CWTP COMICS PRESENTS...!



PROTECTORS! (VOLUME ONE)

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(VOLUME ONE)

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FEATURING:

PROTECTORS! (ISSUES 1 TO 42)

WITH SPECIAL GUEST CHARACTERS

CAPTAIN SUSAN KENNEDY
(DAUGHTER OF MARS)
&
GEORGE SEWELL (LAST FREE SPIRIT)

WARNING!

THIS BOOK IS INTENDED FOR ADULT READERS. IT CONTAINS VIOLENCE, PROFANITY, AND SEXUAL CONTENT. READER DISCRETION IS ADVISED. A FULL LIST OF ALL CONTENT WARNINGS IS PROVIDED AT THE END OF THE BOOK.

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CONTENT WARNINGS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PROTECTORS!

Issue One – Antoine

JANUARY 2017: LOS ANGELES

My teammates have no idea where I am tonight.

Today was the fourth anniversary of Wally's death. Katarina and Jason have dragged Tim out to the theatre to try and take his mind off things. They've all got tickets for a musical – I think it's something by Andrew Lloyd Webber. I didn't ask them for any of the details, because I didn't want to risk them trying to persuade me to tag along.

There's something far more important that I need to do.

The other Protectors all think that I'm just busy fine tuning my newest suit of power armour; the extra shiny gold one with short sleeves to allow for the temperatures here in California, and its corresponding pair of ornate gold bracers. Like all of my other armour, it houses a lot more technology than might be anticipated. And it looks awesome next to the deep blue and red charmeuse velvet of my cape, too; which is admittedly a priority for me.

Tim says that it looks classy. Jason says that it makes me look like an out of place extra from whatever the latest movie set in ancient Rome is. Katarina says that I need to settle on a costume and have done with it.

Opinions aside, the suit has actually been ready to use for ten days now. I even took it out for a test flight. Did a quick loop around the city limits, and then stopped by my Grandma Molly's house to help celebrate her ninetieth

birthday. The rest of her coven threw her a surprise birthday party, and I brought the cake.

She was so happy that day.

I haven't told the other Protectors about it yet, because I don't want them to get involved, but Grandma Molly was brutally murdered in her home a week ago; just two days after her birthday. The authorities have swept it all under the rug; claiming that it was a home invasion. They say there isn't any evidence that can help identify who did it. But that's all a bunch of bull crap. Grandma Molly's coven and I all know what really happened. It's the same exact thing that happened to both of my parents. And the very same set of monsters are behind it too.

First, they murdered my dad, when I was five years old. That time, they made it look like an aneurysm. Then they murdered my mom; a few days

before I turned sixteen. They disguised her cause of death as previously undiagnosed blood cancer. By then, she'd taken steps to keep me from being targeted by those responsible. Thanks to her spell work, they can't harm me directly unless I choose to try fighting them. Up until now, out of respect for my mom, and her sacrifice, I've chosen not to do that. But now it's time for me to act. Before anybody else I care about is targeted.

I'm in full costume tonight. Anybody who happens to glance up and see me flying along here will just assume that I'm out on patrol. There goes Kickstart; looking for evil doers, and helping keep the city safe, just like he always does! And, to be fair, technically speaking, they'd be right about that.

The Del Drachi Infernali crime family are the highest level of evil doers. Killing every single one of them will undoubtedly help to keep the city

considerably safer. And quite a few other places too, I'm sure. They're a global threat, after all. Kind of like the mafia, only with blood magic. Spells to create a massive blood clot deep within a man's brain, and then to rupture it. Spells to turn a woman's blood into literal poison inside her veins.

Spells to rip another woman's entire blood supply out of her through her pores, before using it to beat her hard enough to shatter every bone in her body before she died.

What a legacy I share.

My mom, Julietta, sat me down a couple of months before she was murdered. She told me everything about her family lineage; all the secrets that she'd kept from me, and that she'd convinced Grandma Molly to keep from me. How she was born a Del Drachi Infernali, but fell in love with

my dad: mechanical engineer Lionel Kratz. How she ran away from her family to marry him and take his name, and then to have me. How she'd always tried her best to keep me from developing the same powers that she had. Evil powers, Mom called them. Gifted to the Del Drachi Infernali bloodline centuries ago; by a dragon, or maybe a demon. Maybe both. She wasn't sure on the finer details. What she was sure of, was that she'd failed.

Along with my mom's warm bronze complexion, jet black hair, and dark brown eyes, and my dad's rugged build, I also inherited a mix of both of my parents' powers, plus a sneaky little extra from Grandma Molly's side of things. Blood, steel, and far worse, was how Mom wanted to put it, but Grandma Molly said that it was too dramatic, and not to go scaring me off being myself. As a natural redhead until age declared otherwise, she did insist on taking all the credit for my

stereotypically wild Irish curls, though! Apparently, Grandad Charles – who died long before I was born, and whose lifelong abiding hatred of cameras meant that there are no photos of him – was pretty much identical in looks to my dad as a young man: tall, burly, and fair haired, with greyish blue eyes the same as Grandma Molly's. But neither of them ever had a goatee, so I guess that part's all me! That, and my stubborn refusal to let my hair just do whatever it wants, instead of keeping it slicked back. Grandma Molly always used to roll her eyes about me doing that. Then she'd gift me more hair gel every birthday and Christmas.

I'm getting *way* off track here, sorry. The point is, I know that the Del Drachi Infernali crime family are the ones who attacked my family. I know that they've done so twice before now, too. And I know that they won't ever stop coming after the people I care about. Not until they finally get what they want.

Namely, my death at their hands.

Too bad for them that I'm not feeling very self-sacrificing tonight.

Like I said, it's been a week since the attack. I've spent five and a half days of that time poring over old books and ancient scrolls. A great number of which I deeply regret ever having read, but needs must. And anyhow, it was all worth it in the end.

I found a spell that nobody else has dared to cast in over a millennium.

Want to tag along and see me use it?

Yeah, of course you do! Who wouldn't, am I right?

Anyhow, that's the house down there. The neogothic mansion looming at the very outskirts of the city. The one with its own cemetery out back. You know; for ease of access, and so on. After all, blood magic encompasses magic that affects the dead.

I swoop down and land right in the middle of the front lawn. Other than the moonlight, it's pitch dark out here, but there are plenty of lights on inside. I can hear opera music drifting out from a set of open French doors over to my right. And there are voices, too; speaking in a mix of English, Italian, and Latin. People talking and laughing with one another.

Sounds like there's quite the party going on here tonight. I think it's time for me to crash it.

It's cold here in Los Angeles at this time of the year. A thin layer of frost crunches beneath my boots as I stride towards the mansion. The sound of it is enough to alert the fifteen sharply dressed and heavily armed men whose job is murdering would-be intruders on sight. They all mob up immediately, and jog across the gravel driveway towards the edge of the lawn; levelling their firearms at me as they come.

I wave my left hand curtly in their direction. A pulse of technokinetic energy surges from my fingertips, and arcs through the cold night air. It connects with the assorted weapons being aimed at me almost instantly; causing the firing pins to jam, and the ammunition to eject itself harmlessly. Three seconds after that, the energy reaches the rest of the technology that my assailants have on them.

Watches.

Phones.

Pagers.

Earpieces.

A couple of pacemakers.

The results are messy, but effective. I walk on through the remains, and then make my way carefully up the polished – and therefore currently slippery – black marble steps that lead from the frozen lawn onto the patio.

By now, my boots are spattered with blood and brain matter. This draws considerable attention from the first two of the partygoers to notice me. It's a pair of young men, very probably brothers to judge by their overall similarity in looks. I suspect that they've been sent to investigate what's behind all the agonised screaming and subsequent deathly silences out here.

One of them pulls out a gun. This time, I don't even bother gesturing. I don't need to anyhow; it's just a silly little habit of mine. The technokinetic pulse always knows exactly when I need it to activate, as well as what I want it to do.

The man with the gun screams as his wristwatch explodes; obliterating his left hand in the process. His gun has already disarmed itself. He screams even louder when the phone in his inside pocket blasts a hole in his upper torso. I ignore him as he collapses.

His companion flees back in through the French doors; shouting out a warning as he goes, and slamming the doors shut behind him. The edges of the glass panels in them flicker with a harsh red light as a protective spell activates. I raise my hands and use the energy weapons in my bracers to blast a human sized hole in the wall beside the doors. The technokinetic pulse surges eagerly along in front of me as I step in through the rubble. It leaves more explosions in its wake; all of them resulting in injury or death. The one that takes out the mansion's electrics is particularly impressive.

But the pulse isn't the ancient spell that I told you about earlier. It's just a means to an end; the key that has let me enter the home of my enemies.

My late mother's estranged family.

The people who rejected both of us, but refused to let us go.

None of the adults among them are going to live to regret that decision. Here's hoping that the next generation learns from tonight's events, and takes a less evil path as a result. I'd really hate to have to do what I'm about to do here ever again.

A few spells bounce off my armour, but I came prepared for that too. I'm layered up with so many defensive and protective spells and rituals that it would take at least week to get past them. And even if I wasn't, it's still much too late for anyone to stop what I've set in motion.

I made sure to cast the spell itself before I even left home tonight. All I needed to do after that was set foot inside this house.

The spell roils up from within me, and latches onto the magic of every living adult Del Drachi Infernali on the planet.

Including me.

For a moment, I feel myself become one with all the rest of them, as the inherent connection formed through our blood asserts itself. I feel their collective rage at what I'm doing. Then the most intense pain that I've ever known burns through me. The spell rips out my share of the familial magic along with that of everyone else targeted. I drop to my knees and scream along with all the others. Something I'm intensely glad I can't see lets out a deep, infuriated roar, and the taste of blood fills my mouth.

The next thing that I know, I'm opening my eyes. I must have passed out at some point, because I'm lying flat on my back. Sitting up slowly, and wincing as I do so, I look around at the smouldering remains of the room that I'm in. All the soft furnishings have been reduced to ashes, and the hard surfaces are charred black. Judging by

the big hole next to the French doors, and the shadows burned into the walls behind where I remember there having been people, it's the same room that I unleashed the spell in.

Huh.

Looks like I'm the last adult Del Drachi Infernali left alive.

Which means that the familial magic is now solely mine to command.

I already arranged in advance for the relevant people to go and check on all the underaged members of the family, so there's nothing to worry about in that regard. I've even set up a trust fund to provide for them. They'll be fine. And hopefully not evil.

Hey, problem for future me, am I right?

I shake my head to try and clear it a little. When that doesn't help at all, I stumble out through the hole that I came in by, and stagger across the

patio, and back down the steps onto the lawn. For a moment, I admire the way the moonlight plays on the frost.

Then I trip over a corpse and fall flat on my face amidst the remains of my initial opponents here at the mansion.

Okay, so note to self – dear Antoine, it *might* be time to consider adding a helmet with a faceplate to your costume.

You know; decades into the future from now, once you eventually get out of prison.

If you ever get out at all, that is.

You might even get the death penalty for what you've just done here.

The sound of rapid footsteps thudding across the lawn reaches me as I sit up and try to wipe the gore away. Blinking, I sigh in relief as I recognise the burly figure as my impeccably dressed blond-haired and blue-eyed valet

hurrying towards me. I don't know how he does it, any more than I know his real name instead of the nickname that he goes by, but somehow, he always arrives *exactly* when I need him.

I manage to wave at him. "Hey, Minty! All done here, thanks! Can you drive me straight to the nearest police station, please? I'm not up to flying, and I need to go turn myself in for premeditated familicide."

Minty looks *seriously* unhappy about my request, but he nods his agreement anyhow while he helps me to get back up onto my feet. "Sure thing, Dr Kratz! You're the boss! But can I call Ms Edderton about it first; just to check in with her about it? You know she won't like you doing any of that without having legal representation present, and I don't want her to be mad at me."

I can't keep myself from chuckling at how insane this whole situation is.

“Yeah, okay, Minty. You can call her. Let’s…let’s just go and get in the car first, okay? I think I might need to sit down and rest for a while.”

PROTECTORS!

Issue Two – Susan

OCTOBER 2097: DEIMOS BASE

Half of my command deck is festooned from floor to ceiling with strings of tiny light-up plastic pumpkins and other such Halloween themed decorations. The other half has a three-inch-deep layer of an as yet unidentified and sticky clear viscous substance coating all surfaces, deck plating included. There's a handy one-word explanation for both of those things: Marines. Or, to be precise about it, Marines who've got it into their heads to make sure that I celebrate having survived as far as my forty-fifth turn around the sun.

Granted, I can see the logic behind the Halloween stuff; given how today's October 31 and all. Where exactly that nasty looking mystery substance fits in – and where in the heck it came from – has me all kinds of stumped. Knowing my Marines, I ain't real sure if I want an explanation either. But given how nothing that it's touching looks damaged yet, I think I'm safe to take a chance on it probably not killing me. After all, it ain't as if my Marines are gonna get share of the celebratory birthday pudding cups if I die here.

With that in mind, I trudge across from the elevator to the command chair that's situated right in front of the observation window taking up most of the wall over on this side of the room. It's kind of a silly thing to admit to, I guess, but I've always liked the view from in here; especially at this time of day. You can see the sun rising over Mars. It's real pretty – kind of like an oil painting happening in real time.

Private Samuel Hendricks, the fair haired, blue eyed, and keenly eager to please young Marine who's been manning the conn as one of last night's crew is already on his feet and saluting me. "Good morning, Captain Kennedy, ma'am!"

I can see the exact moment when it hits him that we're neither outdoors nor officially under arms. His eyes go wide, but by now his right arm is fully physically committed to the gesture. His hand trembles some as he does it, though, and his face has gone kind of crimson. I ain't about to rub it in, so I salute right back. "At ease, Private Hendricks. And good morning to all of you, Marines. Now – will someone present kindly explain the current state of my command deck?"

As I'd anticipated, all six of the Marines in front of me suddenly look extra squirrely. Private Molly Jessup, who's blonde, brown-eyed, and about fifty

percent freckles, bounces to her feet at her station and volunteers the answer. “It’s your birthday, Captain Kennedy, ma’am!”

I stare at her in silence as I sit down in the command chair; which is currently spun around so that it’s facing away from the observation window. So much for enjoying the view, I guess. “I am keenly aware of that fact, thank you, Private Jessup. It doesn’t explain the weird ass goo I just trudged through!”

Nobody whatsoever chimes in to help fill the resultant silence. Hendricks has sat down at one of the consoles. His face is now steadily approaching the attainment of a shade of red that I strongly believe may have been previously unwitnessed by the human eye. Jessup has started chewing on the inside of her top lip. She’s still on her feet, and I suspect she’s hoping the deck plating will magically open up and swallow her.

Dang it all, I think I broke them. Now I feel bad. I hate it when my people are scared of me. Maybe that doesn't fit with the stereotype for officers, but I know what it takes to make it through Martian Marine Corps basic training alive. I also know that most of our recruits only even join up out of desperation. Hendricks, Jessup, and the other four privates who made up last night's crew ain't no exception. Nor am I, for that matter, but I've stuck around long enough that I can't justify keeping on using it as an excuse.

Luckily, the universe takes pity on us. The elevator doors slide open, and my African American second in command, Gunnery Sergeant Archibald Woods, strides out with his usual air of wholly competent orneriness. As has also become usual for him, he's got my ten-month-old daughter, Ellie, strapped to his chest in her sling. She's wearing a miniature set of pink and red MMC cammies that probably break at least

six rules just by existing, but screw that noise. It's adorable. Brass can suck it.

Woods scowls like he's about to start yelling questions. Then he stops and stares past all of us towards the observation window. He scrambles backwards; punching the controls for the elevator so as to keep the doors from closing. "Clear the deck!"

I don't wait for him to clarify what he means by that utterance. I'm already on my feet and running along with everybody else by the time he finishes pronouncing the second syllable. All seven of us cram into the elevator along with Woods and Ellie. As the doors slide shut behind us, there's an unmistakable sound – one that every Marine who serves off planet is trained to recognise instantly, and which we all fervently hope never to hear.

The sound of unbreakable glass as it cracks and shatters.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Three – Walter

FEBRUARY 2017: UNKNOWN

The straps tying me to the hospital bed that I'm on are fixed too damn tight again. The skin right underneath them was already pale from repeated blood loss and lack of sunlight just like the rest of me is, but those parts are even worse looking from the circulation being damn near cut off.

I quit trying to break free long ago. I don't remember when, exactly. Kind of hard to keep track of time around here. I just know it's been long enough that I ain't embarrassed about how I'm being kept naked.

I got plenty of worse things than that to worry about, anyway.

Another wave of pain slams into me. I clench my eyes shut again and scream while I ride it out.

Guess I must've passed out from it for a while or something, because the next thing I know, I'm waking up again. There's a male voice coming from right next to me; youngish sounding, with a real posh English accent. "Hey. You're not alone anymore, okay? I'm here."

I snap open my eyes, and turn my head around to look at him; managing to choke down my scream. He's a lanky white guy with longish curly black hair and dark blue eyes like mine but with longer lashes. Can't be aged much over twenty, by the looks of him. My voice rasps painfully in my throat when I answer him. "Who…who are you…?"

He smiles down at me as he strokes my brow. His hands are gentle and

cool against my achingly hot skin. “George Sewell. What’s your name?”

I groan as the pain swells up again. “Frontline…!”

The kid looks confused at what I’ve said for a couple of seconds. Then he perks right up. “Oh! Frontline! Right! You’re that supersoldier fellow – the famous American one who blows things up all the time! Er, aren’t you supposed to be dead?”

His question hits me like a damn truck! I stare up at him; confused. “Dead…?”

He nods. “Yes. In January 2013. You were struck by some sort of energy weapon and it disintegrated you on the spot. It was all over the news at the time. Don’t you remember?”

I shake my head; panting for air as I do, and trying not to puke. “Was…was abducted by Charybdis…! They kept me…prisoner…experiments…!”

The kid doesn't look like he believes me at first. I ain't surprised by that. Everybody probably remembers how I used to look – that big black mullet and handlebar moustache that I had. My captors here keep the hair on my head shaved short enough that it's barely even stubble. Makes it easier for them to attach the damn electrodes. The bastards robbed me of my moustache too; just because they could.

I guess I don't look totally wrong to the kid, because he answers me then. "Well then, let's get you out of here! Do you know if you can walk or not...?"

Everything goes dark on me then.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Four – Walter

FEBRUARY 2017: UNKNOWN

I ain't strapped down when I wake up. I ain't naked either. The kid must have freed me, and found me some clothes. He's wheeled the bed I'm still lying on over to the doors, too.

I can't help groaning when I try to talk to him. "Kid…?"

For some reason, he wheels me back into the cubicle. He's gone real pale, and it seems like he's in a big hurry to get behind the curtain. "We aren't going out there. It's nothing but death. Painful looking death. And zombies."

I blink at him. “What…?”

He starts explaining things in shorter sentences. “Zombies. Eating people. Out there. Where we are not going.”

That’s bad. I’m still mostly out of it, but I manage to sit up. “Zombies…those are probably Doktor Erzfeind’s work! He makes…makes bioweapons.”

The kid backs away from me like he’s getting ready to bug out. “Um, so are you likely to be infected with whatever’s going on out there?”

I shake my head. “Nah. I was one of Baron Villainy’s projects. He…he doesn’t like to share his victims.”

He looks relieved. “Okay, so what did this Baron Villainy fellow do to you? Also, do you know if the other two men in here were his victims, or Doktor Erzfeind’s? Only, well, they’re dead, and as sad as that is, I’d rather like to know if they’ll definitely stay that way!”

My eyesight starts to blur, and there's a dull ringing sound in my ears. I feel like I'm burning up and freezing all at the same damn time. A sudden wave of dizziness comes over me, and I feel myself lurch sideways.

Then there's nothing.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Five – George

FEBRUARY 2017: UNKNOWN

Have you ever had to drag a mostly unconscious male supersoldier along a metal ventilation shaft? Because that's the plan that I'm currently enacting, and I wouldn't recommend it. Damn it, Frontline is heavy! I suppose that it's partly to do with him being unconscious. Dead weight, as they call it. Not a turn of phrase that I'm fond of right now.

At least I've managed to keep him from screaming and groaning too loudly. I had to gag him with a bit of sheet to do that. It feels cruel, but it's working so

far. He'll just have to cope with the added trauma as and when he finally wakes up properly. If I can keep us both alive that long, that is.

We're somewhere on the floor above where we started now. Getting Frontline up into the vent at the top of the wall in our room was tricky enough. The ascent through the vertical section of the shaft to reach this floor was even harder. I didn't have a bed to stand on that time, and the metal used in here is terribly slippery. I've had to stash my camera away inside my pack.

My plan is a bit vague, really. I'm trying to find the roof of this facility. I have the idea that it might be easier to secure against zombies than a room would be. And we'll probably have a much better chance of signalling for help from up there, too. Well, unless the area outside turns out to be full of yet more zombies, or worse, living people bent on recapturing us. I'll have

to leave Frontline to fend for himself if either of those turn out to be the case.

We keep moving, or I do, anyhow. Frontline doesn't actively try to prevent me from moving, which is as much as I can ask for from him right now. I drag him along behind me, and manhandle him up through two more vertical shafts. The sounds of people being eaten alive gradually become more distant. I can still hear them; it's just that they're sort of muffled now.

Finally, we reach the roof! I know this, because I can smell fresh air through the metal grille just above our heads. Desperate to get out of the vents, I reach up and grab hold of the bars. Then I yank down on them as hard as I can. The grille gives way at one side; swinging down into the vent. I let go of it immediately, and shove Frontline up and out into the sunlight, before scrambling up after him.

Thankfully, it's a flat roof, and so neither of us falls to our death.

Less pleasant is the discovery that we aren't alone up here. There's a small group of people standing about thirty feet away from us. Two of them are women. They're wearing long white coats over the rest of their clothes, and they look terrified. Another three of them are men; heavily armed and dressed in black tactical gear. They don't seem to be very into facial expressions, but the speed of their reactions is impressive. All three of them are already pointing assault rifles at me and Frontline.

Frontline just lies there, shuddering and groaning. I put my hands up, and shout in English, because I don't know the German word for zombies. "We aren't zombies!"

The sixth and final person steps forward; a woman in a tight black

leather catsuit and matching high heeled boots. She has dark green hair that hangs almost all the way down to her ankles, and cold looking green eyes. She gestures curtly to the three men, as she speaks in English. “Bring them along! We might as try to salvage something out of this mess!”

I don’t like the sound of that, but it’s still better than zombies. At least, I hope it is. At any rate, I don’t resist when one of the men comes over and restrains my wrists behind my back using plastic ties. He grabs hold of my elbows and starts manhandling me back over to where the three women are still standing. Meanwhile, the other two men are carrying Frontline bodily between them.

The green haired woman takes out a radio and snarls into it angrily. It seems that she’s expecting to be airlifted out. “Where the actual fuck is my plane?”

I don't get to eavesdrop after that, because the man guarding me leans in close to my right ear and whispers in American accented English. "Don't be scared, kid! I'll look after you."

That could mean rather a lot of things, really. Not all of them good. But I'm twenty now, and really very fed up with people assuming me to be younger than that, and so I growl back at him in reply. "Keep your mitts to yourself!"

He laughs nastily, which confirms my worst suspicions of him. Then, presumably in case there was any doubt remaining as to his intentions, he lets go of my left elbow to cop a feel of my arse. "Oh, yeah, I'm going to have plenty of fun with...!"

I'm still processing the sound of the shot when his body hits the roof behind me. The green haired woman holsters her pistol and keeps on snarling into the radio. "Hurry it up then, you ass!"

Hmm. Clearly, it's not a good idea to interrupt her when she's busy.

Frontline startles awake again then; possibly thanks to the gunshot. He's obviously totally confused about what's going on. I watch helplessly as the two men guarding him club him back into unconsciousness with the butts of their assault rifles. They look like they're enjoying doing so.

Elwyn taught me never to try reasoning with people like that. Instead, I keep quiet and snap the plastic ties around my wrists without letting on. Might as well wait for the plane to arrive before trying to escape. It's not likely to bother picking me and Frontline up if the others aren't still standing. And I'm not sure if I can get the drop on the green haired woman anyhow. She seems to be a lot more competent than her minions. I suspect that she'd wipe the floor with me!

The other two women are sniffling. I'd feel sorry for them, but, well, they do work here. Or at least they did. From the sounds of what the green haired woman is saying, this entire facility is going to be destroyed as soon as the plane extracts us from the roof. Something about share prices, and cutting their losses.

I sit down on the roof with my hands still behind my back, and hang my head a little; as if I'm feeling tired, or cowed. The women all ignore me utterly, and the men are still busy beating up poor Frontline.

Nobody notices me help myself to my would-be molester's knife. I tuck it up inside my right sleeve. Then I nab a grenade from his belt for good measure, and go back to biding my time. Elwyn always says not to rush into things. Well, unless you're him, of course, but then *he* regenerates!

The plane turns out to be a sort of hover jet thing. It lands on the roof, and the green haired woman storms up the rear ramp into it without so much as glancing at the rest of us. The two scientists scurry along after her. I scramble back to my feet and do my best to look harmless. It's not really all that difficult; given that the two men guarding my fellow escaped prisoner have now been joined by six others. They grant me a collective sneer, and then poor Frontline makes the mistake of groaning, and they all lay into him again. Except that now there's eight of them, instead of just two.

Elwyn would be *beyond* furious with me for what I'm about to attempt here. And I don't even dare to imagine what the nuns would think of it!

Hail Mary, indeed.

I dive for cover underneath the ramp of the plane as the pilfered grenade that

I’ve just thrown lands squarely atop Frontline’s bruised and battered torso; just above his ribs. It rolls down into the hollow of his naval, and there it sits for two whole heartbeats. Then it emits a loud click, and explodes.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Six – Walter

FEBRUARY 2017: UNKNOWN

A live grenade has just detonated right on top of me!

I don't know for sure yet who tossed it my way, but I've got a feeling that it was probably the kid. My powers kick in right away; absorbing the kinetic force of the blast, and redirecting it into healing me. Fully reenergised, I spring up onto to my feet and tear off the gag. By now, my eyes will be glowing bright white like they always do. That tends to scare the enemy a lot, but this time there ain't anybody left for me to fight. The goons who were

kicking me to death are all lying in bloodied heaps thanks to the grenade.

It looks like the kid and I might just be out of the woods. But where the heck has he gone? The only thing up here aside from me is a Charybdis hover jet over on what looks like the building's landing pad. The rear ramp of the jet is standing wide open. Maybe the kid's on board it already, or something. I'd better go and look for him.

Before I can take so much as a step towards the jet, there's an angry yell from inside it. Seconds later, an all-too familiar woman dressed in a black leather catsuit storms down the ramp and across the roof towards me. She's armed with an energy rifle, and her ankle length prehensile green hair is already poising itself to attack me.

I grimace at the sight of my old enemy as she levels her weapon at me. Parricide! That crazy bitch again, huh?

Guess she's here to help mop up whatever went wrong. But wait – why would she be dumb enough to try and use an energy rifle on me? Those things are even sweeter than grenades for helping me to power up!

Something ain't right here.

Parricide grins at me maniacally as she fires. A beam of vivid yellow light streaks out of the muzzle. It's too late for me to try dodging, and there's no cover to be had up here.

The pain as the beam of light hits me…oh sweet God, the pain…!

PROTECTORS!

Issue Seven – Walter

FEBRUARY 2017: UNKNOWN

I wake up in a busted open cryostasis chamber. The kid's there too; standing over the chamber and staring down at me. He looks worried as he helps me to clamber out, but he doesn't say anything about what's bugging him. Instead, he takes hold of my left arm and leads me over to an old log; the remnant of somebody or other's past lumber making activities, I guess.

The kid helps me to sit down on the log. Then he holds up a cell phone, and announces that he's got a friend who'll help us. "I'll go call him now!"

He walks off a few paces to make the call. I stay put on the log. I'm still exhausted, and real dizzy, too.

Where the heck are we now, anyway?

Looking around me, I gather that we're on the bank of a wide, shallow looking creek instead of the Charybdis facility roof. There's no sign of Parricide or the hover jet, but I do see a pile of folded up used parachutes nearby. And the cryostasis chamber that I woke up in looks like it's taken a real beating.

Did the jet crash, or something? I'm guessing that the kid and I must've been on board when it did. But then how'd we survive? And come to think of it, what's the deal with all those used parachutes over there? If I didn't know any better, I'd almost think that the kid must've rigged them up to get himself and me off the jet and down to wherever this is!

Nah, that'd be crazy!

One thing's for sure, and that's that there are a heck of a lot of trees here. Evergreens, mostly; with some thorny and currently leafless scrub in around the bases of their trunks. The air feels icy cold against my skin, and there's a lot of deep snow on the ground that looks like it's been there for a long while. Ice, too; especially on the trees. My feet and other extremities would already be blue with cold if I wasn't a supersoldier!

As it is, I'm doing okay; even with how little I'm wearing. I sure do miss my old boots, though. They were reliable, and comfy, with thick treads; and worn in to that point where it's like putting on a second skin, you know?

The kid makes a few tries at calling whoever it is that he's trying to reach. It looks as if they ain't answering their phone. Then again, maybe it's not even connecting. The signal probably isn't all that great out here.

I try not to stare, but it's getting kind of obvious that the kid's upset. Too bad that Tim ain't here. He'd know what to do to help comfort him. Heck, for that matter, so would Antoine! But if it's a choice between the two of them, then I'd rather have Tim at my side.

Jeez, I miss him! I miss all my other teammates, too, of course; only not for the same reasons, you know? The Protectors…we're a *family*. Or we were, anyway. I don't know what's happened to the others between when I last saw them and now. The kid hasn't said anything yet about how they've been doing. Just that everybody thought that I'd died.

I should've guessed Charybdis had done something like that to cover their tracks. Making out the weapon they'd hit me with disintegrated me instead of teleporting me away was the only thing that would've kept Tim and the others from scouring the globe in search of

me. And when Antoine goes looking for someone or something, they or it gets found. That guy's a damn genius!

He still ain't my Tim, though.

The kid's started to cry now. It looks like he's trying to hide it from me; as if he's ashamed of himself for doing it. Well, I ain't standing for any of that toxic male bullshit! What that young man needs right now is a good hug, and a shoulder to cry into for a while.

I get to my feet slowly, and put my arms around him. "It's okay, kid. I'm here for you."

PROTECTORS!

Issue Eight – George

FEBRUARY 2017: UNKNOWN

Frontline is a surprisingly good hugger. I know this, because when I randomly started snivelling in front of him after repeatedly failing to reach Elwyn on my phone, he stood up from the log that he was sitting on, and put his arms around me. He's been trying his level best to console me ever since. It's surprisingly nice, but it's also a tad embarrassing.

Deciding that it's now well past time for me to fucking man up, as Elwyn would say, I squirm free of the hug; stiffening my upper lip and wiping my

eyes. “I’m fine now, honestly. Thanks for being so supportive.”

Frontline doesn’t look as he believes me. He nods anyhow. “Glad to hear it, kid. Any chance I can borrow that phone? I got a few people who think I’m dead. Kind of like to put that right. Say, what’s your name, anyhow?”

I shrug as I hand him the phone. “My name’s George Sewell. I told you that back in the facility when you first woke up. I take it that you don’t remember?”

He shakes his head. “Sorry, George. Everything before that grenade hit me is still kind of fuzzy in places. I remember you helping me, but not so much of what you said.”

That makes sense. Realising that he doesn’t know how to use the phone, I step in closer to him and point at the buttons. “You type in the number. Then you just press the green button. The red one ends the call.”

Frontline thanks me politely as I leave him to it. A few minutes later, whoever it is that he's rang apparently answers their phone. Frontline all but breaks down at the sound of their voice. He chokes out a few words in reply. "Tim! Tim, honey, it's me! It's Wally! I ain't dead. I love you, Tim."

He spaces out again then. I manage to herd him back over to his log and sit him down there. Then I take up where he left off in talking to the mysterious Tim on the phone. "Hello, is this Tim? I'm George Sewell. I've er, well, I've sort of rescued Frontline from some villains. I mean Wally. I rescued Wally. Um – you already knew about his secret identity, right?"

Mercifully, Tim knows all about the latter subject. He explains to me that he's Frontline's longtime boyfriend, and that I probably know him as Advocate, of the Protectors. Then he asks me what's going on.

I tell him what little I know about what apparently happened to Frontline back in the facility before I arrived there. Then I tell him about the zombies, and our escape, and what happened on the roof, and on the plane, and so on. Well, most of it, anyhow. I leave out the bit about my having essentially blown up his boyfriend whilst trying to save him from being kicked to death; since kicks aren't the same as explosions when it comes to the kinetic energy produced. And obviously I don't mention my having lied to the green haired woman either. Or how she and her minion both sexually molested me. That's personal, after all.

Something big and brown and shaggy suddenly bursts into view out of the trees just to the right of Frontline. It slams into him; bowling him over backwards into the snow, before I can even finish shouting a warning to him.

Oh God. Oh fuck. Oh, shit on a stick!

The shaggy brown creature that's now attempting to eat poor Frontline alive is nothing other than a Eurasian brown bear; the smallest type of brown bears. It's still absolutely bloody *huge*, and as for the speed it came out of the trees at, well! Unreal. Except it is real. That is absolutely a real bear; just like the grizzlies that Elwyn taught me how to avoid, and that I then spent days photographing.

This bear, however, is a lot more actively aggressive than the grizzlies ever were. It's also dreadfully thin; as if it hasn't eaten well in quite some time. Perhaps that's why it's awake and roaming the countryside right now; instead of still contentedly hibernating like it ought to be at this time of year. For some reason, it wasn't able to eat enough before it went to sleep, and so it woke up early from hunger.

And now poor Frontline and I are the nearest available menu options.

Frontline has somehow grabbed hold of the bear's lower jaw with his right hand, and is just about managing to hold its head away from him, so that it can't bite him. He's fending off its front paws with his other arm, and kicking frantically up at its emaciated body. He screams heroically at me to run for it. "Get out of here, kid! Now!"

Elwyn would tell me to run, too. But as I've already highlighted, he's not here, and I am, and he hasn't answered any of my phone calls, and if I don't do something right now, then Frontline is going to fucking die!

I *have* to try to save him.

I'm tangentially aware of Tim asking me what's wrong as I drop my phone and grab hold of a branch that's sticking out from the trunk of a nearby fallen tree with both hands. The branch that I've selected is about six feet long, and sturdy looking. Perhaps if I break it

off, I can use it to drive the bear away, or at least deter it from attacking Frontline long enough for him to get up and help me. I don't have a gun, and there's no way that I'm going to risk getting close enough to it to use my knife; not when it's this bloody desperate for something to eat!

There's a sudden cracking sound from the vicinity of the fallen tree. Then something gives way abruptly, and I stagger backwards with the branch still gripped in my hands. I swing it up above my head and make a run at the bear's hind end; making as much noise as I can in the hopes of frightening it away despite its hunger.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Nine – Antoine

FEBRUARY 2017: LOS ANGELES

I'm making the final adjustments to the new earpiece that I've been working on for the team when Tim bursts into my workshop; his huge white feathered wings flared behind him to slow him down before he can collide with me. His usually rosy cheeked face is ashen, and his bright blue eyes are wide with fear. He's clutching his cell phone in both hands. "Antoine! Oh, God, Antoine, Wally's still alive! Charybdis had him all this time! He called me, but then he passed out, and the kid he's travelling with took over

talking to me instead, and now they're both being attacked by a bear, and…!"

I wrap him up in the tightest hug that I can manage; ignoring the pain from the deservedly vengeful bit of familial magic that I've only recently found out about, and that's slowly eating me alive from the inside out. "Okay. It's okay, Tim. Just breathe now, alright?"

Tim whimpers unintelligibly as I card my fingers through his long blond hair. He's still clutching his cell phone. I can hear a youngish sounding guy with a cutglass upper-class English accent shouting to or maybe at someone else at the other end of the call.

I can also hear the kinds of snorting growls that I very much prefer to only ever hear via wildlife documentaries.

Then Wally's voice rumbles.

He's telling whoever he's with to run.

Naturally, there's no convincing Tim to hand over his cell phone even for a second or two, but I'm still able to start tracing the call. It's coming from somewhere over in Europe. I'll have the exact location determined within the next thirty seconds.

I just don't know if it's going to do poor Wally any good or not.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Ten – George

FEBRUARY 2017: UNKNOWN

It isn't until I try to hit the bear that I notice that the rest of the tree is still very much attached to the branch. The whole thing comes down against the unwitting animal. I hear a horrendous, grinding, sort of crunch as wood meets fur. Then the bear is knocked aside by the force of the blow. It lets out an agonised sounding bellow as it collapses onto its left flank on the snow. All four of its limbs thrash wildly for a moment, and then they go limp. The bear shudders once, and dies.

I let go of the branch and drop to my knees in the snow; sickened by what I've just done. Beside me, Frontline finally manages to regain his feet. He says something to me, but I can't hear him. The bear's death cry continues to ring in my ears.

Over the past day, I've killed eight – possibly even ten – human beings, and now a bear. The latter is the only one of the deaths that truly upsets me. The humans were all evil, and at least in the case of the green haired woman, had superpowers. The poor bear was just a desperately hungry animal with no better options available to it.

Frontline claps me on my right shoulder. He speaks again, and this time I hear him. "Jeez, kid! Didn't you have any bear spray?"

It takes a few more seconds for me to realise that he's joking. When I do, I

immediately scramble to my feet and glare at him angrily. “It’s *not* funny!”

He frowns and tries to pacify me. “Hey now, relax! I ain’t mocking your powers, kid. Just trying to lighten the mood a little, that’s all. You looked like you were upset there.”

Right. That does it. I’m done with him. No more babysitting. Frontline can bloody well just take care of himself from here on in!

I tell him that, and then I stomp back over to where my phone is still lying in the snow. I pick it up and toss it over to Frontline; not caring if he catches it or not. “The call’s still connected. You should probably tell your boyfriend that you still aren’t dead.”

PROTECTORS!

Issue Eleven – Walter

FEBRUARY 2017: POLAND

I stare at George while I put the cell phone up to my ear. Poor Tim sounds like he's on the verge of a heart attack right now. It's just about all I can do to get a word in edgeways to reassure him. "Tim, honey, I'm fine! George and I are both fine. We ain't hurt. There was a bear, yeah, but it's dead now. Everything's okay here, I promise."

Tim breaks down sobbing. Then he's gone, and another familiar voice is there in my ear instead. "Wally, this is Antoine. How are you holding up there, buddy? Are you alright?"

I sigh in relief that he's there to support poor Tim. "Yeah, I'm good, thanks. So's the kid who's been helping me – well, physically, anyway. He uh, he had to kill the bear that attacked us, and he's taking having done it real hard. I think maybe he likes animals."

Antoine sighs. "Wally, did you try to make light of things?"

I grimace at my own stupidity. "Yeah."

He sighs again. I can all but hear him shaking his head in disappointment. "Oh, Wally! Only you, buddy. Only you. Okay – let's just put a pin in that part of things for now! I've managed to trace the signal from the phone that you're using. You guys are in rural Poland. Tim's pulled himself together enough to speak, so I'm going to give the phone back to him now. He'll read you in on where the nearest town is, and how you can get there. We'll all meet you there, okay?"

I feel some of the tension leave my shoulders. “Yeah, okay. And thanks, Antoine. It’s been good to hear your voice again. See you soon.”

Antoine makes his goodbyes to me, and then Tim takes over the call. He sniffles. “Hey, Wally. Oh, God, Wally, sweetheart, I’ve missed you so, so much…!” His voice chokes a little, and then he pulls himself together somehow, and starts telling me what I need to know. “Right, sorry. So, uh, Antoine’s given me a map, okay? He says that I need to talk you through how to find the nearest town. Let’s uh, let’s get on with that part now.”

For once, I manage to stay awake. Tim talks me through the route just like he said. I repeat the directions back to him twice; just to be sure that I’ve got them memorised. It gives me the excuse to hear Tim talking to me some more, too. Then it’s time to end the call. Neither of us wants to say

goodbye, but sadly this phone ain't one of Antoine's miracle level inventions, and so it doesn't have an endless battery supply. I can't risk ending up with no means of contacting Tim and the others if George and I get into any more trouble between here and the town that we'll be heading to.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Twelve – George

FEBRUARY 2017: UNKNOWN

Frontline is telling his friends that everything is fine now. He's lying. Nothing about any of this is fine. Elwyn didn't answer my calls, something *really* bloody weird is going on with me, and that poor bear deserved better!

And Frontline and I are still lost.

That last part is quite literally the only thing that's keeping me from leaving right now. I don't know where we are. That means that I don't know which direction to head off in. Worse, my supplies are limited. I'd planned on

stocking up my pack ahead of leaving Amsterdam. Obviously, that didn't happen. And now I'm somewhere in an unidentified frozen wilderness, with a strange man who I am slowly coming to hate.

He approaches me again then, and reaches out as if to pat my shoulder. I spring backwards before he can, and snarl at him angrily. "Touch me again and I swear I'll hit you! And you saw what happened to that poor bear."

Frontline blinks in surprise. He steps backward a little and lowers his hand. "Sorry, kid. Didn't mean any harm."

I nod sharply at his other hand. He's still holding my phone in it, but it looks as if he's ended the call. "That's mine. I want it back now, please."

He nods slowly. "Sure thing, kid. Look – I'll set it down right here for you, okay? Then I'm gonna move back some. Give you your space."

I watch him warily as he does what he said. Once he's a full fifteen feet away, I bend down to pick up my phone. I want to try reaching Elwyn again. If anyone will be able to find me out here, then it's him. I suppose Frontline can tag along with us as well until we get back to human civilisation.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Thirteen – Walter

FEBRUARY 2017: UNKNOWN

It's obvious there's no way George's gonna agree to stick with me now. But I can't just leave him behind! Even if he hadn't saved my sorry ass multiple times, he's still just a kid. A traumatised one at that. And for all I know, there might be a whole bunch more bears running around out here.

Trying not to feel too guilty about it, I wait until he's occupied with trying to call whoever it is that he's looking for this time. Then I lunge at him, and knock him flat onto his back. The cell phone goes flying from his hands, and

disappears into a nearby bank of snow. Manhandling George over onto his stomach, I straddle him and pin his wrists behind his back; snagging a couple of bits of stray paracord that I've spotted hanging out of one of his back pockets.

He squirms and yells at me while I'm tying him up. "Get off me, you bastard! Let me go!"

I ignore him as best as I can, and finish tying him up; knees and ankles too, just to be safe. Then I sling him over my right shoulder in a good old firefighter's carry. I try to reassure him at least a little bit while I start walking. "Don't worry, kid! The other Protectors traced the signal from your call. We're in Poland. Tim told me how to get to the nearest town. They'll come meet us there, and then we'll get you some help."

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fourteen – George

FEBRUARY 2017: UNKNOWN

Trying to process the fact that Frontline apparently thinks that *he's* now rescuing *me*, I lift my head and stare back towards the corpse of the bear. An idea strikes me. "Wait, you idiot! We need to dispose of the remains! The bear had *rabies*. If another animal feeds on its carcass, then the disease could spread!"

Thankfully, Frontline falls for my cunning ploy, and listens to my advice. One can only presume that he knows absolutely nothing about the ursine sorts of bears. He sighs and sets me

down gently on the snow. “Okay, kid. I’ll see about burning it. Uh – do you have any matches?”

I glare up at him, and nod. “There’s a small waterproof container in my pack. It has a box of matches and some tinder in it. But you’ll need to gather up a lot of wood, too.”

Frontline grins. “Not a problem, kid!”

He carries me back over to the bank of the creek and sets me down on top of the pile of folded up parachutes. Then he wanders off to see to building a funeral pyre for the bear.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Fifteen – Walter

FEBRUARY 2017: POLAND

It's real eerie in among these trees. Kind of *too* still and quiet, if you know what I mean? Like nobody's supposed to ever set foot here, or something. Unhallowed ground springs to mind. I can't help feeling like there's something lurking just out of sight; watching me, and biding its moment. Something that doesn't like what I'm doing with the axe.

Well, tough shit if there is. I ain't afraid of the supernatural, and that diseased bear carcass ain't gonna burn itself!

I’m halfway through chopping up an old dead tree stump when I hear the soft crunching of the snow under something else’s feet coming from behind me. Tightening my grip on the axe, I turn around to face whatever it is that’s been stalking me in here.

Parricide grins at me from around one of the bigger trees. She’s got that damn energy weapon trained on me again, and her hair’s poised for combat, too. Her voice rasps in my ears. “Time for your next nap, Frontline!”

The yellow light engulfs me as I dive for cover, and for what feels to me like the umpteenth damn time now, everything goes black.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Sixteen – Walter

FEBRUARY 2017: POLAND

When I open my eyes, I'm lying inside another cryostasis chamber. Or maybe it's the same one as before. I don't know, and right now, I don't much care either. What matters is that it's open, and George is outside glaring in at me.

I groan as I sit up. "We really need to stop meeting like this, kid! It ain't good for me!"

He scowls at me as I clamber out. "Count yourself as extremely lucky that I managed to get loose from my bonds before this lot caught up to us!"

I try to apologise, and to thank him for rescuing me again, too. “Uh, yeah, sorry about tying you up like that, I guess. I just thought you were having some kind of mental breakdown, or something.”

George ain’t impressed. He scoffs at me and shakes his head. “Charming! I’m not the one who keeps screaming and passing out, you know. Anyhow – can you fly us out of here? Because, if not, then we’re probably completely doomed.”

I grin at him, and then I stagger off towards the front end of the plane. Luckily for both of us, flying a hover jet is something that I can do in my sleep!

George follows me as far as the empty cockpit; with his knife held at the ready. We don’t run into any more trouble, and he leaves me to it once I’ve sat down at the controls. Guess he’s gonna go make sure that there

aren’t any Charybdis operatives hiding somewhere onboard the jet. Or maybe he just doesn’t want to spend any more time around me than he has to.

I don’t blame him if it’s that last one.

I wouldn’t want to forgive me either.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Seventeen – George

FEBRUARY 2017: POLAND

As I feared, Frontline isn't looking too good when I return to the cockpit of the plane. He's gone dreadfully pale, and he's sweating profusely, which is starting to cause a bit of a nasty smell.

He nods to me when he sees me. "I ain't doing too good here, kid. Gonna need you to take over the controls."

I stare at him blankly. "What?"

He coughs weakly before he answers. There's a rattling sound in his chest. "For the plane, kid! You're gonna have to fly us the rest of the way."

I attempt to point out the flaw in this plan. “I don’t know how to do that!”

Frontline gestures vaguely at the empty seat beside him. “Better buckle in then, and fast! I’ll have to give you a crash course in piloting.”

Exceptionally poor choice of words on his part! I grit my teeth and slide into the seat; not bothering to buckle myself in. It’s not as if it will help me if we crash anyhow. “Okay – how does all of this stuff here work?”

My fellow escapee manages to show me which buttons to press when, and which switches need to be toggled in what order, and so forth. Then he passes out again. There’s a thin trickle of blood coming from his right nostril. I rather suspect that he won’t be waking up any time soon. Which means that I’m well and truly on my own here now.

Do or die, I suppose!

The flying along part of things is fine, really. In fact, I quite enjoy it. The views from up here really are spectacular! It's a pity that I can't take any pictures of them, but my camera is still inside my pack, and I don't feel safe removing my attention from the controls. They have an annoying habit of suddenly beeping frantically for attention. Still, it's all simple enough compared to what I'd initially feared.

This changes once we reach our intended destination: an airfield outside a small Polish town whose name I still don't know. There's only one runway on it that's clear, and it really doesn't look long enough! One can only hope that the building at the far end of it is empty, because I'm honestly not sure if I can stop this plane in – oh, wait. Hover jet!

I completely forgot about that part! Hmm. Perhaps this will all work out well enough for us after all!

Luckily for everyone here on the plane, Frontline is apparently much better at teaching people how to fly hover jets than he is at escaping from random villains! Perhaps he ought to consider making a change of career going forwards. Well, always presuming that he doesn't die from whatever it is that's wrong with him first, I suppose.

I check him over as best as I can once the plane is safely landed, and everything has been switched off. He really doesn't look at all well. His friends the Protectors, or whoever else it is that's meeting us here, had best see about finding him a doctor as soon as possible. And a hospital, too.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Eighteen – Antoine

FEBRUARY 2017: POLAND

Naturally, it's Tim who reaches the ramp of the jet first once it opens. He swoops down in a blur of white and gold to where the guy who I'm guessing must be George is standing with Wally slumped against his left side. It's obvious that our long-lost teammate is unconscious.

Tim doesn't stop to talk to George, but that's understandable. Instead, he scoops Wally up into his arms; cradling him against his chest as he flies back towards the team of local paramedics who are accompanying us. His voice

trembles a little as he calls out to them. “Get the stretcher ready!”

On my right side, Jason capers a little and snickers; clapping his black gloved hands against his face. A little of the thick white greasepaint covering it smears off on his palms. The mirrored lenses of his goggles seem to all but blaze in the harsh winter sunlight. “Looks to me as if Tim’s going through a fucking moult! He’s shedding fucking feathers all over the fucking airfield!”

Katarina, who’s standing to my left, dressed in her usual combination of sleekly fitting purple leather catsuit and matching impossibly high heeled boots (I will *forever* envy her elegance and sense of balance), answers him before I can. A cold breeze catches her long black hair as she speaks; causing a few strands of it to lift and dance. “It has been an especially stressful day for him. Allowances must be made.”

I inhale deeply and straighten my shoulders; forcing myself to ignore the latest flare of pain searing through my blood courtesy of that vengeful familial magic that I mentioned previously. “Okay, you two. Let’s all go and say hi. And please – be *nice* to him!”

PROTECTORS!

Issue Nineteen – George

FEBRUARY 2017: POLAND

Advocate doesn't stay to chat, but the other three members of the Protectors soon form up into a semicircle in front of me: Kickstart standing in the middle, with Doom Jester on his right, and Countess Cruel on his left. I tell myself that they probably *aren't* doing it to be intimidating, but it's really rather hard to feel completely sure of the latter. They're honestly quite scary up this close! Especially when one is a normal human being with no powers.

Elwyn wouldn't feel intimidated.

It’s a shame that he’s not here. I could have hidden behind him.

As it is, my only choices are to cower back and beg for mercy, or put my best foot forwards and try to shake hands.

I choose the latter option, because Elwyn will take the piss out of me otherwise once he finds out. Also, I just rescued Frontline! And accidentally killed a starving bear, too, but I’d still rather not think about that part of it. Still, surely the Frontline thing ought to impress this lot!

Right?

Hmm. Perhaps not.

Countess Cruel just narrows her eyes a bit and stares at me silently. She reminds me a lot of the green haired woman, only a bit less murderously evil, if that makes sense? Also, her hair is only waist length, and black, and not remotely prehensile, and her eyes are

violet. And the green haired woman was white, whereas Countess Cruel has dusky skin. But the same general air of potential death radiates from her every pore. And they're both very tall. On balance, I think my comparison makes at least a *little* bit of sense!

Doom Jester doesn't speak to me either. Nor does he move from where he's standing with his arms folded across his chest. In fact, I'm not even all that sure whether or not he's breathing! With the amount of sharp, pointy things in his arsenal, I don't especially feel like checking his vital statistics. Although, I must confess that his makeup is impeccably applied. It's a combination of black lipstick and that white greasepaint that clowns use; only on him, it's grim and scary looking instead of cheerful. And his costume looks intriguing. Some sort of high-tech chainmail meets one piece bodystocking! With a jester's cap and bells type thing over his head, and

chunky mirrored goggles that hide his eyes. His whole costume is a mix of various colours; even the metal parts. Does the chainmail feel cold to the touch? Does it pinch his skin, or is there a base layer underneath it?

So many questions, and all of them likely never to be answered!

Finally, after what feels to me like an uncomfortably long time but which probably isn't really, the leader of the group, Kickstart, deigns to accept my attempted handshake. He's not quite as terrifying as Countess Cruel and Doom Jester. Above average in height and musculature, with thick black hair slicked back from his face, and a meticulously trimmed goatee. Warm bronze complexion. Tired looking dark brown eyes. Sumptuous dark blue and red cape; the lining of it far smoother than the outmost facing side, and all very billowy looking. Gleaming golden power armour that's paired with a set

of matching bracers. Distinct lack of any sleeves or helmet.

He smiles at me. “Thanks for saving Wally, kid. We owe you one.”

They do indeed, but I’m not about to say so! The nuns raised me to have better manners than that, and Elwyn is still working on undoing their efforts.

Instead, I smile back and introduce myself. “George Sewell! I’m a wildlife photographer – my blog is called Last Free Spirit, if any of you happen to be interested in finding out about my work. Pleasure to meet you all.”

PROTECTORS!

Issue Twenty – Antoine

FEBRUARY 2017: POLAND

Not wanting to embarrass George, I elbow Katarina and Jason before they can say anything about us already having been told his name. “Come on, guys! You can at least thank the kid!”

Never one to miss an opportunity for melodrama, Katarina rolls her violet eyes and sighs as she briefly shakes his hand. “Ugh. Whatever. Good job saving that idiot Walter, I suppose.”

Jason leans in towards George with one of his trademark sneers. The assorted tiny bells on his multi-

coloured jester's cap jingle menacingly as he clasps the kid's hand in both of his and squeezes it hard. "Yeah. Nice work, you fucking twat."

You know, that was actually a pretty polite conversation by Katarina and Jason's standards! And George seems happy enough with it. Hoping that his hand isn't broken, I pull out my cell phone and call Minty; who's back at our own jet waiting for this call. "Hey, Minty; it's me! I need you to transfer $10,000,000 over to the guy who saved Wally. Just let me get his bank details for you."

"No problem, boss." Minty is his usual supportive and unflappable self.

George is *way* less calm about the whole thing! I ask him for his bank details anyhow. Then, having realised my mistake, I wait for him to compose himself like I should have done in the first place, and repeat the question.

This time he manages to answer me, which is good, because I really *do* need to go and lie down for a while now.

The local authorities can take care of things from here.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Twenty-One – Timothy

FEBRUARY 2017: POLAND

Wally's asleep now. It's a real sleep this time, according to the local doctors; not just another mysterious fainting spell. They can't tell us if that's a good sign or not, because nobody outside of Charybdis knows exactly what's wrong with him yet. But they've taken x-rays, and run tests on his blood, and done a scan of his brain, and all that stuff came back okay. Or at least okay enough for us to be permitted to transport him home with us later today.

I'm real glad about that. Everybody here at the hospital has been swell and all, but I want to get Wally back to Los Angeles as soon as possible. When it comes to medicine and technology, Antoine and his people are the best there is. If anybody on Earth can figure out what's been done to Wally and fix him, then it's them.

All I can do is stand vigil by his bedside and hold his hand; praying that he'll recover, and begging God to give our love for one another a second chance.

Some avenging angel I'd make!

It's kind of ironic how that's what those creeps behind Project Eagle's Wing wanted to call me. Captain Liberty – the Avenging Angel! A flying force for real American values and true patriotism! Here to smite all those who'd dare stand against good old Uncle Sam's brave boys!

Ugh. What a big old can of rotten crud! More than fifty years on, and it still makes me feel sick to my stomach just thinking about it. Not only the plans and schemes that my captors had for world domination, but also the amount of support behind the project itself. A whole bunch of people with real deep pockets were involved in funding it. And not all of those involved were caught. Some of them are still out there, along with all their wealth and terrible ideologies.

I can't help but wonder if maybe one or other of them might be involved in what's been done to poor Wally.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Twenty-Two – Minty

MARCH 2017: LOS ANGELES

In the end, Dr Kratz wasn't punished for what he did at the Del Drachi Infernali estate. I think that's good, but he doesn't seem to agree with me. Everybody else does. It's been three whole months now since it happened, and people are still celebrating what he did. Nobody liked the Del Drachi Infernali family. Except maybe their accountants, but I heard that they always hired family for that job. That means that the accountants probably aren't around anymore either to be mad at Dr Kratz.

The mayor rang again this morning. He keeps trying to persuade Dr Kratz to accept a reward for his actions. The city wants to give him a medal, and commission a statue of him, too. I saw on TV yesterday that they're arranging a big parade in his honour whether he agrees to be there for it or not.

Ms Von Vanderova and Mr Driver both say that Dr Kratz is being dumb, and that he should just go along with what the city wants to do.

Mr Thompson is more worried about Major Brooks, but he did tell the last bunch of reporters who showed up here that everybody needs to back off a little and let Dr Kratz alone for a while so that he can process everything that happened.

Poor Major Brooks doesn't even know what's going on. But if his brain wasn't still all scrambled up from being experimented on for all that time, then

I bet he'd agree with Mr Thompson. Except that Major Brooks would probably be a lot more proactive about making people listen.

Dr Kratz isn't talking much at all; even when it isn't anything to do with what happened. The other Protectors don't seem to have noticed yet, but he hasn't been sleeping well, or eating enough. In fact, his clothes are getting kind of baggy on him. And lately he's started limping, too.

I'm worried about him.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Twenty-Three – Antoine

APRIL 2017: STORM ISLE

I don't know who started the salacious – and totally untrue! – rumours about me having seduced all four of the Element Elles into taking part in a week-long orgy with me, but it's only a matter of time until I do. My attorney, Elodie Edderton, has made it her mission to find out, and she takes *no* prisoners. I'm paying her ten times her usual rate to be extra vicious.

It's the *least* they deserve.

I could do so much worse to them.

And honestly?

I kind of want to.

Obviously, I *won't*, of course!

But I *could*.

The Element Elles themselves seem to be finding the whole thing hilarious. They've even started encouraging their fanbase to come up with names for ships involving the Element Elles and the Protectors! Now, ten days on from when the first horrible rumour hit the headlines, their fans and our fans are at each other's throats online. It's a toxic mess all round, and it's only a matter of time until things get too far out of hand. I've been a celebrity long enough to know how these situations play out. But the Element Elles are barely even into their twenties, with less than a year's experience of being active as superheroes! They probably have no idea of the trouble that they've started. Or how important it is for us to take control of the narrative.

That's why I'm headed to their base on Storm Isle today. I need to talk to them about what's happening, and how bad it is for our collective reputations. I'm hoping that they'll agree to make an official statement alongside me to refute the rumours.

Why their mentor, superpowered English billionaire fantasy author Rob Waithringall, aka Captain Fabulous, hasn't already done that is beyond me.

Something about his involvement with the Element Elles really *bothers* me. I mean, come on, seriously – think about it. An extremely wealthy guy in his forties suddenly all but retires from public life and instead sets up house on his very own private island with four much younger women as his proteges. He trains them, and then he sends them out to fight evil dressed only in PVC microkinis and stiletto sandals. Meanwhile, everybody else just stands by and cheers him on, huzzah!

I'm not cheering.

Neither are the rest of my team. To be honest, I'd feel a lot more comfortable if they were coming with me today, but it's not an option. Wally's having his regular weekly physiotherapy session, and the others are all busy helping the Miracle Mob deal with Mister Terrible's latest attempt at world domination for fun and profit. The Miracle Mob's leader, Mike Nelligan, aka Mister Miraculous, reached out to us about it yesterday. He and his wife Dorcas Nelligan, aka Golden Glory, are two of my oldest friends. Our teams regularly work together, so, naturally, we agreed to join them on the mission. Unfortunately, there's an eldritch horror kind of thing that draws power from technology lurking somewhere in the mix, so I've been benched for everyone's own good.

I figure that it only makes sense for me to be productive with my free time.

According to my suit's GPS, that's Storm Isle right down there. Wow, what a view! I've never laid eyes on it before now, and it's just as breathtaking as everybody claims it to be. Just look at all the trees and other plant life! Wait – are those Buffon's macaws in the treeline? And spoon-billed sandpipers on the beach? That doesn't make any sense. Storm Isle isn't suitable for either of those species! The macaws need tropical evergreen forests, and the sandpipers need boreal coastal tundra. The climate here off the west coast of North America is temperate. The forest is a mix of deciduous trees and shrubs, and the beach has nothing but fine dry golden sand. I guess the macaws might manage to adapt to it, but the sandpipers won't be so fortunate.

What the heck does Captain Fabulous think he's playing at here? Why does his island have two separate species of critically endangered birds? I haven't

heard anything about Storm Isle being involved with conservation efforts. And to be blunt, it's not like Captain Fabulous or the Element Elles to miss an opportunity for attention. Just look at why I'm here to begin with! No, if this was above board, then the whole world would have heard about it already.

One of the sandpipers just collapsed!

The rest of the flock scatter as I land beside them on the beach. None of them look healthy. My suit's biometric sensors confirm my fears: these poor little birds are literally *starving*. The one who collapsed is close to death.

I pick him up carefully, and cradle him in both hands. "Hey, buddy. Don't die, okay? I'm going to help you, I promise."

Looks like it's time for me to risk using the family blood magic again. Here's hoping that it works – there are less than five hundred spoon-billed sandpipers left alive on the planet!

Using the bird in my hands as a focal point for the spell, I siphon off some of my own lifeforce and gift it to the entire flock. It's not as if I need it. I'll be dead in less than nine months from now, anyhow. I might as well do as much good as I can in the meantime!

The sandpipers are all looking a lot better now. They'll be fine until I can get them safely relocated to the right environment. Although I think the little guy who'd collapsed probably counts as being a revenant now. The glowing red eyes kind of help give it away.

Oh well, moving on!

Captain Fabulous greets me at the front door of his mansion with a broad smile that doesn't reach his bright blue eyes. He gives me a much too firm handshake. "Antoine Kratz! I've been wondering when you might turn up!"

Three years into his retirement, his reddish blond hair has sprouted some

grey at the temples. He's wearing sandals under a pair of tan linen slacks and an unbuttoned white silk shirt instead of his once ubiquitous red and white costume. But he's still just as tall and overly muscular as ever. In fact, if it wasn't for my armour, then I don't doubt that he could snap me like a twig in close combat if he wanted to.

Incidentally, my continued lack of a helmet is starting to feel like a bad idea again. No neck protection to speak of.

Not that Captain Fabulous would even need to bother with basic physical combat to begin with, of course. Aside from his highly enhanced strength and agility, he also has near total mastery over the elements of fire, water, earth, and air. I say near mastery, because from what I've seen and heard of the Elemental Elles so far, each of them has a lot more control over her element than Captain Fabulous ever did. That tends to be how those kinds

of powers work. It's easier to focus when you aren't constantly splitting your concentration across multiple elements. More to the point, and being brutally honest, Captain Fabulous has always been kind of lazy. I doubt if he's ever actually bothered to push himself to be any better at using his powers.

My host leads me indoors, and on through the mansion to what he calls the main lounge. It's an extreme large room, with a vast, ornate fireplace, a vaulted ceiling, and four tall, narrow stained-glass windows spaced equally across its south facing wall. Each window depicts a different member of the Elemental Elles. There's something twistedly churchlike about the whole thing. The furniture is even more disturbing. It comprises four single bed sized padded red faux leather benches arranged in a perfect square in the middle of the room. Their heavy chrome frames are bolted securely to the polished white marble floor.

I stare in absolute silence at the four sets of red and white leather restraints attached to the frames of the benches with thick steel chains that look strong enough to hold Captain Fabulous, never mind any of the Elemental Elles.

Collars.

Cuffs.

Waist belts.

There's dried blood engrained into the leather on all of them. On the benches, too. It isn't visible to the human eye, but I know it's there. Thanks to my blood magic, I can *feel* it screaming.

Captain Fabulous chuckles at my reaction. "Oh, come on, Kratz, old boy! Don't pretend that you hadn't already guessed why I decided to mentor the little sluts! Admit it – that's why you're here today, isn't it? You finally figured out that it was *me* who started the rumours about the orgy, and then you

correctly deduced it as the invitation I intended it to be! So – which of them do you want to fuck first, hmm? They won't give you any trouble; I knocked all *that* nonsense out of them within a week! Don't even need to use the restraints these days! Bloody good fun though. Scares them shitless, you know. Being chained down. I made sure that it would. The fear helps keep them tame. Makes damned sure that they don't try running away again!"

Three years since he retired.

Those four young women came to live with him here on Storm Isle when they were just *eighteen* years old.

Technically legal.

Technically.

He claps me on the back. "Well? Made your mind up yet? Or should I send for all four of them at once? Let you act out those rumours for *real*, eh?"

Thankfully, Mike and Dorcas have always turned down his invitations for their teenaged daughter Ramona to come to Storm Isle and train with the Elemental Elles.

From what I've heard, there have been a lot of those damn invitations made over the past three years.

Ramona was *fifteen* when they started.

And she's my goddaughter.

Captain Fabulous nudges me in the side with his left elbow. "Speak up, Kratz! You must have made up your mind by *now*. Unless you've lost your nerve. Is that it, eh? You've got cold feet and need me to warm the little sluts up for you?"

I inhale slowly, and then I turn to face him. "Kickstart."

"Eh?" He blinks at me in confusion. "What are you on about?"

“My *name*, you sadistic rapist creep!” I open fire with both wrist mounted turrets at point blank range; blasting him across the room and into the wall beside the fireplace hard enough that the impact cracks the plaster. Then I summon the room’s wiring out from within the walls and ceiling and begin strangling him with it. “Bad guys don’t get to call me by my real name!”

PROTECTORS!

Issue Twenty-Four – Timothy

APRIL 2017: LOS ANGELES

Ramona Nelligan was a real sweet kid once, but gosh darn it all if she hasn't grown up to have the world's worst crush on me! She turned eighteen less than a week ago, and she's determined to make me – ahem – appreciate that fact. Just look at the skimpy little blue dress that she's picked to wear as her Miss Miraculous costume. The pleated skirt on it barely covers her thighs! And as for that scandalous neckline, well, I'm sorry, but back in my day, girls who ran around town dressed like that ended up with *reputations*.

I've known Ramona since she was all of six years old; back when Antoine first introduced the Protectors to the Miracle Mob. Naturally she's grown up a lot since then. But that doesn't change anything! A nice girl like her shouldn't be going around flaunting her body like that. Somebody, either Antoine, or one or both of her parents, really needs to sit her down and talk to her about dressing appropriately! And it sure wouldn't hurt for them to tell her to quit flirting with grown men, too.

I'm trying to keep well away from her, but she isn't having any of that. Why, she even *followed* me all the way here to the docks when I flew away from the rest of our group in pursuit of Mister Terrible's cybernetically enhanced eldritch horror! I can't think of any reason other than sheer wantonness for her to have done that. Sure, she's got her mom's wings, and her dad's healing touch, but neither of those powers will help with this fight!

Speaking of which, this gosh darned monster ought to come with a warning label! Even its tentacles have teeth! It's as if Mister Terrible somehow crossed a giant demonic squid with a bunch of real angry cybernetic piranha. And why in the world did he decide to make it bright pink with yellow spots? Luckily for everyone, once I catch up with the thing, I'm able to punch it hard enough to knock it out. It topples off the piled-up shipping containers that it scaled only moments ago. The cargo ship's crew have fled along with everyone else, so nobody is at risk of being crushed by it when it hits the deck.

Ramona giggles and flutters her golden feathered wings in a blatant excuse to dip her body forward and show off her pert bosom. "Gee whillikers, Advocate! That was super awesome! Will you teach *me* how to fight like that?"

Good Lord, just look at how lustfully she's gazing at me with those big bright

blue eyes! Something seriously needs to be done about this girl! Who knows who she'll throw herself at next?

I take a deep, fortifying breath. Then I grab hold of Ramona by her shoulders, pull her in real close, and plant a kiss square on her lips. Girls really aren't for me, but I still make exceptions for any who need manly correction. It's my moral duty to help them, after all!

Ramona squeaks as if she's trying to act all surprised, but I can tell that she's secretly pleased by my having finally reacted to all her attempts at flirting with me today. Her lithe young body starts quivering all over. She flares her wings suddenly in her excitement; almost sending us both into a gosh darned spin! Trying to prevent an accident, I wrap my right arm tightly around over her wings to pin them down out of the way. Then I kiss her some more while I take us up higher into the clouds for privacy.

It's as easy as apple pie for me to take care of all the flying for both of us. Heck, if things were different, I'd even enjoy the whole thing!

Maybe Wally would like to try doing it with me like this some time.

Once we're up there, I slide my free hand down Ramona's body and up underneath her skirt. She gasps against my mouth when I tug her panties down over her hips. Much to my relief, gravity does the rest for me where that part of things is concerned.

Ramona squirms eagerly in my grasp as I nudge her thighs apart with my knees and position myself between them. A lustful whimper escapes her; the sound of it muffled by my own mouth. Her chest heaves with desire, and her slender legs thrash eagerly in anticipation of what comes next.

I'm surprised to find that she's still a virgin. But at least now I don't need to

worry about not my having a condom. Virgins can't get pregnant, after all. And it also makes it a sure thing that she won't have any of those nasty sexual diseases. Why, I couldn't bear it if I caught something and passed it on to poor Wally!

When it's finally over, I descend slowly with Ramona onto the flat roof of the abandoned building near the docks that Mister Terrible was using as his base. I set her down on her feet, and gently brush her soft blonde ringlets away from her not so innocent face with my thumbs. She blinks up at me wordlessly; her eyes wide and her cheeks still flushed pink.

I give her one last kiss. Then I step back. "Okay, Ramona, you got what you wanted, you spoiled brat! But you'd better not go around bragging about it, understood? If word ever gets out that you threw yourself at me like this, then people will never let you live

it down. And I'm sure you don't want to end up labelled as being...well...as one of *those* sorts of girls."

Ramona's top lip begins to wobble as I lecture her. She makes as if she's about to try and interrupt me.

I shake my head sternly at her as I pick up her panties and hand them to her. "Put these on and no back talking, young lady! I won't stand for it! Now, run along back to your parents and quit bugging me! Oh – and next time, see to it that you find someone your own gosh darned age to fool around with!"

She turns away and puts on her panties in silence; clearly ashamed of herself, as well she should be! Then she runs to the nearest edge of the roof without so much as a thank you or a goodbye! I shake my head in disbelief at her lack of manners as she flares her wings and takes off. I really can't believe how many young people these

days have such bad attitudes! I suppose she'll go home now and just flat-out sulk for days over me having set her straight on her behaviour.

Jason appears on the roof barely a minute later, and capers over to me. "Tim! Where the fuck have you been, you feathery twat? Come on – Katarina's warming up the fucking jet! The Miracle Mob can fucking mop things up here. We need to go to Storm Isle. Our fearless fucking leader's just beaten the ever living fuck out of Captain fucking Fabulous!"

PROTECTORS!

Issue Twenty-Five – Antoine

APRIL 2017: STORM ISLE

Captain Fabulous is still alive, but he won't be moving any time soon. I doubt if he'll even fully regain consciousness without medical attention. Which he'll get, once the authorities arrive here on Storm Isle to take him into custody.

And no, I *don't* think he deserves any mercy. I'm just not willing to have yet another murder on my conscience because of a perverted misogynistic monster like him. Not when there's a perfectly good prison system waiting to welcome him into it. Hopefully for the rest of his natural life.

He'll have to be housed in a facility for superpowered individuals. That means sharing space with the kind of people that he used to be famous for defeating and bringing to justice. It's highly likely that he'll run into some of his old enemies. I can't help wondering how they'll react to his presence, or what they'll think once word gets out about what he did to end up there.

Yeah, I know I shouldn't think like that. Prison should be for rehabilitating offenders as well as punishing them. Wanting someone to suffer at the hands of other inmates isn't okay. But after learning about everything that Captain Fabulous has done here on Storm Isle, I honestly don't want to care about being moral where he's concerned.

He tried to target *Ramona*.

Grandma Molly would understand.

I miss her so, so much.

With Captain Fabulous well and truly out of the way, I'm busy searching the rest of his mansion for the Elemental Elles. It's a massive house; with way too many rooms compared to the number of occupants. That's even allowing for the handful of staff who work here. I've already spoken to all of them. Despite living here year-round, they all deny having known about what their employer has been doing to his victims. But *somebody* around here must have been responsible for cleaning that vile torture room downstairs. And I'm not buying their excuses about how they thought the screaming coming from inside it was all just a normal part of the Elemental Elles' combat training sessions. If I have my way, they'll all be held to account for helping Captain Fabulous.

It looks like I'm finally in the right place. According to the engraved chrome nameplate on the heavy oak door immediately to my left, it leads

into Foxfire's bedroom. The next door along is Stoneheart's. Cloud Cover and Zepher have the two bedrooms on the opposite side of the corridor.

All four of the bedroom doors are padlocked shut from the outside.

Oh yeah, the staff are *absolutely* going to serve time for their roles in this!

I don't have the key, so instead I just blast the padlock off Foxfire's bedroom door with one of the smaller energy weapons built into my left bracer. Then I open the door and step slowly into the room beyond it; trying to look as non-threatening as possible.

No offence, but I'm going to keep the rest of the details from here on in for the post mission report.

The Element Elles deserve at least as much privacy as I can give them.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Twenty-Six – Katarina

MAY 2017: LOS ANGELES

Mud beasts.

Savage creatures formed entirely out of dirt. Any kind of dirt. Soil, at best. Sewage, at close to worst.

Mud here is what they call a misnomer.

The pathetic madman responsible for summoning the monstrosities up has done so out of spite; intending to interrupt his ex-wife's wedding day. Three years on from their parting, she has moved on with her life. He refuses to do the same. An old tune, which he has made into everyone's problem.

It must be noted that in this particular case, everyone includes the wedding party, the guests attending it, the officiants and staff involved, all those traversing the roads and byways within the affected area, the staff and customers in eighty-six different stores, the occupants of fifteen hundred homes, the medical staff and patients in a private hospital for the elderly, the students and faculty members of six schools, and a large flock of peculiarly stupid pigeons.

It is merely five minutes into the confrontation, and I am already wholly convinced that the latter creatures actively desire to perish. And I have, as they say, *thoughts* regarding some of the others endangered.

Antoine has wisely instructed Timothy and Walter to protect the innocent bystanders, including the pigeons. Even now, almost ten full years after my departure from the ranks of the

League of Malice, my temperament remains ill-suited to such tasks. It is good that Antoine understands this fact. It is better yet that he makes no attempt to confront me about it. I do not want to harm him. But I am still too often the scorpion who stings the fox.

Far better that my venom be set to work elsewhere.

The nearest mud beast roars as it lunges toward me. Its maw is a gaping tunnel of unspeakable filth. The vile stench alone is an abomination. I take great pleasure in rending the creature apart with my mind, just as I did the previous three. Antoine has already electrocuted six others. He is now battling the final specimen by steadily grinding it to death beneath the wheels of the summoner's SUV. It is an inventive approach, and provides an intoxicating display of his abilities. There can be little wonder why the populace is so very enamoured of him.

He glances at me whilst the vehicle he controls continues to reduce the mud beast to a fine paste. His lips quirk into his usual warm smile. “Think the bride and groom will send us some cake?”

I shrug. “You are presuming that neither of them attempts to propose to *you* instead.”

Antoine pales at my reply, and then blushes. “That’s not going to happen!”

I smirk at his discomfiture. “It certainly did so the last time we saved the attendees at a wedding.”

Jason tumbles to a halt alongside me. He throws down the decapitated head of the summoner. The man’s bloodless face remains twisted most amusingly in shock. “Ta-fucking-dah! The day is fucking won. Tim said to tell you that he’s taking Wally back to the fucking jet. Fucker’s got another fucking migraine. Should probably get himself checked for a fucking brain tumour.”

Antoine halts the SUV atop the remains of the final, and at last deceased, mud beast. “Yeah, I’ve been trying to persuade him to have some tests run, but he keeps on making excuses. I think he’s still too traumatised by all the experimentation he was put through by Charybdis.”

The correctness of his assessment is all too probable. I frown as I contemplate the potential outcomes. “Do you suppose that it may render him incapable of continuing with his role in the Protectors?”

Antoine appears pensive. “I don’t want to speculate on that. But I’ve decided to bring some more superheroes into our roster either way. I’ll be holding the first few interviews later this month. Anyhow, we’d better get going now.”

He flies off towards the jet before either Jason or I can formulate a reply to his announcement.

Jason recovers himself first. “Is he fucking serious about that?”

I scowl in irritation. “I suspect so, yes. It is a foolish and unnecessary course of action. I cannot see his reasoning.”

Jason tugs at the bells on his cap as he attempts to ground himself. “Maybe he’s just finally fucking cracked up!”

This is not impossible. Antoine has endured much this year. Perhaps the murder of his beloved grandmother has indeed slowly tipped him over the edge of sanity. Or perhaps it was what he discovered during the events on Storm Isle. Regardless, mere insanity is no excuse for him to inflict such drastic change upon the rest of us.

Something will have to be done.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Twenty-Seven – Walter

JUNE 2017: LOS ANGELES

Four months on from my rescue, I'm finally starting to feel like my old self again.

Mostly, anyhow.

Aside from all those weird dreams I keep having lately. But they ain't real, so I ain't worrying about them.

Dreams can't hurt you.

And…and they can't make you do stuff, either.

Just because I keep on dreaming all that horrible crap about…about hurting

and killing Tim doesn't mean that I'm gonna wake up and actually go through with any of it! My subconscious is still just...you know...working through all the mental trauma, and shit, that's all. From what Charybdis put me through while I was stuck in their clutches.

It's normal.

Healthy, even.

Especially after how I was abandoned like that. Written off as dead, I mean. After the rest of the Protectors all saw that weird ray hit me, and then seemingly disintegrate me on the spot. When really it just teleported me away into a Charybdis holding cell.

Tortured and experimented on for more than four damn years...!

No...no, none of that was Tim's fault! He loves me! And I love him, too! I don't blame *him* for what happened.

I don't blame *any* of the Protectors.

It wasn't their fault that they got tricked like that.

Tricked into abandoning me for dead.

Into not looking for me even *once*...!

But that ain't their fault...

It ain't Tim's fault...

Those damn dreams of mine...they're just fucking *dreams*, damn it!

I don't really want to...want to...to do that stuff...

No...not to Tim...never to Tim.

He *understands* me.

He loves me.

And I...I love him, too...don't I?

PROTECTORS!

Issue Twenty-Eight – Antoine

JULY 2017: LOS ANGELES

I usually enjoy the July 4 celebrations, but today I've got far more important things to think about than fireworks – environmentally friendly, soundless, holographic ones, of course – and hotdogs. I even skipped out early on Kratz Industries Los Angeles' annual barbeque for our staff and their family and friends! Hopefully, everybody else attending it will have a great time.

I left Tim and Wally there. Those guys more than deserve to have a day off together to relax and unwind. Unlike certain *other* people around here!

Maybe it's because of the chronic pain that I've been living with since the events at the Del Drachi Infernali estate back in early January, but I'm seriously getting tired of catering to Katarina and Jason's recent antics. That whole grim and serious visage thing they've got going on during missions? Yeah, it clearly doesn't extend to them assisting me with interviewing potential new teammates! Or at least not in a good way.

Deliberately scaring people off during their interviews isn't helpful!

I tried calling the two of them out on it a few days ago; asking why they keep on messing with all the candidates. Katarina's excuse was that anyone who's scared of facing her down isn't going to last long fighting evil, and so, in her opinion, she's doing everyone involved a kindness. Jason just kind of shrugged at me, and admitted to enjoying being a dick.

Anyhow, today's candidate is called Amalthea Horner, aka Pink Phantom. She's from a small town up in Canada, and she's got a *really* interesting power set! You know how stealthers can usually only turn themselves invisible? Well, Amalthea's ability *also* hides her scent and any sounds that she makes other than speaking. And she can phase herself through solid objects as well! That last thing is incredibly useful, and seriously rare, too! There are only four other people in the world known to be capable of doing it, and three of them are career criminals – currently incarcerated.

I reached out in hope to the fourth one, but it turned out that she's in her early nineties now, and enjoying being a great-great grandmother way too much to be interested in accepting my invitation. She did send me a dozen jars of her completely and utterly *awesome* homemade spaghetti sauce, though, so it wasn't a complete loss!

Ironically, age is also the one concern that I have about Amalthea. But in her case, things are the other way round. She's only just turned eighteen. That's pretty much still a child in my eyes. I'm not sure if I'd feel comfortable taking her along on missions. What if she got hurt out there, or worse? How could I ever explain it to her parents if she was abducted or murdered by Charybdis?

No. No, I can't risk it. I *won't* risk it; especially not after what happened to poor Wally! I'll feel really bad about disappointing Amalthea by rejecting her application, but it's for her own good, damn it!

But what if I'm just being pre-emptively sexist and overbearing towards her here without realising it?

After all, Ramona started out as the Miracle Mob's kid sidekick when she was twelve. I never really approved of her parents letting her do that. Still, it

wasn't up to me, so I've kept my opinions to myself. Thankfully, she's never come to any harm. But I'm still secretly relieved that she's stepped down from her role while she gets ready to go to college.

Absolutely none of this helps me decide on whether I should risk accepting Amalthea onto the team.

God, I hate being the team leader!

Honestly, I'm kind of hoping that Katarina and Jason will pull one of their usual stunts during this afternoon's interview. Which is scheduled to begin in less than five minutes, so I'd better hurry along and get to the conference room before Amalthea does!

It's totally *not* cheating to put on my costume, leap out of the nearest window in my apartment, and fly down the side of the building to get there in time. Not when flying hurts less than walking for me these days.

The conference room is on the ninth floor, and it's got a balcony running all the way along outside the floor to ceiling windows on the east side of it. It's great for landing on and taking off from. Spacious, you know? And edged with a flat-topped stone wall, instead of anything easy to get a cape tangled up with. I'm hoping to secure planning permission to have a few more added onto the rest of the building.

There's nobody else in the conference room when I arrive. I take a few minutes to search for boobytraps. Last time around, Jason put thumb tacks on my chair, and a live white mouse in the thankfully empty coffee carafe over on the side table! I didn't find it amusing. Neither did the candidate; an up and coming twenty-six-year-old pyrokinetic from Guam. He gave us all a piece of his mind before he left.

I kept the mouse, and named him Gilbert. Got him a huge cage system

and another male mouse (this one grey and white) as a friend. The second mouse is named Sullivan. They live in my workshop; which is located way up on the sixteenth floor, just above my apartment. So far, they seem to be getting along just fine with each other.

I also contacted every single pet store in the state and asked them politely not to sell any other live animals to Jason or Katarina.

Huh. What do you know? No traps this time. Not even a whoopee cushion.

Now I'm *really* worried.

The door opens just as I straighten up from checking the underside of the conference table for any hidden wires leading to who only knows what. Minty ushers in a young woman dressed in a faded pink and white spandex catsuit, and pink flatform sneakers with glittery laces. She's only five feet tall even with the two inches added by her shoes,

and skinny, with a gaunt looking pale brown face, dark blue eyes framed by a glittery pink and white domino mask, and lilac pink hair that hangs to her waist. “Miss Horner is here for her interview, boss.”

He steps back out again; closing the door quietly behind him. Amalthea glances back over her left shoulder towards it. Then she looks at me, and gulps nervously. “Hi.”

I smile at her, and pull out the nearest chair for her. “Hey there! Amalthea, right? Nice to meet you. Please – take a seat, and we’ll get started here.”

I go and sit down at the opposite side of the table. Amalthea hunches down in her chair while I go through the usual set of standard introductory questions and answers; mostly stuff that was already covered in her application form, but with a few icebreakers thrown in as well; to try and encourage

her to talk more about herself. She's hiding her face behind her hair. Her hands are resting on the table in front of her, and she keeps clenching and unclenching her fists. I end up straining my ears to try and make out her replies to my questions.

It's starting to look as if turning down her application really will be the right thing to do here.

Then Jason drops down out of the ceiling vent, and lands in a crouch in the middle of the conference table; facing Amalthea. As always, he's in full costume; sinister black and white face paint and all, and there's a vicious looking footlong curved knife clenched in his right hand. The bells on his cap jingle as he tilts his head from side to side and sneers nastily. "And who's this one here, then, eh? Looks to me like little girl lost must be wanting to play with the fucking big leagues...!"

I swiftly raise my left hand and use the combined weaponry in my bracer to blast him out through one of the closed windows onto the balcony in a shower of bullet resistant glass fragments. I don't know what the end of his sentence was going to be, and frankly I don't care either. My patience with him has snapped. "Too far, Jason!"

He groans and huffs out a pained cackle. "Worth it, mate! The fucking looks on your faces...!"

This time, the energy blast sends him toppling right over the wall surrounding the balcony. "Go away, Jason."

Amalthea has scrambled to her feet. She looks anxious. "Will he be alright?"

It's the first thing that she's said in anything louder than a whisper.

I nod my reassurance. "He'll be fine. Don't worry; he's totally unkillable. Some kind of chaos magic thing, you

know? Anyhow, sorry about the interruption to your interview...!"

Katarina chooses this moment to blast open the door of the conference room with one of her telekinetic energy bolts. She stalks in imperiously, also in full costume, and with telekinetic energy crackling and spitting all around her. "Where is the newest challenger to my power? What deluded fool now dares to believe that they may enter the domain of Countess Cruel and live?"

I take a deep, calming breath, steel myself for the pain of moving, and rise slowly to my feet. Then I upend the conference table and blast it away from me; straight towards Katarina. It bludgeons its way past her defences and slams into her; knocking her back out of the room. I yell after her angrily. "This is your last warning, Katarina! If you or Jason dare to take even one step back in here, then I *will* remove the pair

of you from the building, *and* from the team! I mean it! Having you two running around here deliberately terrorising all our potential new teammates *isn't* funny or clever! It's downright mean and nasty, and you should both be thoroughly ashamed of yourselves over it!"

There's no reply from outside the room. Presumably, Katarina has already slunk off to find Jason, and gloat with him about how they've successfully driven off yet another would-be new Protector.

That, and how they've finally managed to make me lose my temper with them.

To my right, Amalthea clears her throat politely. "Um, Dr Kratz? Does this mean my interview is over?"

I sigh resignedly as I nod my head. It's probably for the best that she quits now, but I still feel bad for her. "Yeah, Amalthea, it's over."

She pushes her hair away from her face, and tucks it behind her ears. Then she blinks owlishly at me. “So, did I, like, get the spot on the team?”

I turn and stare back at her in disbelief. “Uh, you mean that you’d actually still be willing to *join* this circus?”

Amalthea nods vigorously. “Being a superhero is awesome, but I’ve kind of had my butt kicked a few times now. I feel like I’ll be safer as part of a team. My mom and dad both agree. And the Protectors are just, like, *so* cool!”

Oh no. This poor kid! If she thinks the street level villains up in Canada are bad, then there’s no way she’s prepared for what our team goes up against. I should do what’s best for her, and turn down her application.

But she’s clearly set on joining a team. If I turn her away, then she’ll just go and apply elsewhere.

What if the next interview she has is with someone like Captain Fabulous?

We all have to start *somewhere*. And she's smiling up at me so hopefully! Even after Jason and Katarina's attempts at scaring her away. Not to mention my reactions to them. Amalthea saw me at close to my worst just now, and she *still* wants to join?

What else can I say to her, but yes?

I smile and hold out my hand for her to shake it. "Welcome to the team, Pink Phantom! How do you feel about me making you a new superhero costume? I'm thinking something with a *lot* more armour. Maybe some weapons, too?"

I will keep this girl safe if it *kills* me.

Let's just try to ignore the fact that I'm already dying.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Twenty-Nine – Antoine

JULY 2017: LOS ANGELES

Amalthea's been part of our team for two weeks now, and things are going great so far. Well, aside from that little blip with Tim during training yesterday, but really, that was all his fault! As Katarina pointed out at the time, he should have known better than to try swooping down to tackle someone whose powers let them phase through solid objects. And it's not as if he even collided with the floor all that hard anyhow. Honestly, I think his pride took the biggest hit. Mostly because of how Jason wouldn't quit cackling about it afterwards.

Life lessons, am I right?

It would be nice if Katarina and Jason experienced a few of those. You know; grow as people, learn to take at least some responsibility for the assorted shenanigans they cause on an hourly basis, and so on. As it is, they've made it next to impossible for me to find staff who are willing to work here in the Protectors' headquarters. One or two of the braver Kratz Industries security personnel will *sometimes* agree to drop off packages and escort guests up or down in the elevator, but that's it. Everything else falls to Minty. He never complains about the extra workload, but it still bothers me.

In an attempt to make things easier for him, I've just finished building a bunch of small semi-autonomous cleaning robots to act as housekeepers for the Protectors. I've linked them to the building's security systems so that they can move around freely without

accidentally triggering any of the alarms. And I've made extra sure that they're sturdy enough to survive any encounters with Jason and Katarina!

Not going to lie – the urge to arm the little guys as well *is* still nagging at me.

But that would be overkill.

Right?

PROTECTORS!

Issue Thirty – Amalthea

JULY 2017: LOS ANGELES

I hope Antoine is okay; wherever he is.

He took off on vacation the day before yesterday, straight after the, um, the *incident* with the cleaning robots.

I feel bad about what happened. Tim says I shouldn't worry because it was just a silly prank, and Wally agrees with him like he does about everything, but I don't think they're right. I think we *should* feel bad. I mean, none of us even tried talking to Antoine about what Katarina and Jason had told us. We just, like, assumed it was all true!

That wasn't smart of us at *all*. We should have investigated what was going on first. If we'd done that, then Antoine could have, like, told us that the poor little cleaning robots he'd built *weren't* there to kill us all in our sleep, and that he totally *hadn't* been brainwashed by Charybdis, either!

Katarina and Jason totally shouldn't have pranked us. I mean, like, for real – we're *literally* all on the same team here! And it wasn't even a funny kind of prank. Especially not for Antoine. He probably spent forever making those robots for us. And then we just destroyed them right in front of him!

I think we hurt his feelings.

I got mad and yelled at Katarina and Jason about it earlier today; before I went out to grab some snacks and drop off my library books. The three of us were riding Elevator A down to the lobby, and Jason started, um, fake

whispering to Katarina about me, like, not having what it takes to be a real superhero, and that I'd probably just, like, quit the team or something now that Antoine wasn't around to babysit me. When I heard him say that part, I turned around and told them both straight that Antoine is like, totally a *way* better person than any of the rest of the Protectors will *ever* be!

I don't think they were expecting for me to do anything like that, but I didn't risk sticking around for their response. I just, like, turned myself invisible and phased out through the side of the elevator onto the floor that we were passing at the time. Then I took the stairs the rest of the way down instead.

I wonder if Antoine would be proud of me for having, like, stood my ground? I hope he comes back so that I can maybe, like, ask him and find out. But maybe I shouldn't do that. It would be kind of vain of me if I did.

Anyway, the thing in the elevator with Katarina and Jason was this morning's drama. Nothing much has happened since then; aside from how my errands took me *way* longer to finish than I'd planned them to. For real – it's, like, mid-afternoon now! I still can't believe that the library was *so* busy!

Jeez, I'm glad to be home again!

I set my purse down on top of the shoe rack in the empty hallway of my apartment while I shut the front door. When I turn around again, Katarina is standing, like, *inches* away from me!

She smirks when I jump backwards in surprise and bump into the front door. Then she steps in closer again, and smiles down at me. "Congratulations, little Pink Phantom. After your show of courage this morning, Jason and I have decided that we are going to enjoy having you on the team after all."

I gulp. "Um…okay…?"

Katarina laughs softly at the back of her throat. “Remember to eat today! Your powers are making you too skinny again. Antoine worries about that.”

She snaps her fingers at me abruptly; gesturing for me to get out of her way. I scuttle sideways so that she can reach the front door without deciding to just, like, walk straight through me instead. Seconds later, she’s gone.

Does this mean that they want to be, like, *friends* with me now?

PROTECTORS!

Issue Thirty-One – Katarina

SEPTEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

The seasons have turned, and Antoine has still not returned to us. I have begun to wonder if he ever shall.

In the interim, it falls to the rest of us to interrogate potential new additions to the Protectors. Jason and I still do not see the use of this tiresome activity, but it seemed important to Antoine, and so we will continue to engage in it in his absence. Our gracious decision to do so has pleased Timothy beyond all explicable measure, bemused Amalthea, and caused Minty to

cautiously declare us both as being possibly much improved.

Walter has voiced no opinion on it.

Walter voices no opinions whatsoever now. He speaks very little, and even then, only when he is prevailed upon to do so. It is a silence not at all in keeping with the garrulous fool who was taken from us. A silence which Walter now wears as if a second skin. He wraps it closely about himself as he lurks around the tower; peering out at us all from dark corners and through the open doorways of unlit rooms.

There are far too many such places within this building now.

I have ordered Minty to attend to the lighting several times now. Each time, he claimed to have already done so. Since I know him to be wholly honest, this can only mean that someone else is undoing his work behind him.

Someone, or perhaps *something*.

The latter disturbing possibility feels more probable with each passing day. Walter's strangeness has grown increasingly eerie. There is now an almost inhuman quality about him. I find it most difficult to dismiss his symptoms as merely an outcome of what he endured at the hands of Charybdis.

I suspect there to be an evil far more ancient at play here. An evil which prefers to have dark corners and unlit rooms readily available to it, and which has begun to display an unacceptable degree of interest in our youngest teammate.

Jason shares my thoughts; just as he always does. He has taken to keeping vigil underneath Amalthea's bed each night with his best knives already in his hands. I too am armed, but I deem it far more dignified to repose upon her

couch. Thus far, our young teammate remains ignorant of these measures, and of the reasons for our taking them; as do Timothy and Minty.

Walter, however, or at least what little remains of him, has almost definitely guessed at what we are doing.

He has not reacted to it – yet.

He will undoubtedly attempt to do so.

Alas, none of this precludes our reluctantly agreed upon duty: the collective interrogation of a Greek woman named Astrape Athanasiou.

I do not like her.

Amalthea, who is seated on the chair to my left, is her usual quiet self.

On my right, Jason is openly asleep in his chair. He is snoring loudly.

Timothy and what might well not be Walter are both mercifully absent. They are visiting a high school today;

talking to the students about the dangers posed to young people by peer pressure and drugs. It is one less thing to concern myself with.

Astrape is extremely tall and athletic looking; with what are politely described as being aquiline facial features, and the smooth golden-brown skin that is so very typical of those from the Mediterranean. She is dressed in dark brown leather armour and a voluminous scarlet cloak, with a golden circlet on her head. Her long black hair hangs in a thick braid down the middle of her back. Her face is ageless, and her eyes are yellow. They are harsh, cold eyes – typical of those people with the capacity for producing optical blasts. In Astrape's case, these blasts are bioelectrical in nature.

This is another way of saying that she shoots lightning from her eyes at will.

It is far from her only power.

I curl my upper lip into an unimpressed sneer as I read the full list of Astrape's abilities aloud. "So – you possess invulnerability, superhuman strength, enhanced senses, a flying speed of up to supersonic levels, *and* bioelectrical optic blasts?"

Astrape nods proudly in response. Her voice rings out loudly as she replies to me. "Indeed! They are all gifts which were bestowed upon me many thousands of years ago by none other than the mighty Zeus!"

I stare unblinkingly across the width of the conference table at her as I assess the situation before me. Why do so very many people with optical blasts end up becoming utterly insane? And why also are they almost inevitably all but invulnerable to physical harm?

Most unfortunately, Amalthea is wholly enthralled by the supposed revelation.

She evidently believes the drivel that Astrape has just spouted to us.

I now know what barely audible excited squeeing sounds like.

I do not care for it.

Astrape continues to match my gaze. There is now a hint of smugness to her expression. Doubtless, her enhanced senses have detected every syllable of Amalthea's reaction.

I kick Jason's left ankle sharply.

He awakens at once, and elbows me in retaliation as he straightens up. "What the fuck's gone wrong this fucking time, then? Can't a bloke catch forty fucking winks in peace around here?"

Amalthea blushes at his crudeness, and then swiftly hides her face behind her hair. "Jason! Come on. We, like, have company right now, you know?"

Astrape waves dismissively; as if her benediction is somehow necessary or welcome. “Pray, my new friends, do not concern yourselves with it! I have assuredly heard far worse already in my long lifetime!”

Jason covers his greasepainted face with his hands. He groans wearily. “Ah, for fuck’s sake – seriously? We’ve gone and got ourselves another one of these fucking ones, eh?”

I maintain both my silence and my eye contact with our newest foe. I have no doubts of the latter assessment. The gradually increasing hostility in her micro expressions confirms it. She will undoubtedly attack us very soon.

Antoine is a fool to have ever granted her this interrogation. He should know better by now than to accept applications for consideration from all those with optical blasts. When he returns to us, I will chastise him for it,

as well as for his having abandoned his duties here in Los Angeles over such a dull and petty matter.

Astrape's jaw tightens.

Jason snarls as he leaps up from his chair; landing upon the conference table with his knives readied.

I remain seated and raise my hands; my power already surging about me in a veil of crackling psionic energy. A moment's thought and it is extended to cover Amalthea also.

Our naïve young teammate squeaks anxiously at our actions. She stumbles to her feet; her lilac pink tresses falling back from her face as she moves. "What…um…what's wrong, guys?"

Astrape bellows her reply before Jason or I can speak. "What cold hospitality is this? You would treat me as an enemy so readily? I, who was chosen as torchbearer by the mighty Zeus, and

who has now journeyed across many leagues to do battle by your sides against the forces of evil?”

I nod curtly to Amalthea. “Go!”

She does not move.

Astrape’s eyes begin to glow.

Jason tumbles instantly to his left; placing himself between Astrape and Amalthea. He does not speak, but his cackling is a hollow sound in my ears.

I prepare myself to strike at our opponent with all my power. I do not know if it will be enough, but I will try nonetheless.

For a moment, everything stills.

Suddenly, at the opposite side of the room, and directly behind Astrape, the door of the conference room opens.

Astrape immediately whirls to face it; effortlessly backhanding Jason into the wall behind us when he springs at her.

There is an all too familiar cracking sound as several of his bones break upon his impact with it.

Amalthea gasps and vanishes.

Antoine walks in; knowing nothing of the danger he now faces, and dressed in mere blue jeans and a faded grey T-shirt instead of his armour. He stops and stares at what is occurring before him in obvious bewilderment. I see his eyes widen as he makes to speak.

Then Astrape unleashes the full power of her optical blasts.

Straight at Antoine.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Thirty-Two – Antoine

SEPTEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

I can't help sighing as the lady in front of me attempts to obliterate me with what looks and smells like genuine lightning. Naturally, her attack has no negative effects whatsoever on me, because technokinetic energy feeds off bioelectrical energy. That's just basic superpowered science. But I'm still not happy about her having attempted it. What if someone else had walked in alongside me, or instead of me? And I'm even more annoyed with Jason and Katarina for them having somehow created this whole unpleasant situation in the first place!

Speaking of the terrible two, I'm also still not over what happened back in August with the cleaning robots I built. In case you haven't heard already, it ended *badly*. You see, while I'd made sure that the robots were sturdy enough to survive any encounters with Jason and Katarina, I *hadn't* thought to allow for everyone else on the team. Or, more accurately, for Katarina and Jason convincing them all that the robots were there to kill us in our sleep on the orders of Charybdis. Oh, and that yours truly here had somehow been brainwashed into helping them with their dastardly task.

I came *seriously* close to quitting the team over the whole debacle.

Instead, I was an adult about it, and took myself off on what turned out to be an awesome solo late summer through mid-autumn vacation to Monaco, without telling anybody other than Minty (who mouse sat for me)

where I was going. I've had an *amazing* time over the past six weeks.

But that's more than enough wool gathering for now. Time for me to get back to work here!

I decide to voice my irritation with the lot of them. "Wow. What a thoroughly charming way to introduce yourself, kind stranger! Hi there, welcome, how do you do? I'm Antoine – Antoine Kratz, aka Kickstart. You may have heard of me already. I'm the guy who owns this building. Oh, and I also happen to lead the Protectors; albeit that I admittedly sometimes wonder why I bother with doing that last part. On which note, come on, seriously, you guys? You two couldn't even manage to get through *one* interview without antagonising the candidate?"

Jason is still out cold, but Katarina has the unexpected good grace to incline her head slightly in acknowledgement

of my words. She doesn't say anything, but she's not trying to fry our guest with her psionics either. I'm classing this as an improvement on the usual. Our guest doesn't speak either. She looks as if she's too stunned.

Amalthea suddenly pops into view right next to me; seemingly out of nowhere. She flings her arms around me in a tight hug. "Antoine! You're okay! And you came back!"

I manage to hide how much pain I'm now feeling thanks to her show of affection. "Uh, yeah, I did. And I am. Wait – how long have you been here?"

She nods anxiously towards our guest; who's recovered from her surprise enough to start scowling. "Um…so, I was just, like, kind of helping with the interview, but it, um…went wrong…?"

Katarina finally speaks. "The candidate has optical blasts, and states that she

was gifted her powers by Zeus. You may perform the mathematics."

The woman in question whirls around on the spot to accost Katarina. "How dare you doubt my words, mortal? I should strike you down where you stand for such impertinence!"

I get the feeling that she probably *isn't* going to be our friend.

I clap my hands together to regain our guest's attention; nodding and smiling to her as she turns back around to face me again. "Okay! I'm sensing that we got off to a bad start here! Let's try and fix that now, okay? Amalthea – Minty mentioned to me that his phone is acting up right now. Will you please go and find him in person for me? Tell him that we need some refreshments. Some of his coconut and lemon syrup cupcakes would be extra cool, if he has any left in the pantry."

Amalthea nods and darts off out of the room; clearly relieved to be gone. She's blissfully unaware of what I really mean by requesting coconut and lemon syrup cupcakes. It's an emergency code between me and Minty; informing him that I need him to keep everybody else in the building well clear of wherever I am right now, and also to get the medical suite ready for incoming casualties. But there will still be cupcakes, too, of course, and some sandwiches, and a few different drink options; because Minty really is just that much of an awesome valet.

Katarina hands me the tablet that was on the table in front of her. "The applicant's details are all listed here, Antoine. I will take Jason to medical."

Oh boy! The threat level here must be off the scale if Katarina doesn't want to risk sticking around!

I wave her off whilst speedreading the information on the screen. “No problem, Katarina. Get well soon, Jason – the Protectors need their unkillable chaos gremlin mascot!”

He snarls at me, but Katarina drags him away with her by his elbow before he can do more than splutter a few furious expletives. The door of the conference room closes softly behind them; leaving me all alone with the woman who just tried to kill me.

At least I know her name now.

What I *don’t* know is how in the world she got herself invited to attend an in-person interview with us when I’ve never seen her application before.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Thirty-Three – Astrape

SEPTEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

The dark bearded male mortal who has taken over the task of welcoming me to this coarse place of habitation claims himself to be the leader of those heroes who I had sought to aid. I am unconvinced by his words; for he appears to me to be no more than a poor shadow of the mighty Kickstart! There is a sickly pallor to the edges of this mortal's complexion, and an unkempt lankness to the waves of his hair. Moreover, he walks with a limp; albeit one that he conceals from all but the most keenly sighted of observers.

I gaze upon him for a long moment after the violet eyed witch departs with her foul-mouthed companion. When at last I deign to speak to him, it is with great caution and suspicion. “Who are you truly, mortal? And why do you seek to deceive me so on this matter?”

He sighs as if he is most weary. “I’m exactly who I told you I was. But I get why you might have doubts about that. I know I look a little different these days to my official pictures. It’s…it’s complicated. And beyond boring, too. Unforeseen familial blood curse, partially uninformed casting of a long-forgotten spell, wilful breaking of ancient pacts with a demonic dragon, all the usual kind of stuff. Super dull, you know? Now – let’s get back to talking about *you* instead!”

I introduce myself proudly. “I am Astrape Athanasiou, and I was gifted my powers many thousands of years ago by the mighty Zeus!”

The mortal – I am yet unconvinced of his identity – nods at my words. “So, are you just named *after* the goddess Astrape, or are you claiming to literally *be* her? And more importantly, how exactly did you manage to bypass the usual application screening process? Because I personally review every single application that we get, and I know for a fact that I’ve never seen yours before now.”

His questions are wise, but his fears unfounded. I tell him so; explaining with great patience how I am indeed the goddess Astrape, and how the will and might of the Olympians is unhindered by mortal contrivances!

He listens to my words attentively, and without interruption, which is most pleasing. Then he speaks once more. “Right. Okay. But if you’re really the goddess Astrape, then why are you bothering with using a surname? Even if it is one that means immortal.”

Although displeased at being doubted once more, I find myself most admiring of his rational and polite manner. Therefore, I graciously deign to grant him his answer without further resort to smiting. “I have observed how mortals place great value upon such customs! It was – and indeed, yet is – my intention to honour this fact. Thus, did I choose to adapt my name!”

My host nods his head in signal of his accession to my words. “Thank you for making the effort. It’s very considerate of you. But in future, please try to adhere to our mortal contrivances, okay? They’re in place for a reason, and there are a lot of hardworking people who’ll be upset with you if you ignore them. It’s considered rude.”

His explanation of this matter is most seemly in its wording, and I find that I am pleased enough by it to grant him my agreement. “Very well! I shall do so henceforth, friend Kickstart!”

I have decided that he is indeed whom he claims himself to be.

This open show of my acceptance and most genial intention of friendship between us pleases the mighty Kickstart greatly. He smiles in answer. “Okay! This is good! I think we can make this work. Sorry about the mix-up earlier. As I’m sure you’re guessed by now, we really didn’t expect any deities to apply. Katarina and Jason must have been worried in case it was another one of Charybdis’ schemes – seriously, those assholes will stoop to anything! Anyway, I’m glad that we’ve been able to smooth everything over like this.”

I grant him the blessing of my smile. “I too am pleased by our accord! And I yearn to begin my role in the great and worthy war against Charybdis!”

Kickstart nods his head at once in further willing accession. “Glad to have you on the team, Astrape! But

we'll still need to decide on a superhero codename for you to use. It's just another one of our mortal contrivances. People like us to have them, you know? And it also helps to ensure that you can still have a private life apart from your role within the Protectors; well, if you want to, that is. Some heroes do, and some don't; it's a very personal decision."

I nod my head in comprehension of his words. "I shall indulge myself in this choice, friend Kickstart! Doubtless, wandering the mortal realm unknown will prove most entertaining."

He smiles once more. "Please, feel free to call me Antoine! Now – how do you feel about going by the superhero codename of Thunderstruck?"

PROTECTORS!

Issue Thirty-Four – Jason

OCTOBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Amalthea sleeps like a fucking log.

Now, on the one hand, this makes secretly babysitting her a fucking sight easier. But on the other hand, she snores. It's beyond fucking loud. And to make things worse, I'm fucking stuck here; hiding under the adorable little bint's fucking bed for the umpteenth fucking night in a row – my hearing's fucking fucked by this point!

Ah, the things I do for my teammates!

Katarina reckons that whatever we're fucking up against will make its fucking

move soon. I fucking hope she's right, because watching it fucking pretend to be Wally is getting on my fucking tits! Why the fuck we can't just take it outside and set it on fucking fire while Tim's fucking back is turned is beyond my fucking ken, but since I trust Katarina to know what she's fucking doing, I'll stick to the fucking plan.

It's doing my fucking back in, though. Fucking hardwood floors.

Above me, Amalthea rolls over in her fucking sleep; dead to the fucking world, and dreaming of sugarplums, or whatever else the fuck it is that young girls like her dream of. Her bed creaks when she moves. If she wasn't so fucking skinny, I'd have a fair few genuine fucking concerns for my continued wellbeing. But as it is, I somehow very much fucking doubt that I'll end up being fucking squashed by a fucking collapsed bed. And if I do, then it'll be a right fucking good laugh!

Hang on a fucking minute – it sounds to me as if there's something fucking creeping along the fucking hallway outside Amalthea's fucking bedroom! I can just about fucking hear it over all her fucking snoring. Well, that's just fucking typical, isn't it? We spend weeks fucking waiting for it to try something, and the *one* fucking night that Katarina isn't here is when things finally fucking kick off.

I slide out from underneath the fucking bed, and hop up on top of the fucking wardrobe instead. Time for a little bit of fucking death from above, you fucker!

Well, well, well! Just look at that! The fucking handle on the fucking bedroom door has fucking started to turn. It clicks when the door fucking opens, but it doesn't fucking matter, because Amalthea is still fucking snoring.

The fucking bedroom door swings inwards. As it does so, the fucking

darkness from the fucking hallway leaks into the fucking bedroom, and makes it even fucking darker.

Now, kindly fucking note that I am not a fucking physicist. But I still fucking know that that's not how darkness is supposed to fucking work!

Fortunately, the fucking lenses in my fucking goggles mean that I can still fucking see what's fucking happening. Something that's Wally shaped but very fucking definitely *not* Wally steps into the fucking pitch-dark bedroom. It pauses, and then it takes another fucking step towards the bed; where Amalthea is still contentedly snoring her fucking head off.

I raise both my knives perfectly fucking silently over my fucking head.

The fucking not Wally thing stretches out its left fucking arm towards Amalthea. The fucking fingers on its fucking hand are far too fucking long,

and what's more they're all fucking well tipped with fucking claws!

It touches the fucking quilt.

I spring down from my fucking perch at the fucker; fucking cackling as I go! "I'm going to fucking gut you like a fucking fish! I'll fucking skin you alive, so I fucking will!"

The fucking not Wally thing fucking well vanishes into thin fucking air!

I fucking well sail through where it was fucking standing, and land in a crouch on the foot of the fucking bed.

Amalthea, bless her little heart, finally stops fucking snoring, and goes from being sound asleep to fucking wide awake impressively fucking quickly. She takes one fucking look at me, screams her fucking head off, and then fucking phases herself down through her fucking bed; turning fully fucking invisible as she fucking goes.

I can only fucking hope that Katarina's on her way back from her fucking date, because frankly I fucking fear that things around here are about to fucking go to absolute fucking fuck!

PROTECTORS!

Issue Thirty-Five – Katarina

OCTOBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

It is late when I return home from my final date with my now ex-girlfriend. I am greatly displeased with Rebecca for wasting my time tonight. She could easily have ended our relationship without insisting upon meeting with me in person to do so. Certainly, there was no need for her to so loudly catalogue her reasons in front of the entire restaurant. Or to hurl her drink in my face when I magnanimously accepted our parting without question. Such absurdly public displays of histrionics are of no good to anyone. But at least the matter is settled now.

The lights within the building are flickering as I enter; an all too familiar phenomenon by now. The handful of Antoine's minions who are present in the lobby gawk at me from what they clearly – and incorrectly – presume to be a safe distance. Ignoring them, I step into Elevator B.

I am about to press the button for the seventeenth floor when I observe one of the female minions approaching me at as much speed as the confines of her black knee length pencil skirt will allow. The chunky soles of her black and cream flatform sandals clatter inelegantly against the marble floor of the lobby. "Hold the elevator, please!"

I gaze down at her impassively as she joins me inside Elevator B. Even with the inches added to her height by her shoes, she remains almost a foot shorter than me. The Kratz Industries personnel card dangling from the lanyard around her neck identifies her

as Erin Kangjeon. She appears young, perhaps in her mid-twenties; round faced and dainty, with golden hued skin, large double-lidded eyes whose colour lingers on the cusp between deepest purple and black, and long straight black hair that is quietly unwinding itself one strand at a time from the staid chignon that it has been scraped into. Her uncomfortable looking skirt is paired with a cream cowlneck sweater and black hosiery.

Perhaps Antoine's hiring choices are at last improving.

Erin is too busy explaining herself to me to notice my interest in her beauty. "Thank you so much for waiting for me! I need to go to the sixteenth floor, and Elevators D and E are out of order."

The lights in our own elevator flicker as she speaks. I block the doors from closing with my left elbow. "Why do you need to go to that floor?"

She holds up an A4 sized sealed white envelope. It is addressed to Antoine; his name emblazoned upon it in elegant crimson lettering. “This came to the front desk a few minutes ago for Dr Kratz. It’s marked as urgent, so I’m taking it straight up to him.”

My instincts begin prickling. “It is after eleven o’clock now – no one delivers letters to anyone at such a late hour. Who brought it?”

Erin glances at the still open doors. “It came by private courier. A white man; tall, with brown hair and dark glasses. I didn’t notice what courier service he worked for, sorry. But it will be in the book – everyone who visits the building has to sign in, after all.”

I pluck the envelope from her hand with my mind, whilst levitating her out of the elevator. “Inform security, and tell them that Countess Cruel orders them to investigate immediately!”

The doors close before Erin can begin to formulate her reply. Facially, she appeared both shocked and angry at my actions. It will be interesting to see how she reacts to me in future. But for now, I must focus all my attention on this mysterious envelope.

Which has begun to leak blood.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Thirty-Six – Antoine

OCTOBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

I'm celebrating having purchased the Scottish island of Sula Sgeir – yeah, no more gannet murdering on my watch, butchers of Ness! – by pulling a quiet all-nighter in my workshop; listening to a bunch of my favourite tracks and painstakingly rebuilding the cleaning robots that my teammates all but obliterated back in August. This time, the robots will be sturdier in their construction. And wholly electricity proof, too; given Astrape has joined the team. She's an impressively quick learner with regards to contemporary technology, but mistakes *do* happen.

Also, there's still Jason and Katarina to allow for. True, they haven't tried pranking anybody since I got back, but I'm neither stupid nor optimistic enough to imagine that they've quit their annoying ways permanently. They're just biding their time; waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike! And with this being Halloween night? Yeah, no way am I leaving the safety of my workshop before morning! Well – not without wearing my armour, anyhow. And maybe even a helmet, too; if I can *finally* get the one that I've been working on since March past the prototype phase. It's proving trickier than you might think. The connector seals that will attach it to the rest of the suit aren't working the way that they should. It keeps falling off during testing. And don't even get me *started* on describing the disaster that ought to be the thing's HUD!

So, nope – no leaving the workshop for me tonight. Not even to take my private

elevator straight down to my apartment on the floor below this one. True, the elevator itself is biometrically coded so that only Minty and I can access it, and in theory so are my personal quarters, but who's to say if Jason and Katarina won't have snuck up from the main ground floor lobby using Elevator D? That one would take them straight to the fourteenth floor, where I entertain guests, and which is just underneath my personal quarters. From there, all they'd need is a ladder and a few tools to cut their way up through the ceiling!

Although, in hindsight, pretty much anybody could do that if they were so inclined. Jason, Katarina, unethical dogged reporters trying to fabricate a scandal about me, overly adoring fans bent on cornering me alone, Charybdis operatives out for my blood…!

Note to self – improve the security on *both* floors of your apartment.

Oh well, at least my workshop is safe!

A pink pyjama clad Amalthea phases in through the ceiling and lands right on top of the cleaning robot that I'm currently working on. She yelps as she bashes her knee on its chassis. Then she flings herself off the bench and squarely into my arms; wrapping herself around me like an especially unhappy octopus as she frantically tries to explain to me what's wrong. "Jason…um…Jason was…I mean, like, he was…he was on my *bed*…!"

The urge to just flat out set the sweary little murder clown's blood on fire inside his veins rises within me.

I ignore it, and do my best to comfort Amalthea instead; speed dialling Minty as I do so. "Hey, Minty! Sorry to call so late, but I need you in my workshop!"

My loyal valet arrives in my workshop less than two minutes later. "What's up, boss?"

Before I can answer him, the workshop doors slide open again, and Katarina staggers into view. She's wearing street clothes, and clutching at her left side. A red liquid which could be anything from blood to corn syrup oozes through her fingers. She gulps in some air and wheezes at us as if she's trying to speak, but no words come out. Then she sways for a moment, before her eyes roll up in her head and she drops like a stone.

Minty dives forward and catches her. He lays her down carefully, and checks her side. "She isn't faking it, boss! There's a blood trail along the hall to Elevator B; I can see it from here."

I set Amalthea down on the edge of the bench and hurry over to Minty and Katarina; gesturing to Doc9, the medical drone that I keep here in my workshop, as I go. "We'll take care of her, Minty! You go raise the alarm! Jason broke the switch I had in here."

It's a nasty injury; with four long narrow gashes over the front of Katarina's left ribs, and a smaller puncture wound at the back of them. If I had to make an educated guess about what caused it, I'd go with something or someone with *very* big claws having grabbed at her.

There aren't all that many bad guys with claws. I run through the names in my head while Doc9 cuts off the remains of Katarina's strapless bustier and begins tending to her injury.

Top of the list can only ever be Elwyn Butterworth, aka the Bringer of Blood. Unkillable felinoid hybrid mercenary for hire to whoever pays the most. He's a scary guy; especially when he gets riled up! But if it had been him, then Katarina likely never would have made it this far. And even if she had done, then Butterworth would have been right on her heels. Since there's still no sign of him, I think I can safely discount him. Or at least, I hope so.

Next up is Knallhart, a cybernetically enhanced canid hybrid assassin with a talent for stealthing, and whose real identity is unknown. He has close ties with Charybdis; most especially the vile genius Doktor Erzfeind. If Knallhart is roaming loose inside the building, then we've got real problems. And they'll probably include zombies.

Last of all on my list is that bastard Reichslander. Damn, I hate vampires! But especially Reichslander. He's an asshole of the lowest order. As far as anyone seems to know, he first turned up during the Roman era. He's been tormenting mortals ever since, and I know the Protectors are high on his list of enemies. Worse news – for me, at least – his signet ring generates a magical field around him that absorbs all forms of electrical energy; which makes the weaponry built into my armour useless against him. And since he's undead, my technokinesis can't affect him either. It stems from

bioelectromagnetism; which makes it an energy that only affects living cells. None of that is good, of course, but Reichslander still can't enter the building without being invited in by someone who lives here. I don't see that happening, and I'm *almost* positive that Katarina couldn't have gotten all the way here from outside with this injury without security noticing and raising the alarm.

Doc9 finishes dressing Katarina's wound, and immediately glides back to his charging station. I programmed him to have a bedside manner, but after the fates of his eight predecessors – in chronological order: Jason, Charybdis hit squad, Jason again, alien fungus, Katarina, gremlins, Jason *and* Katarina, giant murder shrimp – I added in some self-preservation subroutines. It looks like they're working as intended!

Since I'm already dying, I take the risk of lifting Katarina into my arms and

carrying her over to one of my larger workbenches. “Amalthea, bring me my cape, please. I need to put something soft underneath her to help keep her comfortable.”

Amalthea grabs my cape from its stand and hurries over. She helpfully folds up my cape and phases it up through the bench and into the ideal head, neck, and lumbar support position. “Is Katarina going to be okay, Antoine?”

I nod as I tuck a fold of my cape in around Katarina’s torso to try to help make up for her top being gone. At least she still has her bra. “Yeah, she just needs rest now. Doc9 sedated her for his safety and her comfort. Mostly the former.”

Amalthea nods, looking relieved. “Um, so, should we, like, take her shoes off, or something? You know, to keep her from getting, like, foot cramps, or a blood clot in her leg, maybe?”

“Nope, definitely *not* risking doing that!” I back away swiftly, shaking my head as I go. “And you shouldn’t either. She’s killed for less. Just check the records for what happened to Doc5! I’m still trying to find some of his parts. And that guy in – uh, you know what, never mind him. He was a creep. Totally had it coming to him! But yeah, no, Katarina *really* doesn’t like people messing with her footwear – kid! No! What did I *literally* just say to you?”

Amalthea sets down Katarina’s high heels and shrugs at me nonchalantly; as if she hasn’t just been terminally proactive and well-intentioned. “Life is risk! She’s told me that, like, a couple of times now.”

“No more adhering to bad life advice for you!” I glare at her sternly, and point at the nearby wall. “Grab a chair and go sit over there. I’ll put her shoes back on while there’s still time. And then we will *never* speak of this again!”

Amalthea giggles. I get the feeling that she thinks I'm kidding. Then she looks thoughtful. "Hey, so, do you think maybe Jason was in my room to, like, um, try and warn me, or something? About whatever got Katarina?"

"Well, I'm not ruling it out." The emergency alarm finally starts blaring then. Relieved that Minty has managed to get it working, I take out my phone. "Okay, I'm going to try contacting the rest of our teammates now. Here's hoping they all pick up!"

PROTECTORS!

Issue Thirty-Seven – Timothy

OCTOBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Gosh darn it all, that new emergency alarm that Antoine installed last week sure is loud! It woke me up so fast just now that I fell off the couch!

I pick myself up and turn to check on how Wally's coping with all the sudden blaring. We were watching a movie together before I dozed off. He was sitting next to me, with his head resting on my right shoulder, and my wing on that side draped over him a little. Now there's no sign of him – he must have gotten spooked by the alarm and taken off to hide somewhere.

He does that a lot these days. Takes himself off to hide, I mean. Loud noises and bright lights trigger his PTSD. I'm real surprised that Antoine didn't allow for that fact when he was designing the alarm. But maybe he doesn't know about it yet. After all, Wally still seemed to be okay about stuff like that back in August. He didn't start hiding until early September.

Now, I sure hate to admit this, and I'd *never* tell poor Wally, but the funny way he acts these days disturbs me some. His doctors say that he must have been masking his distress at first. They reckon that it's a real good sign he's secure enough to show his feelings now; that it's all just part of his journey to recovery. But…well…they don't have to live with him.

I take out my cell phone and call Antoine while I'm stumbling around in the dark searching the apartment for Wally. The emergency alarm is still

going off, and I want to know why; in case it's something serious, as opposed to another one of Katarina and Jason's silly pranks. Either way, I'm hoping that Antoine can shut it off long enough for me to get poor Wally calmed down. I don't want to risk switching on any of the apartment's overhead lights until then, since that will only make him worse.

Unfortunately, that means that I've only got the standard lamp over in the far-left corner and the ambient light from the TV here in the den to see by. I closed all the drapes on the windows before we sat down with our movie. I didn't want the light from the city's Halloween fireworks displays triggering Wally. It's nearly midnight now, and they're still going off. Even more selfishly, those responsible are only using old fashioned fireworks; the kind that explode. I can hear them a little even through the triple glazing. Outside must sound like a warzone!

Antoine answers his phone just as I reach the doorway that leads out of the den into the even darker hallway. “Tim! I was just about to call you. We’ve got an intruder – someone or something with big claws! Katarina’s been injured. Doc9 managed to stabilise her, but she’s still unconscious. I’m up in my workshop with her and Amalthea. Minty’s in charge of the alarm for now. Are you and Wally both okay?”

I make my way out into the hallway as I reply; touching the wall on my left with my free hand as I walk to try and keep track of where I am. “I don’t know where Wally is right now. I dozed off while we were watching TV and when I woke up, he was gone. I guess maybe the alarm must have spooked him. Can you get Minty to switch it off now, please? And where the heck are Jason and Astrape?”

Someone starts banging on the front door of the apartment just as I finish

asking Antoine all my questions. Then I hear muffled yelling, too. It's Jason. He's being as foulmouthed as ever, but he also sounds like he's real worried underneath all of his blustering and swearing. "Tim! Fucking hurry up and fucking open this fucking door right fucking now, you fucking feathery twat! You're in literal fucking danger! We all fucking are!"

"Uh, on second thoughts, hold on, Antoine. Jason just got here, and he sounds agitated. I'll go let him in." I hurry over to the door and unlock it; setting my phone on the side cabinet first to free up my hands. I'm expecting Jason to want to come in, but instead he grabs my right wrist and hauls me out into the brightly lit communal hallway, and on away from the open front door. For some reason, he's got a whole bunch of battery fairy lights wrapped around him. The thin plastic cables are all tangled up with one

another, and every single bulb on every single one of them is lit.

He clamps his free hand over my left shoulder; forcing me to lean in close while he speaks. “It likes the fucking dark. I think the fucking light fucking hurts the fucking bastard somehow.”

I frown, but not at his language. He can’t help that he’s got Tourette’s. I just don’t like seeing anyone upset like this. “Jason, please, what the heck are you talking about? What is it that doesn’t like the light?”

Jason peers around warily; like he’s expecting us to be attacked at any moment. When he finally replies, it’s in a hoarse whisper. “The fucking thing that’s fucking pretending to be Wally.”

A chill goes through me at his words “I don’t understand. Are you just kidding around, or are you seriously telling me that Wally ain’t really Wally right now?”

He starts to cackle, and then he stops himself. The bells on his cap jingle. “He hasn’t fucking been him for quite some fucking time, mate! Katarina and me; we’ve been fucking watching him, you see. Since he got back. Thought it was just fucking trauma at first, mind.”

I swallow. “But not now, huh?”

“Nah.” Jason scuttles past me, but only by a couple of steps. He points at the open front door of my apartment. His arm is rigid, but his hand is visibly shaking. “Look for yourself.”

I don’t want to look, but I do it anyway. At first, the doorway seems empty. Then I spot what Jason’s pointing at: a figure lurking just inside the front hallway. I only really catch a glimpse of the thing before the door slams shut, but it’s more than enough! “God help us! That’s definitely *not* Wally! But my phone is still in there – I was talking to Antoine when you arrived.”

Jason claps his hands gleefully. “Fan-fucking-tastic! That should mean he’ll be along any fucking minute to find out what’s fucking going on!”

I remember what Antoine said to me on the phone about Katarina having been injured by someone or something with claws. “Well, I guess now we know what happened to…!”

All the lights in the communal hallway shut off abruptly; leaving us with just the multicoloured glow from Jason’s fairy lights to see by.

Then those go off too.

PROTECTORS!

Issue Thirty-Eight – Antoine

OCTOBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Tim's still in the habit of treating his phone like it's a landline. I give him a couple of minutes to get back from answering his door; straining my ears the entire time to try and hear what Jason and he are talking about. At first, all I can make out is the faint jingling of the bells on Jason's cap. Then there's the sudden rasp of heavy breathing, followed by the unmistakable sound of a door slamming shut.

I yell worriedly into my phone. "Tim? Can you hear me? What's going on up there, buddy? Talk to me, please!"

Nobody answers. The silence feels off. As if there's somebody there at the other end of the call, listening, but not speaking. Or maybe even *something*.

I end the call, and begin putting on my costume. "Okay, it sounds as if some weird stuff's happening upstairs! I'm going to go investigate. Amalthea, I need you to stay here with Katarina, okay? She should have somebody aside from Doc9 with her when she wakes up. Worst case scenario, use your powers to get both of you out of here. Take my mice along with you, too, please." I gesture sharply at the nearest console; using my powers to lock down the workshop. "Minty's the only one other than me who has clearance to override the door controls for this floor. Just sit tight and wait for one of us to get back. Call me if Katarina wakes up before then. Oh – and, uh, block Tim's number for now. I'm not sure who has his phone, but I don't think it's him."

Amalthea nods her understanding. “Okay, Antoine. Be careful!”

I exit via one of the windows, pausing mid-air to close it again behind me. There’s a soft thrum of energy as the electronic locks built into the frame reengage. It’s comforting. The glazing itself is – theoretically – unbreakable. Amalthea and Katarina are both as safe as I can make them right now.

Time to find out what’s happened to the rest of the Protectors.

A carelessly aimed firework hisses past my right shoulder as I draw level with the floor above my workshop; exploding into a web of sparkling neon green and yellow just above my building. My ears are ringing, and my heart’s racing – just a couple of inches to the left and that thing would have hit me! Shaking my head, I turn in the air and try to spot where it came from. Clearly somebody down in the crowd

below needs a serious talking to about safety and consideration for others!

Something that's at least human sized slams into me from behind, sending me into an unplanned spin and grappling me. My stomach lurches at the unmistakable stench of death that's now filling my nose. Cold breath chills the nape of my neck, and pale fingers topped with viciously sharp nails rake across my armour. An ornate gold ring, set with a glowing red stone, adorns the right index finger.

Reichslander!

I retch as I frantically try to break free. "Get off me!"

Reichslander chuckles menacingly as he tightens his hold on me. The metal of my armour creaks as it starts to buckle. His deep voice rasps in my left ear; his accent that of a long extinct culture. "Struggling merely sweetens the taste of your blood, Kratz!"

Damn it, he's too strong! And my armour and weaponry are nothing but dead weight, thanks to his ring. Having benefitted from Katarina's frequent and detailed lectures on supernatural threats, I always keep a couple of small glass vials of blessed water, some garlic and silver nitrate capsules, and a UV light flashbang stored in a hidden compartment at my waist just in case of vampire attack. But right now, that's no help to me either. I can't move my arms enough to even reach the compartment, let alone open it!

Pain sears through the left side of my neck as my assailant bites me. It's nothing when compared to what I've gotten used to living with, but something about the bite triggers the Del Drachi Infernali family magic into reacting. I can feel the diabolical energy roiling within my blood; a sapient force of raw evil that's just *yearning* to be unleashed.

Elodie saw to it that the exact details of how I dealt with my maternal family members were kept out of the news. And I still haven't talked about it to anyone, aside from her and Minty. Which means that unless Reichslander has been communicating with the birds rescued from Storm Isle, he likely has no idea about my having inherited my mother's blood magic abilities.

I could obliterate him right now at a subcellular level. Inflict the kind of damage that even *he* can't regenerate from. Just a moment's effort; one little unspoken incantation from me, and the world would be rid of him forever!

I won't do it.

The family magic wouldn't be satisfied with only Reichslander's destruction. The innocent people milling around in the street below us would be next, followed by the rest of the city. In fact, there's every likelihood that the spell

wouldn't stop *at all*. No, better to have the thing die with me; like I've been planning for it to do all these months. And hey, if you think about it that way, then really Reichslander's just hurrying things along a little here!

Admittedly, the latter isn't quite as comforting a thought as I'd like it to be. But given just how cold and weak I feel right now, I doubt if I'll be around to care about that fact for much longer. Even ignoring the dampening effects of the ring, I'm too out of it to generate the technokinetic energy that's needed to power my armour. If vampires couldn't fly, then Reichslander and I would be in the middle of making an unplanned joint descent right now. As it is, he's keeping us both aloft while he feeds on me.

The obscene noise of his slurping is somehow even worse than the sensation of having his fangs buried to the gumline in my neck. But the prize

for the most stomach churningly awful part of this entire experience goes to how I can feel his tongue moving *inside* the bite wound.

Vampires.

Are.

Disgusting.

Mouths, tongues, and necks are now permanently ruined for me. If, by some unlikely miracle, I somehow manage to survive this nightmare, I don't think I'll ever be able to kiss or be kissed by anyone again!

There goes my playboy status.

How did I even end up with one of those in the first place? Seriously – I can count the number of relationships I've had on one hand, and my more, uh, let's call them mutually casual encounters, are at *most* only double that number.

Well…okay, so I guess that *maybe* it's a little closer to being *treble*. But not by much! Besides, I'm forty-five, so it still works out at less than one partner a year since I first started dating.

Forty-five.

Wow.

That's…not old enough to die.

Weird places your mind goes to when you've lost enough blood to make breathing difficult, huh?

PROTECTORS!

Issue Thirty-Nine – Astrape

OCTOBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

I am in my bed when the strangeness erupts. An eldritch shrieking fills my ears and drags me from my slumber. As I sit up, the flames upon the finely scented candles which I have placed around my sleeping chamber gutter and die. But blessed as I am by the mighty Zeus, the darkness is no barrier to my sight! For I can see through the very deepest of shadows, and hear even the slightest of sounds.

Truly, the lattermost gift has brought me great discomfort this night. The mortals Hallowe'en celebrations are a

most noisome event indeed! In my opinion, it is a bothersome tradition. I think it most unfortunate that it has spread to so very many of their lands. Worse, I am informed all too gleefully by the roguish Jason that the tiresome works of fire are deemed as part of many other popular mortal events and activities.

The obscene noise that awoke me continues unabated. It seems to be emanating from the ceiling. A mere glance is all the effort that is needed from me to silence it. Alas, the damage to the ceiling is extensive. Doubtless, friend Antoine shall not scruple over it. He is most generous.

Leaping from my bed, I stride to the door of my dwelling and fling it open without troubling to robe myself first. There is no cause for me to hide my glorious form – indeed, it is surely a boon to all who might gaze upon it!

Such petty vanities are soon proven to be by the by, for the corridor too is cast in darkness, which is most peculiar. Undaunted, I make my way along it towards the sound of two familiar voices. Jason and Timothy are soon within my view. They clutch at one another as though both are panicked by something. But surely such fine warriors do not fear mere darkness?

I hail them gladly regardless. “Well met, friends!”

Jason makes to lunge at me with one of his many blades, only for Timothy to stay his hand. “Jason, no! It’s Astrape! Don’t you recognise her voice?”

Our friend twists free and capers as he snarls in reply. “That fucking thing’s fucking passed itself off as Wally for fucking long enough that I’m not fucking willing to fucking risk trusting someone else’s fucking voice to really fucking be them!”

Something moves within the darkness behind them. A thin, monstrous figure; fingers tipped by long, curving talons and jaws filled with vicious fangs! It grins as it reaches for my companions. Mindful of what Jason has just uttered, I unleash the full power of my gaze upon it. “Perish, vile interloper!”

Jason and Timothy dive aside, crying my name in strident tones which I know to be worshipful. For how could they not be, when my heroism is matched only by the glory of my physical form? Such fortunate mortal men, to bear witness to both at once!

Our foe topples backward with an eldritch screech. Light returns at once to the corridor around us; privileging Jason and Timothy yet further. Striding forward, I bring my right foot down upon the monster’s skull; smiling victoriously as the doomed creature writhes in agony. “You shall threaten my companions no longer, fiend!”

The beast shudders and hisses but a moment further. Then it stills beneath my foot. Its skin begins to smoulder; acrid green vapours issuing forth, only to fade away impotently. The torso splits open slowly with an obscenely wet sound. Within it, something stirs. Scowling, I ready myself for a return to battle. I call out a warning to my two companions. “Stand firm, my friends! It seems the deed is yet not done!”

PROTECTORS!

Issue Forty – Timothy

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

Much to my puzzlement, Jason hurls himself forward and drapes his body over the monster's remains just as Astrape raises her foot again to finish smashing its skull. "Fucking stop and fucking *look*, you fucking Greek twat!"

Astrape splutters indignantly. "You dare insult me?"

I put myself between them before things can escalate past yelling; spreading my wings as I do so. "Calm down, both of you! We're a team – we shouldn't fight amongst ourselves."

With that, I take Jason's advice and peer down at the chitinous mess on the floor. "Let's see what Jason's talking about."

Jason backflips out of the way and lands in a crouch. He claps his hands and cackles as he tries to settle himself a little. "I only fucking went and *fucking found Wally*, that's what I'm fucking talking about!"

I gasp as I recognise Wally's dazed looking face staring up at me from inside what's left of the monster. Dropping to my knees, I pull and tear desperately at the strange cocoon that surrounds him. "Wally! Sweetheart, please, just hang on in there! We'll save you, I promise!"

PROTECTORS!

Issue Forty-One – Katarina

NOVEMBER 2017: LOS ANGELES

I awaken lying upon a bench in Antoine's workshop. I am wrapped in his cape, and my bustier is missing. This is irksome, but forgivable, since my wound has been both treated and dressed, an act undoubtedly requiring the removal of my uppermost clothing. Unsurprisingly, my brassiere remains intact. As ever, Antoine's scrupulously clean reputation is wholly deserved.

Amalthea looms suddenly into view as she leans in to peer at me. "Katarina! You're okay! Um, I mean, like, you are, right? Okay?"

I sit up carefully, adjusting Antoine's cape to suit as I move. "A minor flesh wound. Whoever adjusted my shoes will suffer. Where is Antoine? Why are you here in your nightclothes?"

She flinches. "Um, Jason kind of, like randomly pranked me, I think...? Or maybe not. I panicked and phased down to here. Antoine's gone upstairs to see what's going on. He told me to wait here with you – he thought maybe somebody had taken Tim's phone. So, like, what happened to you, anyway? How'd you get hurt?"

I scowl darkly as I recall the incident within Elevator B. "Reichslander had himself hand delivered to this building as mist within a magical parchment. He addressed it to Antoine."

Amalthea gasps. "Reichslander as in, like, the big vampire guy? The one in the villain files? Oh my God! Wait – so, you, like, um, you fought him alone?"

“It is not as if my doing so was taxing.” I rise to my feet. “His pathetic scheme is thwarted. It is what always happens when he encounters me. Come – we will investigate what is occurring upstairs. I will discuss things with Jason regarding his…prank.”

She continues to emanate fear as she follows me towards the door. “But what if Reichslander comes after us?”

I acknowledge her concern with a disdainful sniff as I override the lock with my telekinesis. “Do not worry. I destroyed the parchment and drove him from the building. There is now a Reichslander shaped hole in Elevator B and the external wall of its shaft. He cannot return without invitation.”

Our conversation is interrupted by the arrival of our teammates. Antoine is not present within their number. Doubtless he is speaking with Minty, as is his way. Jason is bedecked in fairy

lights. Presumably he has some cause for it. Astrape is nude. I do not care to wonder why. And Timothy is carrying Walter in his arms. Walter is alive, and appears wholly himself once more. There is an unacceptable amount of vile smelling ichor covering them both. Perhaps that is what Antoine is discussing with Minty.

Amalthea speaks before I can begin to question the others. Her voice is shrill with horror. “But Antoine went *outside* to fly up and check on these guys!”

PROTECTORS!

Issue Forty-Two – Antoine

NOVEMBER 2017: UNKNOWN

Ugh…where am I?

Why are there so many trees here?

What happened to all the buildings?

Did I pass out?

Oh God – he's still biting me, isn't he?

Reichslander finally lifts his mouth away from my aching neck; laughing when I flinch. "I will not merely take your blood, Kratz. I will *turn* you, and take control of all your vast wealth and resources. You will crawl at my heels throughout eternity!"

“No!” I claw helplessly at his arms. “I won’t let you do this to me!”

His right arm tightens around me; pinning me in place. The left one moves briefly out of my sight. When it comes back into view, there’s a fresh bitemark on the inside of the wrist. Dark red blood oozes sluggishly from it as Reichslander presses his cold wrist against my clenched shut mouth. He sinks his fangs back into my neck; savaging the wound until I can’t help screaming in pain.

Suddenly there’s blood in my mouth.

It’s cold and sticky.

The blood of a *corpse*.

A living corpse…!

So, *so* much blood…!

I won’t…no…I *won’t* swallow it…!

And I don’t, but some of it trickles down my throat eventually anyway.

Reichslander seems to sense when it happens. Maybe my sudden bout of choking and spluttering is what gives it away, or maybe vampires can just tell by instinct somehow. Regardless, he laughs triumphantly as he hurls me away from him with so much force that the small fir tree that I collide with is reduced to a broken stump and a pile of ruined branches.

I try to power up my armour now that I'm finally out of range of his ring, but I can't. I'm too weakened by the blood loss. Instead, I fumble at the latch for the hidden compartment where my vampire fighting supplies are stored. But it's no use. I can't open it. My hands won't stop shaking long enough. None of the rest of me will either.

Everything *hurts*.

Reichslander stalks towards me in a swirl of ragged crimson and black finery. His tall, gaunt frame belies his

inhuman strength, and his sunken, ice blue eyes blaze with an unnatural light. A curtain of lank black hair frames his pallid face. Dried blood from God only knows how many of his previous victims stains the skin on his hands and around his mouth. Some of is probably Katarina's. I can see my own still dripping from his yellowed fangs.

He bends and grabs me by my shoulders; hauling me up to my feet, and grappling me again. "You are in my power at last, Kratz! By the rising of the sun, you will be imprisoned within the dungeons of my fortress. There, you will be slowly tortured unto your death. You will arise the next night with your body still broken, and your spirit crushed beyond all hope of recovery!"

I squirm as he pulls me close. "No!"

He sneers and licks the blood from around my mouth. His tongue lathes my skin and scrapes against the hairs

of my goatee. Then he kisses me. A horrible detail from his file surges to the front of my thoughts.

Reichslander doesn't just torture and kill his victims.

He *rapes* them.

And right now, I'm too weak to even try to fight back.

I've got until he manages to crack my armour open to somehow figure a way out of this situation. After that...!

His tongue thrusts deep into my mouth; cold, and sour tasting, and sticky with blood.

I bite it.

Reichslander snarls in fury, and hurls me to the ground at his feet. He kicks me hard in my right side; denting my armour, and rolling me clear of him by almost ten feet. "You will pay dearly for your impudence, Kratz! Do not think

that you can escape my wrath! You are all alone here. And help is *not* going to fall from the sky!"

A tall woman, wearing a tattered pair of red and magenta fatigue style pants and a singed white vest top, lands booted feet first beside me in an utterly *perfect* squirrel stance; dissipating the force of the impact through her right fist. She's athletically built, with cool undertones to her muted complexion that make her skin look greyish golden, and dark brown eyes. Her hair is jet black; scraped back from her face in a neat and practical military style braid.

Wait…is that an energy pistol…?

The woman glances down at me as she straightens up. The moonlight glints off the set of polished steel dog tags hung around her neck. She frowns slightly, and then she steps forward so that she's standing between me and Reichslander. There's what feels like a

dangerously calm air of readiness to how she moves; kind of like Katarina, but ramped *way* up. When she speaks, her voice is low pitched and husky. “This doesn’t look like a real fair fight. Somebody want to read me in?”

Reichslander sneers. “Pathetic whore! This matter is none of your concern! Flee whilst you still can!”

My would-be rescuer scoffs. “Yeah, no, that ain’t happening, skippy. And watch who you’re trying to insult.”

“So be it!” Reichslander snarls and lunges at the woman; grabbing for her with both hands.

She ducks gracefully past him on his left side; spinning on her heel as she raises her hands and clamps them tightly around his head. There’s the sound of a neck snapping, and then Reichslander drops to the ground; his head facing the wrong way.

I stare at him in morbid fascination. The pain combined with the horror of what he's done to me is making me tremble. Talking is hard right now, but it's also extremely necessary, and so I manage it. "A broken neck won't stop him for long. He regenerates. Sorry."

She nods as she draws an energy pistol from a holster strapped around her waist and aims it at Reichslander. "Gotcha. Not a problem."

I open my mouth to warn her about the ring, and how we're too close to it for any technology to work even if it didn't make its wearer immune to such things, but she's already firing. A vivid blue ray bursts forth from the pistol and envelops Reichslander. Seconds later, all that's left of him is a pile of white-hot ashes. His ring – you know, the magical artefact that should have made what just happened *impossible* – bounces as it hits the ground. It lands right beside my rescuer's left foot.

She holsters her pistol, and bends down to pick up the ring; holding it at eye level to examine it while she straightens up. “Huh. Kind of flashy for my tastes. Do you want it?”

I’m still processing what just happened to Reichslander. “Uh…er…how?”

The woman tucks the ring into a pocket on her fatigues. “Hot enough fire fixes anything. What the heck was going on with him, anyway? I’m guessing he bit you. Was he infectious?”

I grimace as I push myself up into a sitting position. “He was a vampire. So, yeah, highly infectious. And yeah, he bit me. I’m infected with vampirism.”

She stares down at me incredulously. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“Nope. Not at all. Not even a little bit” Sitting up takes too much effort. I slump back down onto my back; gazing up at the stars. “Game over.”

The woman shakes her head firmly as she interrupts me. “Don’t talk like that! You’re hurt bad, sure, but it ain’t nothing that a hospital can’t fix.”

It’s too much. I start laughing and ugly crying all at once. “Don’t you get it? Vampirism doesn’t have a cure, and even if it did, I was *already* dying from a familial blood magic curse. All this has just bumped things up by a couple of months! And anyhow, it’s *Reichslander* – he’ll come back, sooner or later.”

My rescuer sighs and crouches down next to me on my right. “Magic, huh?”

I get the weird feeling that she doesn’t believe me about any of this. But why not? It’s not like I have a reputation for dishonesty! And Reichslander was – is, will be again, ugh – just about the most vampiric of vampires ever. Surely, she must have noticed his fangs, at least?

The woman starts examining the open wound on my neck. I can feel that it’s

still bleeding, but I think the flow has slowed now. She mutters something to herself about not having any brain glue. Then she opens another of her pockets and pulls out a pair of small plastic tubes. “Okay, buddy. This is gonna sting like a bitch, but it needs to be done. Just try and hold still.”

I grimace as she pops off the top of the first tube and pours what must be sterile water over the bite. “Thanks, but you really don’t need to bother. Like I said, I’m dying anyhow; have been ever since January. I’ve just been keeping it a secret until now.”

She finishes flushing the wound and pops open the second tube. I catch a sudden whiff of fumes: medical glue. “Yeah, well, whatever’s going on, you ain’t dead yet. I’m sure you’ve got people who’ll want to see that it stays that way. Don’t ask me to piss them off by not trying to save your sorry ass.”

Which, yeah, good point. Katarina and Jason would *not* take that well.

Okay.

Hang in there, Antoine.

Don't be the reason that this kind stranger ends up on the wrong side of your teammates.

I inhale deeply. "You're right. I need to go home and explain things to the others. Actually, I need to check that everyone there is okay, too. I mean, I'm sure it was Reichslander who injured Katarina and cut the power, but he mightn't have been working alone."

She clasps my shoulder. "That's the spirit, buddy! Just keep breathing. Rest of it'll take care of itself, you'll see."

I'm too scared to let myself hope. "I…I don't know if it works that way."

The woman helps me sit up again. "Trust me, buddy. I watch a whole lot

of horror movies. I know all about vampires; even if them being real came as a shock just now. That asshole drank most of your blood, right?"

I shudder at the memory. "Yeah. And now...now...!"

She interrupts me gently. "Now he's nothing but dust in the damn wind, and you're still breathing. That means he didn't finish turning you before he died, and *that* means that the vampirism won't take. You ain't gonna turn."

I smile wanly; trying to be polite. "Thanks for the reassurance. Still dying either way."

She sighs. "No offence, but I'm starting to think that you're a professionally qualified pessimist."

"Who *are* you?" I twist myself around a little at my waist, and crane my neck so that I can peer at her dog tags. There's a stylised globe with a bird on

top of it etched into them. Then I realise that it probably looks as if I'm staring at her chest. I look away again as fast as I can. "Sorry, sorry! Just trying to read what's on your tags, that's all, I swear!"

Thankfully, my rescuer isn't offended. "I'm Captain Susan Kennedy, of the Martian Marine Corps. If it helps any, I don't think I'm from around here."

TO BE CONTINUED...!

CONTENT WARNINGS

LGBTQ+ and cis heteronormative characters.

Several characters with lifelong unseen disabilities.

An adult male character living with a terminal condition.

Non-explicit depictions of consensual relationships between adults.

Repeated instances of implied mental and emotional issues in adults.

Depictions of toxic masculinity.

Discussions regarding consent.

Frequent strong profanity.

Frequent genre typical peril.

Frequent instances of genre typical violence involving adults, including revenge killings and acts of murder.

Abduction and false imprisonment of adults by adults.

Non-explicitly described aftermath of human experimentation on adult male captives, including mild body horror, suspected neurological issues, and death.

One mention of alleged rabies in a wild animal.

One instance of defensive violence by an adult male against a dangerous wild animal resulting in accidental animal death.

Aftermath of accidental animal death.

Supernatural themes and content, including supernatural threat.

Non-explicitly described genre typical defensive and offensive violence against supernatural entities.

One non-explicitly described instance of animal cruelty involving multiple endangered species.

One non-explicitly described instance of animal death due to starvation involving an endangered species.

One non-explicitly described instance of sexual assault of an adult male by an older adult male.

One non-explicitly described discovery of sexual slavery and repeated rape of adult females by an older adult male.

One non-explicitly described act of rape of an adult female by an older adult male.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Non-binary indie author E.V. Greig is a graduate of Queen's University Belfast, and the co-founder of the literary e-zine *A New Ulster*. They have been actively involved within the Arts Community in Northern Ireland since 2001, and have received funding as an individual artist via SIAP 2013/14, 2016/17, 2019/19, 2020/21, 2023/24, and DDASF 2021/22. When not busy writing, their other interests include gardening, cooking, reading, dog walking, chicken keeping, and equestrianism.