult to distinguish from general tiredness.

“When did you last sleep?” Jen asked.

Scorpio offered a shaky shrug, any semblance of casual nonchalance or bitterness gone. He was practically vibrating under her grip. Jen decided to rephrase the question.

“How much coffee have you had?”

“Enough to get through performing major surgery,” he said.

Jen glanced down at his suit and carefully noted that not all of the blood was dry. She sighed.

“I'm sorry.”

He met her gaze in surprise.

“Don't be.” He spread out his hands to gesture at the stains on his chest. “This is how we work.”

Jen opened her mouth and closed it. She knew exactly what he meant. It was much easier for her to ignore blood stains than it had once been.

As Scorpio started to slurp the remains of his coffee, she made to sit down on the sofa beside him, but a combination of his spluttered protests, alongside closer examination of the admittedly bacterial material, led her to awkwardly lean against the table instead. She watched him in silence, desperately trying to think of something to say.

 Scorpio finished his drink in one hefty gulp and settled the cup on the floor by his feet. There was a pregnant pause but, despite everything, Jen's mind felt devoid of conversational content.

“I wanted to be a doctor, you know,” Scorpio said eventually.

Jen nodded. Autobiographical information about Scorpio was rarely news to her these days.

“At first it was because of my eye,” he continued, hands fiddling with a frayed corner of his suit that Jen didn't remember damaging. “I wanted to learn how to fix it myself so the other kids would stop calling me a pirate.” He smiled humorlessly. “I never told mum the reason why, but I guess it wasn't hard to figure out. They stopped calling me pirate pretty soon after that, and she started teaching me how to stitch like a proper medical professional.”

 He paused for a moment, lost in memory. Jen waited. She wondered if she should move to stoke the fire again, but decided against it. There was something hypnotic about the moment that she didn't want to break. He hadn't told her this story before.

A particularly loud pop from the dying flames finally seemed to jerk Scorpio out of his reverie. He glanced down at the blood on his chest, and took a long shaky breath before speaking.

 “She was a vet before all this. I used to find it inspiring, the way she'd care for animals as much as she cared for me. I guess I wanted to follow mum's medical footsteps but in the people direction." He chuckled without humour. "I mean, mostly I didn't want to be teased as much but I figured I might as well kill two birds with one stone." He paused again and Jen frowned, unused to such gaps in his ongoing monologues. Normally Scorpio spoke as if was under some sort of time limit and being paid by the word. "When I told her that I wanted to become a doctor this was *not* what I meant.”

The light was dim enough now that it was difficult to make out his expression, but the tear wiping gesture was universal enough for Jen to recognise it for what it was. Scorpio sniffed before letting out a nervous chuckle.

“Now it's your turn to say something uncomfortably personal,” he said.

There was a long awkward silence as Jen gathered her thoughts. Suddenly she knew exactly why she was here[2] , but she could hardly bring herself to voice the reason now. She stood there opening and closing her mouth like a goldfish, suddenly thankful for the terrible lighting in the room. After several minutes of silent struggling, she opted into admitting a less strenuous personal truth.

“I'm afraid that one day I'll open my mouth and get someone killed.”

“What?”

Jen flinched at the sheer force of Scorpio’s surprise, less embarrassed by such a cowardly movement in the near-darkness of the room. With darkness came an anonymity almost as comforting as her suit had once been, and she found herself spurred on by it.

“Things generally work out better when I don't talk to people,” she added. "I'm bad at it."

She waited for a response, half wishing that she could see his face. The light was almost completely gone now but Scorpio remained worryingly silent.

“Who told you that?” he said eventually.

Jen shrugged.

“No one had to tell me. I changed schools last year and I haven't -” she trailed off, internally debating how much personal information to divulge. She could feel her hackles rising as if Megaman was beside her with his Offsted-approved look of disappointment. She rephrased. “I've only made one friend since then. I don't think he likes me very much at the moment.”

There was a moment of quiet as Scorpio mulled over this new information.

“He's a dick.”

Jen snorted at the bluntness of Scorpio’s response. He almost sounded offended.

“Sometimes,” she acknowledged.

Silence fell again but this time it didn't feel so uncomfortable.

“You talk better than you think you do,” said Scorpio, after a moment. “And you'd never let someone get hurt.”

Jen opened her mouth to argue the point but Scorpio beat her to it.

“You wouldn't. You're the best hero sidekick I've ever met. I always figured you for being the strong silent type.”

Jen squirmed uneasily.

“How many hero sidekicks have you met exactly?” she asked, trying to inject a wryness that she didn't feel into her words.

“That's beside the point,” Scorpio scoffed. “Have you ever let me and mum hurt someone?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You haven’t,” he said firmly. “You don't need to worry about getting people hurt. That's not who you are.”

Jen stared into the darkness at the spot where she knew Scorpio was sitting.

“Aren't you mad at me?” she said quietly.

“No.” A beat. “Yes.” He sighed. “I'm mad about a lot of things right now. It's difficult to pinpoint them all at once.”

Jen wanted to say something; to apologise for not distracting Megaman sooner, to warn Scorpio of the superhero's newly founded vendetta, but she knew the words would feel empty. Megaman's actions today had been warning enough, and “sorry” wouldn't fix what had happened.

“Be careful,” she said instead.

“Alwa-ys am.”

The wavering of Scorpio’s voice reminded Jen of their early fights. She instinctively reached out for where she thought his shoulder might be but pulled back as soon as she became conscious of the movement, not entirely sure if the gesture would be interpreted as comforting. She'd learned what she'd needed to learn. Now was the perfect time to slip away under the cover of darkness.

Scorpio sniffed and all thoughts of making a silent getaway were forgotten. She groped through the dark until her hand met his chest, and pulled him into a hug. Scorpio stiffened and, for one brief moment, Jen wondered if she'd done the wrong thing. What if Megaman was right? What if this sudden vulnerability was one big trap prefaced by an elaborate trail of false camaraderie?

 Scorpio leaned into the embrace and Jen's doubts melted away. She wasn't sure how long they sat like that for, him crying into her shoulder from his chair and her in an uncomfortable half crouch. The only indication of time passing was the complete disappearance of the fire's dwindling light. It felt like an eternity was passing them by.

Scorpio didn't just want out, he'd never wanted *in*. The concept was difficult for Jen to understand. She no longer approved of Megaman's methods, but she'd always approved of his mission. She had seen evil in her old neighborhood in all sorts of forms, but had been completely helpless to do anything about it prior to meeting her master.

"Why do you do it?" she asked, trying to keep her tone judgment-free as Scorpio sniffled into her shoulder.

"She's my *mum*," he said in between sobs.

Part of Jen wondered how he'd managed to keep such a huge detail of his life secret from her. He'd given her enough information for her to be able to locate him in his home, but had neglected to mention that he was directly related to a supervillain.

"Do you want to take your eyepatch off?" she asked after what felt like an eternity.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yeah but I can't see you."

Jen listened to 5 minutes of shuffling, typing and swearing until Izzy's face finally popped into view on her screen. The image seemed fuzzier than normal but the frustration on her friend's face was clear. but Jen was surprised by how tired her friend looked. Izzy usually took great care over her appearance, even when she was ill. It was strange to see the deep bags underneath her eyes.

"I need to get a new laptop," she moaned.

Jen nodded and wondered when her friend was going to tell her what was wrong. After half an hour of technology ranting, and another half hour of gushing about the upcoming concert which, admittedly, Jen was equally excited about, she finally got her answer.

"I want you to teach me how to fight."

Jen blinked. The statement had come out of nowhere; Izzy had never been one for subtlety. She waited for an explanation to follow and when none did, she asked the question on her mind.

"Okay. Why?"

"You remember Mr Neilsen?" Izzy asked.

Jen nodded with a grimace. He was the kind of teacher that she would much rather forget. RE lessons were boring enough when they weren't taught by a barely disguised adult bully. Having Mr Neilsen teach you about ethics and karma felt wrong on a fundamental level.

"He got stabbed last week on his way to school."

"Shit."

 "Megaman got there fast enough to stop him from being killed, but I don't want to rely on a stranger swooping in at the last minute to save me. I'd prefer not to get stabbed in the first place. Megaman may have superstrength but he's not omniscient. I've spent a lot of time putting in the work to get to art college; I'd like to make it there in one piece."

Izzy shivered and Jen was struck with the automatic urge to defend her ex-master. None of the arguments that came to mind were particularly useful. Despite his powers, Megaman was only human and Bunin City was big enough to keep him busy.

In the larger northern cities it was common to have superhero squads split up to cover different regions. Having powers was a rare enough occurrence to keep them on a constant lookout for new recruits to the point where it wasn't uncommon to take on unpowered sidekicks when their numbers started to deplete. Heroes were in short supply these days.

Until Megagirl, Megaman had never had that support. He couldn't do everything and suddenly Jen knew that was why he'd taken her on as his sidekick. Part of her had always known. He hadn't seen her potential; he'd been desperate, and she'd been eager to please. She'd been desperate to distract herself from her newfound loneliness and Megaman hadn't needed to persuade or convince her of anything he said before the Scorpions arrived. It had probably made it easier to throw her away in the end.

She still hadn't given him the suit back.

"Okay."

"So you'll teach me?"

"I already said okay.

“Just because my son trusts you doesn’t mean *I* will.”

         “I know. That’s why I thought I should give you this.”

         Jen handed over the piece of paper and waited for them to react. It only took a few minutes for the information to sink in.

         “It seems fair that you should know my address if I know yours. Follow me home if you want,” Jen said, trying to sound more nonchalant than she felt.

         “You realise I could kidnap your parents if I wanted to,” said the Scorpionette carefully. There was something strange about her tone and Jen knew that she was being tested.

         “They’re away for the weekend, but you’re welcome to try. I don’t think you will,” Jen replied, trying to keep her voice light and her trembling hands hidden behind her back.

         “And why is that, pray tell?”

         “Because you want me on your side. If it wasn’t for me you would be dead right now. Neither of us want that.”

         Something changed in the Scorpionette’s expression and Jen unconsciously took a step back.

         “Oh?” There was an edge to the Scorpionette’s voice now and she started to walk towards Jen menacingly. Behind her, Scorpio suddenly looks nervous. Jen suddenly remembered that the villain had most likely been unconscious for Jen’s moment on the bridge. She wouldn’t have seen what Jen had done. This was not good. “Because it seemed like you wanted that when you kidnapped my son and let that thug of a “superhero” attack us in front of a media circus. And then, when we finally manage to make it to safety look who shows up! I think you were just waiting for-“

         “Mum!”

         Scorpio grabbed the Scorpionette’s elbow.

         “I told you, just hear her out. She helped us.”

         “Did she? How do you know this isn’t one of *his* schemes? He used you to lure me out into the open like a rat. How do you know she’s anything other than his pawn?”

         Even Scorpio looked unnerved by the expression on his mother’s face and the intensity of her words. He opened his mouth to answer but Jen got there first.

         “I’m not. I’m not playing that game anymore. I’m sick of it. How can I prove it to you?”

         The Scorpionette snorted.

         “Trust is something to be earned rather than proved darling.”

         “So tell me how to earn it,” Jen said, into desperation leaking into her voice.

         “*You* can’t,” the Scorpionette spat, leaning down to directly face Jen. When she spoke her voice was dangerously quiet. “You’re lucky that I’m even letting you stand here after what you did.”

Jen looked away, unable to meet the Scorpionette’s ferocious gaze. It wasn’t as if the woman was wrong. Jen could have stepped in sooner on the bridge. She should have been faster. The Scorpionette smiled unpleasantly and straightened up.

“Leave. We’re done here.“

“Stop it.”

Jen looked up at Scorpio in surprise. For the first time in the conversation, he sounded almost as angry as his mother. It was a strange tone to hear in his voice.

“Am I *your* pawn?” he said after a moment of silence.

The Scorpionette frowned. It was difficult to make out her facial features underneath the mask, but a forehead wrinkled in that manner was easily recognisable to Jen. It reminded her all too well of Megaman and how disappointed he had looked when she last saw him.

“Of course not.”

“Then how do you know she’s his?” Scorpio asked. “Meg stopped Megaman from killing you. From killing both of us, probably. At the very least, we owe her for that.”

         Jen waited, watching the pair of them confer through facial expression alone. She couldn’t work out who was winning the silent argument but she was thankful to have at least one person on her side. She knew the Scorpionette didn’t kill but, when confronted with the woman at close quarters, the fact was easy to forget.

         Eventually, Scorpio’s mother turned back to face Jen.

         “I need time to think,” she said slowly. “I don’t know how much time. Try not to betray our location in that time.”

         Jen nodded. She wasn’t entirely sure what had just happened, but the Scorpionette’s tone was final. It was time for Jen to leave.

         She backed away towards the door, initially unwilling to wrench her eyes away from the supervillain she’d been always taught to be wary of. But then, everything was different now.

She took a deep breath, turned around and strode towards the exit. Her hands were still shaking as she reached for the doorknob. As walked out into the startlingly cold hallway she balled her hands into fists to try and limit the obviousness of the tremors. The action made her think of Megaman and, as usual, a mixture of guilt, concern and frustration started to flood her mind at the thought of him. The walk down memory lane was cut short by a hand on her shoulder. Jen froze.

         “Hey.”

         She relaxed slightly at the sound of Scorpio’s voice and turned to face him.

         “For the record, I trust you. Mum will come around. She just doesn’t know you like I do yet.”

         Jen stared at Scorpio. The relief she felt at his words felt like a betrayal of everything she had learned from Megaman. Part of her hated herself for trusting Scorpio’s words so implicitly, but another part of her was angry with her master for denying her this. Jen finally had a friend; if only he’d been a friend she’d was allowed to have in the first place. She could feel whatever remained of her carefully crafted indifference starting to split apart like shattered glass. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to cry or scream.

         “Tha-nk you,” Jen said quietly, internally cursing as her voice cracked.

She cleared her throat loudly, wishing that she could be alone again more than ever. She didn’t want to do this in front of him. Scorpio, to his credit, didn’t comment on the strangled noise she emitted in her attempt to hold back the emotion rising up in her. Scorpio rubbed her shoulder reassuringly.

         “We’ll be in touch.”

         He headed back towards the house and, as the door closed behind him, Jen couldn’t help but miss the comforting warmth of his hand.

Jen fully expected the Scorpionette and Scorpio to scout out her home as she and Megaman had done with many a potential villainous address, but the days passed and there was no sign of them. Either they were more covert than she’d given them credit for, or they had more important issues to deal with.

After a week of no obvious surveillance, Jen forgot to be nervous. Instead she found herself preoccupied once again with schoolwork. She no longer felt the hollowness that had consumed her after being dismissed by Megaman. Part of her still ached to be doing something more with the hours she spent outside of school but, at the same time, it felt oddly soothing to have time to do her homework. In the weeks after Megaman’s diagnosis it had felt almost impossible to cling onto her grades but now she could afford to focus on them, after the week she’d had, dull felt good.