Fast

“I’m not that much different from other teenagers. I think every kid goes to bed hoping that he’ll wake up with superpowers. Well, some might wish for an admissions letter to some magic school or for a police box to show up in their backyard and whisk them away. But becoming a superhero has to be the prevailing fantasy. How could it not be? They are everywhere. The TV, the movies, the bookstore. The skies, the white house, outerspace. Hell, you’re right here in front of me! And you had a choice. I didn’t.”

There was no change of expression on Captain Justice’s—Tim’s—face. We weren’t friends, yet, but he insisted I used his first name. We were going to be working together (!) from now on. And he hated the name Captain Justice. I could understand that. But Tim did not seem to understand me. As always, I pressed onward.

“I didn’t choose this life, but I didn’t exactly wake up with it either. No radioactive vat and no child about to be hit by a car. I was just lying in bed thinking about all of those embarrassing moments that build up over the course of one’s life. Will being a hero help me with that?”

No response.

“So, no. Anyway my mind moved on from not being able to explain where things went wrong to not being able to explain some other…incidents.” Tim leaned in a little closer. “I caught someone else’s phone on a roller coaster once. When it happened, I thought adrenaline had slowed time down. But it didn’t. It froze. I saw his phone. I saw the background of him and his girlfriend. I saw the text from his sidepiece. I saw the missed call from him mom. I saw the faces of everyone else on the ride. And no one else even saw the phone. I just kind of reached out and snatched it out of the air.” I mimicked the motion for Tim to see. “And then time restarted. Pretty cool, right?”

“And then you knew you had these abilities?” Tim’s interest was slight, but there.

“No, I went through a couple of other memories in my mind. Do you want to hear about those?”

“No, I’m more concerned with what you did once you were aware of your powers. It is a unique experience, and like all unique experiences, shows you the real quality of a man, or rather, any person. Some people think desperation is what truly brings out who we are, but I disagree. We all do the same things when we are desperate. If starving, we will steal food. When our families are at risk, we will all kill for them. We might justify these differently to ourselves. Some might take longer to break than others. But in the end, all are the same. But when afforded opportunities, that is when we can see a person for them. On a speed date, you aren’t asking someone what they would do if their daughter were being held at gunpoint. You ask them what they would do if they had two whole days free, with no consequences. So I’m interested to know, what exactly did you do when you realized you could move faster than the eye could see?”

I didn’t realize when I had begun digging underneath my fingernails, but I made a conscious effort to stop. I looked down and saw a graveyard of discarded nails on Captain Justice’s leather couch. I swept them away before he could notice, then I took a deep breath and launched into my speech. “I have always wanted to be a superhero, but that does not mean I have always been one. I have done a lot of things I am not proud of. I have squandered my powers. I haven’t saved everyone I could have. Everyone I should have.” I wiped the sweat dripping from my arm pit. “Even worse than my inaction, I have used my powers for evil.” There was no hiding anything from *him.* “I have cheated on tests, I have looked under girls’ skirts, I have robbed banks. But if you give me a chance-“

Captain Justice furrowed his brow. “Slow down, you’re going too fast. I’m just getting this high pitched whine. You’re going to have to start again.”

I took in another deep breath. Slow, slow, *slow.* I can do this. Micrometer by micrometer, I began to open my mouth. What was I going to say again? Captain Justice—Tim, my idol, was staring back at me, waiting for something. Right, my speech! I started over again, this time making sure to take extra care to slow down. When I was done, Tim looked at me with a stern look of acceptance. Well, at least understanding.

“I did not understand a word you just said kid. But I’m going to show you something.” Tim pulled out a MacBook Pro with an *Of Course I’m a Feminist* sticker and three other ones I did not recognize. After typing an absurdly long password, he handed me the laptop, with a video already ready to be played. I recognized the bank being shown. Reluctantly, I hit play.

I walked up to the bank like I thought a reggie would. On video, it still seemed too fast. I cased the joint with my super speed, and found a wall I could break through if I ran fast enough. So I do. On the other side, the score. I remembered everything. I remembered counting every dollar, every cent I was about to steal. I remembered dropping and picking up the first bag over a hundred times. I remember ferrying the bags back and forth between my house. Of course Captain Justice couldn’t see all of this. For one, he didn’t have X-ray vision. I doubt x-ray vision even worked on footage anyway. And I ferried the money too fast for even x-ray vision to see. But what did happen on the screen was a woman approaching the ATM, and a man dressed in black approaching the woman.

He brandished a knife that I had not realized he had. He made the usual hand gestures, and she withdrew money for him, as usual. But then something unusual happened. I could still feel the crunch of my knuckles on his jaw. His face contorting with the force of the blow. His last breath as it escaped past his broken teeth. I didn’t hear the words play, but I could still remember them. “Ma’am, are you okay?” I asked, shaking.

“You saved my life.” I hadn’t, she was only being robbed. But I was not in the mood to argue. Her eyes were a nice, gorgeous green, but she wore too much mascara. Most of it was streaming down her face, but it was still caked as thick as a southern biscuit on her eyelashes. She peeled off some cash from the stack in her hand. “Take this.” She held it out, her hands barely extending past the sleeve of her coat. “Please.”

“No, I couldn’t.” I looked at her coat again. The zipper was barely functioning. Her pantyhose had holes in them. Her watch was broken—or was I just moving too fast? I looked in her wallet, all she had was three crumpled dollar bills. I looked at the money in her hand, it was only a hundred and twenty dollars. I ran back inside and grabbed a bag for her. “Please.”

“What are you?” she asked.

I held my finger up to my lips. “It will be our little secret.” And then I sped off. The woman pulled out a stack from the bag I had given it and counted it. When she was done, she bit her lips, and then divided it evenly into five stacks. She placed a stack on the windshield of the cars and then—

SNAP. “Are you listening to me?” Captain Justice had switched into his booming *Justice Voice*. Without the mask, it was easier to accept his face as Tim’s, but that voice, that was the Captain’s.

“Yeah, I was just watching the woman.” Tim prompted me to say more with a hum. “She was the real hero that day.” I looked back at the screen, but she was gone. All that was left were the cars and the money. And the body.

“Why did you kill that man?”

“He was robbing that woman.”

“And this means that he deserved to die?”

I stopped myself from picking at my nails again. “You heard the woman. I saved her life.”

“I think we both know that isn’t true.” Captain Justice shifted in his seat. “Why did you kill that man.”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you mean to kill him?”

I looked at the wall. It was decorated with various motivational posters. “No,” I admitted. “I didn’t think I hit him *that* hard.”

“But you did.” He shifted again in his seat and leaned in closer still. “Look, you want to go around robbing banks that’s your business. You want to go around stopping criminals, more power to you. But whatever you do, you should be doing it because it’s what *you* want to do. You use your powers, not the other way around.”

I nodded my head. “Captain Justice—Tim, I have always wondered: what powers do you have?”

He shook his head. “None. I’m not a super hero, kid. But you can be. It won’t happen overnight, though. Train, find your limitations. Make plans and execute them.” He stood up and opened the door for me. “I will be in touch. Hope you do good in the meantime.”

Do *well*. Regular people do well, Superman does good. A smile crept across my face. And so do I.

I spent the next month with no further contact from Tim. In the beginning, I couldn’t really blame him. There was a new gang in town, and their head seemed to be a doozy. They were always one step ahead of Captain Justice, and like ten ahead of the local police. Things were getting out of hand, and it was clear that Tim could no longer handle things on his own. And yet, he never called me in.

So I just kept doing what I always did, but better. Stopped muggers, put out fires, even returned the odd balloon. Except I had trained. My attacks were nonlethal. My rescues were nondestructive. And my newfound efficacy allowed me to reduce crimes to levels they hadn’t been for a while. But it wasn’t enough. Not as long as the Shadow gang still operated. So I decided to stop them.

I held my phone in my hand, with Tim’s number already dialed. He told me to use it only if I was in trouble, and that’s exactly where I was headed. But I knew he wouldn’t want me working this beat, or he would have called me. And he was just a reggie. I couldn’t risk him getting hurt if I was going to take the fight to them. I f he could have stopped them, he would have already. So I put down my phone and turned on my police scanner.

“Carjacking just took place, downtown, need a unit to respond.” This wasn’t the Shadow Gang, carjacking was too far beneath them, but I stillS debated running down there quickly. The night was young, I could find the stolen car and still have plenty of time to take down the Shadow Gang. But what if I missed the call on the scanner? I couldn’t risk it. “Armed Robbery taking place near Summerville, any available units advised to go to 223 Swan Street.” This seemed more like their MO, but Summerville was too far outside of their area of operations. But if I didn’t help, someone could get hurt. The police scanner wasn’t portable, and I needed a way to listen to it on the go. I needed walkie-talkies.

Normally I go to *Desmond’s* for this kind of thing—he illegally breeds pugs with noses too short to breathe so I don’t feel as bad stealing from him—but his place was closed and he wasn’t such a terrible person that I felt alright stealing from him and causing property damage. I am no double dipper. However, this means I had to go further down to *Electronics Emporium*, which was open 24/7 but had a pretty girl behind the counter at nights. I forbade myself from asking for her number until I stopped stealing from her shop, but here I go stealing again. I hoped the cause was worth it.

The *Emporium* was empty, save for Jessica. She was wearing her trademark ripped jeans and the usual amount of makeup. Nothing I hadn’t seen before, so I kept running. I found the walkie-talkies near the phones and took two sets and a box of batteries just in case. I ran back to my apartment building and then snuck into my neighbor’s place to borrow some tape. I taped down the button of one walkie-talkie and set it down next to the scanner, and then took the other one with me after making sure they were on the same frequency. Plan: executed. Captain Justice would be proud.

By the time I had arrived, an undercover cop was already there and waiting for backup. If I didn’t move fast things could get messy. One cop already complicated things. I couldn’t risk him getting caught up in the crossfire. I ran up to the car to see who was in it—Jefferson. That made things a little easier. I knocked on the window.

Jefferson spilled his Monster over himself and then rolled down the window. “Jesus Christ, I told you to stop sneaking up on me like that. I unlocked the passenger door and sat down.

“Like this?”

“Fat Buddha! Yes, exactly like that.” He closed his eyes and massaged the bridge of his nose. Jefferson was a young cop with an old cop’s name and demeanor. At the station Christmas party he had won the award *Oldest Soul*. Nobody else got an award. But he was spry enough when it counts. We had bumped into each other four times, and on the second occasion he had even saved my life. After that I told him my story. He had seen Captain Justice twice, so he assured me he was qualified for the cop half of a superhero duo. And he hadn’t let me down yet.

“So what’s the deal?”

“Armed robbery. Five men. Two floors. Don’t you listen to that scanner I gave you?”

“I just listen for the code and the location, and then I take off.”

“Took you long enough to get here.”

“I had some errands to run first.”

“Long as you’re here now. Camera spotted some heavy machinery before they took it out. Lt. Jenkins says it’s a drill, but an older model which is why they are taking so long to crack the bank vault open.”

I nodded my head and turned down the deBarges he had playing the background. “How far away is back up.”

“Not far.”

His scanner chirped up, with my walkie-talkie repeating it with a slight delay. “We’re about five minutes away.”

“So, far.” I picked at my fingernails and then shook my hands out. “I’ll be back in a flash.”

“Wait,” Jefferson reached out to grab my arm so I let him. “You going out with that thing?” He gestured to my walkie-talkie. “If that goes off and one of them hears it, you’re toast. You’re fast, not bulletproof.”

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you that I’m faster than any bullet. I just want to make that clear. I’m not about to go out like some bitch to a mugger with a handgun. Which is why I’m leaving this here.” I handed my walkie-talkie to him. Better safe than sorry, and I couldn’t even begin to imagine the look on Captain Justice’s face if he heard I died from such a stupid mistake.

I opened the door and cased the place. There were actually six men, one was hiding in a corner with a sawed off to ambush the first person he saw. Of course, that wasn’t me. The drill was malfunctioning and two of the guys were working on fixing it. Patty was right about it taking forever, but once they got it up and running again it wouldn’t be long until they were in. Now was the time to act. The sawed off thug was in too good of a position—tackling him head on would be an unnecessary risk, so I’ll save him for last. The two at the drill were distracted, which made them easy takedowns, but if the noises from the repair attempts stopped, the others might get suspicious. Best to take out the three on patrol before while they were still focused on getting in the vault.

I found the first one in the camera room on the second floor. He was meticulously checking both the camera feeds he had hacked into and the spoofed video they were sending to the security system. Luckily, Captain Justice had told me to never stop moving, so I had never slowed down enough for him to see me on camera. Or when I knocked his lights out. The second one was in the lobby of the bank, making action poses with his gun. They weren’t bad, but his face had too much acne for him to ever be a movie star. Probably why he had to choose this line of work. Damn shame, but my pity never caused me to pull a punch. The last one was in the first floor bathroom. His pants fell to his ankles. His piss fell to the toilet. His body fell to the floor.

The drill guys were going to be tricky. They were not facing each other directly, but neither was so distracted that they would not notice the other one going down. I would have to take them out simultaneously. I wiped the sweat from my brow. I ran towards the drill, grabbing the bit and spinning it as I slid under the apparatus.

“See? I told you I could get it working again,” the one on the left said.

The one on the right didn’t say anything, because I had knocked them both out while they were distracted.

Now that I had bested the rest, it was time to wrestle with the best. Any second now, the sawed-off guy would come out of his fortified area and look for the source of the disturbance. And then I would take him out.

Any second now.

I knocked the drill over to grab his attention, just in case he hadn’t realized that I had showed up and taken out the rest of his squad.

“I know you’re out there!” he announced.

“So why don’t you come out here, too, and we can settle this like men!” I yelled.

“Because I’m not an idiot!” he yelled back. A good response. I really needed to get this over with so I could go back to listening for attacks from the Shadow Gang.

“I got all day!” I announced. I dug at my fingernails for what seemed like an eternity. This guy needed to go down, now. I rounded the corner where he was hiding, but didn’t see him. I paused and looked closer. The bastard was hiding, prone behind a pile of duffle bags. Unfortunately for him, his muzzle was sticking out, alerting me to his position. I charged forward, ready to wrap this heist up and get back to my regularly scheduled program.

That’s when the muzzle shook.

I was too slow to reach him in time. I was too fast to turn around and round the corner again. The hallway was too narrow for me to sidestep it. There were too many pellets for me dodge. I accepted my fate, but my legs didn’t. I found myself airborne, hurling towards the wall on my left. I caught on to what my body was doing, and bounced off of that wall above the shotgun spread. I twisted my body upside down, and rebounded off the ceiling into the last thug. All hostiles neutralized.

I collapsed to the ground exhausted. I sat there, catching my breath and watching the beads of sweat drip from my forehead onto the bank’s clean marble floors. I listened for any reports on the Shadow Gang, or notices of backup arriving on the police scanner. Then I remembered I had left my walkie-talkie with Jefferson.

“Shit,” I muttered. I rounded up all of the would-be bank robbers and subdued them with some zip ties I had found in their duffle bags. I left the police my calling card and headed outside to check back in with Jefferson, but by the time I got out there, he was gone. He at least had the decency to leave my walkie-talkie behind, so I picked that up and ran home. I normally kept my crime fighting habits local and less life threatening, so I was pretty beat when I got home. I turned on the police scanner and then flopped on my bed. There was no mention of the Shadow Gang, even in my dreams.

I was up the next morning at 6 A.M. sharp. I had quit my job after meeting with Captain Justice, but I kept my alarm settings because I was already sleeping more than crime was. In the mornings though, it was less vigilante work and more superhero work. Well, sort of. My costume was still in the early design phase, so I could never slow down enough to inspire the people of my city. Any heroics that were noticed were reported as acts of God in the same tabloids that still think Brad is going to get back with Jennifer Aniston because he didn’t spit on her at the Oscars.

What the Shadow Gang did made the front page of the *Post* though.

I stepped out onto my doorstep and thought I must be dreaming the headline I saw. *SENATE CANDIDATE VICTORIA VICKERS ASSASSINATED! THE SHADOW GANG TAKING CREDIT.* This is where I should have been. Instead I was protecting a bank? Vickers represented the other half of what cleaning up streets looked like. And much like Tim, she hadn’t needed powers to commit her life to justice. But now that life was over. And hers had not been the only life that had been touched. There were a list of civilians who had been killed as collateral damage. And some who had only been injured. One of which was not a civilian at all.

I raced to the hospital as fast as I could, but once in there, I encountered too much foot traffic to move as freely as I would have liked. This one would have to be done by the books, so I found a nurse and posed as a reporter.

“Excuse me, miss, I’m with the *Post*. My boss wants me to follow up on the Vickers Assassination story, so I’m here to talk to one of the witnesses of the event. Do you know where I can find a Timothy Truman?”

“Whoa, slow down there champ.”

“Sorry, was I speaking too fast? Excuse me, miss, I’m with the *Post.*”

“No, I heard what you said. But you can’t go running into patients’ rooms just because you’re a reporter.”

“But miss, I really need this story. You have seen what the Shadow Gang is doing to this city. And what Vickers could have done for it.”

The nurse bit her lip. “Look, I want to help you, I really do, but Mr. Truman is too injured to random visitors he doesn’t know.”

“How about one he does?”

“I beg your pardon.”

I leaned in closer, right next to her ear. This deception was getting me nowhere. In a hushed voice only she could hear, I whispered, “I’m Timmy’s partner. I need to see him to make sure he’s okay.” Her eyes grew softer, but remained skeptical. “He’s not really in a profession where he can be out, not yet, so I need you to keep this between us.”

She looked around nervously and then gave me a slight nod. “Follow me. But you have to be quiet about this, as well.”

“No problem for me, miss.”

The nurse walked painfully slow. By the time we got to Tim’s room, half of me thought he would be dead. But he was awake, and expecting me.

“Don’t you normally get to places a little faster than this?”

I shrugged. “The path to recovery is a long one. You can’t always be in and out as fast as you want to, with all of the nurses in the hallways rushing to wherever there’s a problem.”

Tim was in a neck brace, so he couldn’t nod, but he blinked twice to signal that he got my meaning. His face was bloody and a little burnt, but his left arm looked like he would be lucky if it had not suffered permanent nerve damage. The burns streaked up his arm and no doubt continued onto his chest. When he moved his eyes let out little droplets of moisture, and he made barely audible grunts.

“Who did this to you?”

“Who do you think?” I nodded. “They have got a new player in town.”

“That may be, but I’m sure he can’t keep up with our star player. If you—the coach, ever let him off the bench.”

Captain Justice grabbed my hand with his good one. “Not this time, kid. This new player…let’s just say he’s on a real hot streak. I’d stay away from the games.” He did his best to turn and look me in the eye. “Please.”

“No can do, Tim. I’m a super fan. Besides,” I said while turning around heroically. “I’ve got season tickets.” I left his room and the nurse escorted me back downstairs to the lobby. I was sure Captain Justice would understand my decision to continue pursuing the Shadow Gang. It was one I knew he had had to make before. My other decision would be trickier to explain. I needed to devote all of my time into stopping the Shadow Gang from now until they were behind bars. So no more cats in trees, no more fires, no more bank robberies. I sprinted back home and turned on the police scanner.

I didn’t get a bite until around 10 P.M. “Arson in progress, 10th Street, Northwest. All available units respond. All unavailable units get available real soon. Shadow Gang responsibility likely, be advised.” Oh I was available alright.

I rushed to 10th Street, mentally preparing for a fight. Judging by my conversation with Captain Justice, one of the members of the gang had a flamethrower. Now that I thought about it, I didn’t know any of the members of the Shadow Gang, so I wouldn’t be able to look out for the new guy. I also didn’t know how they fought. I was sure it would be fine, though. I just have to stay in the moment and focus—on the pile of ash that was in front of me. None of the other buildings were on fire, so this had to have been the one that was phoned in. And I doubted that there was another 10th Street around that I didn’t know about. There were still some flames smoldering. The ash even smelled fresh, like the air after you have just tossed a log onto the campfire, rather than the fire pit when you woke up the next day.

I sat down in what I imagined used to be the living room, feeling the soot between my fingers and hoping that the building was all that it was made of. When Jefferson finally arrived he drove straight onto the lawn. I saw him have some sort of argument with his partner, and he motioned for her to stay in the car. He slammed the door on his way out, and charged right up to me.

“Odin’s beard, what happened here?” He kicked a poof of ash my way. “Where were you, running errands again?”

“Nope, I came here as soon as I could?”

“Then why weren’t you able to stop this?”

“That’s what I was hoping to ask you. I started running for this place the attosecond the call went out.”

Jefferson furrowed his brow and bent down to take a closer look on the ash. “Any chance the place burned down before you got here?” he asked, rolling the soot between his fingers.

“Not bloody likely.” He looked at me, confused. I went over and put a hand on his shoulder. “This place was already gone by the time it was called in.”

“They have got a man on the inside.”

“They’ve got a man on the inside.” I picked up a stick and threw it back into the rubble. “Now what?”

He shrugged. “Do you know who lived here?” I shook my head. “Charlotte Rainiers.” “Fuck.” Rainiers had been running for District Attorney, and was a close ally of Vickers. Together, with one other guy, they formed what was known as the New Triumvirate. The Triumvirate was made up of people throughout the political spectrum, to prove how committed each one was with working both sides of the aisle. True unity was the biggest threat to whatever old crony happened to be in charge, so I had no doubts of who the biggest benefactors of the Shadow Gang’s assassinations was.

“So we know who they’re going after next,” I said.

Jefferson nodded, slowly at first, but then with more vigor. “We’ve got to protect him.”

“I don’t know about *we,* dude. This is the Shadow Gang. They took out Captain Justice.”

“They took out the Captain?”

I rushed to change the subject. “Besides, are we even still a team? You left me behind at that bank!” If he had brought me with him, Tim would still be healthy and the Shadow Gang would already be in jail.

“Did you find the walkie-talkie I left you?”

“Yeah, it was my walkie-talkie.”

“Did you look at the note I left you on the back?”

Shit. “No,” I admitted.

“Well Ok then. Besides, they were already gone when we got there.”

“We’ll just have to be one step ahead of them. What time did that happen?”

“Around 9.” He held out his hand. “So we know when they’ll be there.”

I grasped his hand. “They won’t get away this time.”

I spent the next day watching YouTube videos about how fire worked. There was nothing too interesting, but I wanted to be prepared to go against this guy. When I was done with that, I went and visited all of the known Shadow Gang crime scenes. The earlier ones were pretty run of the mill, but around two weeks ago some scorch marks started appearing. I checked with the few flamethrower vendors I could find, but none of them said they had sold a flamethrower around then. But all of them said that it wasn’t out of the ordinary for someone to build one on their own. But to get one working that well, that took a real genius. And that’s what I had to go up against.

At 8:57 I jetted over to Doyle’s mansion. His grass was so green it was the other side, but I doubted that there were any gardening tools in his garage. For all of his talk of bipartisanship, he still fell into a lot of the trappings of his party members. Hopefully he wouldn’t fall into the same trap that his fellow members of the Triumvirate had. There was no sign of Jefferson—hopefully he had taken the advice that I hadn’t and just stayed away. Things were about to heat up.

Ten minutes later, and things had still not heated up. I had already cased the perimeter fifty-seven times and was bored just waiting. All of the doors were locked, and barging in meant loudly announcing my presence to deadly enemies or a peaceful family. And the windows—even if they were locked, I might be able to get a peek inside. If anyone was in danger, they would be on the second floor where the bedrooms were. Captain Justice always taught me to clear the civilians first, so I backed up to get a running start and then ran along the walls to check out the upper story windows. The first room was pink and frilly, with Disney Princesses on all of the walls. Must have belonged to Doyle’s daughter. Her brother had recently invaded it, as evidenced by all of the dinosaur toys on the floor. There were a variety of bathrooms and guest rooms, each with their own theme. The master bed and bath had an oriental vibe to them, and both nightstands had bonsai trees on them. But besides them, there were no signs of life on this floor. With any luck, the family was out of the house. I moved down to the lower floors.

The dining room had large bay windows that opened out to the forest in the backyard, so I went there first. The curtains were drawn, but I was able to maneuver myself to see inside. Robert Doyle was there sitting at his table, surrounded by several members of what I could only assume to be the Shadow Gang. Luckily, the flamethrower guy wasn’t with them, but if I didn’t move fast, Doyle was done. Because of the hostage, I still couldn’t barge in. It was time to try something new.

There was one day I was particularly sick, such that I was still in bed when all of the kids on my block started gathering for the school bus. Their voices grew to a prepubescent cacophony, and I couldn’t go back to sleep. I thought about how odd it was that even with a wall between the kids and me, the sound still made it through. I looked up some YouTube videos about how this worked, and what it boiled down to was that the sound waves were vibrating at such a frequency that they made it through the wall. I hypothesized that I could do the same thing. When I told Tim about it, he reminded me that I would have to vibrate much faster—when sound goes through walls, not all of it makes it through. He advised me to try this in a low pressure environment. Preferably with a digit I didn’t mind losing. I never did.

I took a deep breath and began to vibrate my hand. Faster. Faster. Slowly, I moved it towards the wall, pinky first. I vaguely remembered something about pinkies being essential to balance, but by that time my pinky was already through. I pulled it back out and examined it. Looked fine. Smelled fine. Tasted fine. I tried this time with my whole hand. It felt like I was pushing water out of the way and moving my hand through it. Good enough for me. I vibrated my whole body and walked through the door.

“I still can’t believe Vickers and Rainiers are dead,” Doyle said. Poor guy.

“They were just the first domino to fall,” responded a voice. “Soon it will be the whole city.” The sounds of glass clinking.

Another voice chimed in. “More dominoes still need to topple over before then. That’s why we came to you in the first place.”

So, the Shadow Gang needed something from Doyle? It all made sense. They had come to Vickers and Rainiers with the proposal first, and then burned down their households, themselves included, when they refused. If Doyle had more brains than balls, he would accept the offer and give me more time to work with.

“And you came to the right place,” he assured them. I started stretching out my calves as I prepared to do one last scouting run. Couldn’t risk cramps against these guys. “I could do everything that you guys wanted. But—” No ifs, ands, ors, or buts against these guys Doyle, what are you doing? I didn’t know how long these guys would give Doyle after he refused them, but I guessed that we were quickly approaching arson o’clock. As Captain Justice always chastised me about, acting fast wasn’t just about being fast, but about acting before other people had worked out the outcome. I launched myself in and pulled him out of there, tossing him on the lawn.

“—remember our price,” Doyle said to me.

“Sorry, sir, I’m a super hero, I don’t take payment.”

“Who are you?”

“Good question. I don’t have a name yet, or a costume.”

“But you do have a face. I’ll remember this.”

I nodded. “Are you okay sir?”

“I was before you barged in. I was just about to work out a deal!”

“No need for any deals either, sir. I’m going to go take down these guys, Once and for all. I went back into the dining room. There was plenty of space for me to work with. I leaned against the doorway and got the goons’ attention. “Any other Doyle family members here?”

“No,” their big, bearded boss bellowed. “We made sure that we did this when they were out of town.”

“How nice of you.” I feigned a kow-tow but dropped into a runner’s stance. Before he knew it, my knee was in his jaw like an in-grown hair and he went flying out the bay window. I whirled around to face the remaining three. One of the guys had already had his gun ready to go when I first entered the room, and by now was firing in my general location. Unlucky for him, his gun only fired bullets one at a time, so I weaved through them like a Lamborghini weaves through Dodge Caravans. I grabbed his gun and then busted him in the gut. By the third guy, I was out of metaphors, so I just socked him quick in the nose and down he went. The last guy didn’t even have a gun, he just held up his hands as if they could him from me. It was pitiful, but I wasn’t in the mood for mercy. These guys didn’t show any mercy to Vickers or Rainiers, and they damn sure didn’t show any to Tim. This would be the easiest knockout of my superhero career.

Unless the guy could shoot fire out of his hands.

I reeled backwards a couple of feet before remembering to dodge roll to my right. The flames bellowed past where my face had been seconds before. I looked at him again to make sure I was accurately assessing the situation, and, sure enough, this fucker was spewing fucking flames out of his fucking fingers. He wasn’t the flamethrower guy, he was the flamethrower.

My whole world glowed bright red with heat, and smoke began to fill up the room. Portraits were falling off the wall, wood was cracking. Fireflower kept spewing out more and more fire, bathing the whole house in it as he backed into a corner. His output of flames had increased to such a wide range that there was no longer a safe route for even me to take. The whole place was going to come down, and there was nothing I could do about it. I ran out of the house.

I coughed until my throat was hoarse while Doyle shouted and waved his hands frantically. The front door had completed its evolution into the Gates of Hell, but I hadn’t used it the first time I entered the house either. I ran around to the dining room and jumped at where Fireflower was standing, vibrating my molecules midair like a hummingbird and tackling him to the ground inside. I cracked the back of his head with a quick people’s elbow and he was out for the count.

“You’re fired!” I exclaimed to an empty, burning house.

I stood up to run back outside and a bear trap sprung on my right foot. Or at least it felt like one. The soles of both my shoe and my foot were missing pieces. I looked back and saw them grafted onto the wall. I had stopped vibrating too soon. I transferred my weight onto one leg and hopped out of the building. I was glad I had already taken care of all the bad guys.

“Oh, yea, of course,” Doyle yelled, throwing up his hands and rolling his eyes. “First you burn down my home and then you come hopping out like a fucking flamingo.”

“Sorry about your house, there was this dude who could spit fire out of his hands. Don’t worry, I knocked him out though.”

“You knocked out Damian and left him in there? Are you just going to let my friend die?”

“Friend?”

“You’re right, kid. Associate. And a worthless one at that if he got upstaged by some Usain Bolt wannabe.”

“You were working with him?”

Doyle snapped his fingers in front of my eyes. “Guess that brain didn’t get super speed, huh?”

“You killed Vickers and Rainiers?”

“And I still can’t believe I’m finally rid of those peasants.”

“You were the triumvirate!”

“Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. Two politicians and a self-proclaimed superhero and none of you ever picked up a history book.”

“You’re going to jail for a very long time. Or maybe not so long, if you catch my drift.”

“Why? You got a voice recorder on you?” I kept my face neutral but my tense fists betrayed me. Doyle just smirked back at me. “Didn’t think so, kid. Shame you had to kill Damian.”

“I didn’t kill him.”

He laughed and pointed back at the fire. “You going back in there, kid? Anyways, now I have to find another superpowered freak to run my operation. Try not to manslaughter that one too quickly, okay? He’s gonna have a lot of people to kill first.” He started walking away. “Speaking of which, I think I’m going to pay your vigilante friend at the hospital a visit. If you like saying goodbyes, you might want to get there first.”

I stood there staring at him. And then I stared into the madness that was the fire.

The next day, Captain Justice called.

“Hey son, you did the right thing by not getting involved in this Shadow Gang business. Shame about what happened to Doyle, though.”

“Yeah, about that Captain.”

“Tim.”

“Tim. I was there… and let’s just say we won’t have to worry about the Shadow Gang anymore.”

“Son, you were there? What happened to Doyle?”

“I wasn’t able to defeat that flame guy in time and get him out.”

“What do I always tell you? Civilians first.” I heard him sigh over the phone. “But you are still learning. I’m just glad you’re okay. And thank you for covering for me this past month. I got in deep with this Shadow Gang stuff, but the people still need someone to look up to. That’ll be you one day. And try to move on from this whole Doyle business. Always got to be looking towards the next step.”

I added more shading to the costume design I was working on. “Oh believe me, Tim. I am.”