I was having a weird morning.

It started around 10am. I was at work, walking through one of the hallways on the third floor, when suddenly I felt a strange buzzing feeling in my head, as if a small swarm of bees had just materialized inside my skull. It only lasted a few seconds, but that's when things started getting really freaky. Only a few seconds had passed for me, but the clock showed half an hour! I hurried back downstairs, but of course I was late. I made up an excuse and apologized to my boss, but got chewed out anyway.

My name is Ahab Kane. I'm an assistant reporter at CGAC-TV, in El Paso. I'm just one small cog in a very large media machine. CGAC is owned by a large multimedia company, which in turn is owned by Vought International. Which is why the Howland family was visiting the studio that day.

The Howlands were basically celebrities. You'd expect to see a supe or two in Houston or San Antonio, but when a whole family of them showed up in my town a year ago, we were all excited.

Superheroes started popping up nation-wide a few decades ago. WW2 heroes like Soldier Boy had already cemented their reputations in the mind of the public, but that had been during a war. In peacetime, supes took on a whole new life. They started out as vigilantes, using their powers to help the downtrodden and stop criminals. When Vought stepped in, those supes gained a legal framework as well as the support of a multinational corporation. After that, all sorts of supe organizations began to appear.

Capes for Christ was one of them. A supe organization dedicated to conservative Christian values, it gained huge popularity across the southern states. El Paso might be a bit out of the way to really get caught up in it, but we weren't immune to their influence. The Howlands were their poster family. The nuclear American family unit, all super and all photogenic.

For the past two weeks we'd all been busy as bees preparing for the live interview. We'd had James Howland onscreen before, but his family had never been with him. I remember the interviewers frantically going over their questions, both for the family as a whole and for the individuals. Our lead TV personality Alex Tainer was popping antacids like they were candy, and I couldn't blame him. We were all nervous.

Until about a month ago, everyone thought superheroes were naturally-occurring. That they just popped up out of nowhere: extraordinary kids born to normal parents. The seven most powerful of them set up shop in NYC, with Vought's approval. The rest of them spread out, or were sent out, to various cities including ours.

Then a scandal hit: there was a brushfire of news about some drug called Compound V. Apparently it altered human DNA, and... created superpowers! It was like our whole world had been turned upside down. Supes weren't born, but made? How was this even possible? And more to the point, who was responsible?

Eventually Stan Edgar, Vought's CEO, released a statement to the public. A group of rogue scientists, most recently led by his senior Vice President Madelyn Stillwell, had apparently developed Compound V a few decades ago. They'd been secretly injecting kids across the country with the damn stuff, turning them into supes. Apparently kids adapted more easily to the changes than adults. It made sense, in a sick kind of way.

Those kids, including James Howland and his now-wife Sandra, had eventually had kids of their own, who were in turn injected secretly and developed superpowers of their own.

Now, for the first time since that revelation, the Howland family was about to sit in front of a camera and give the public some desperately wanted answers.

Alex Tainer waited for the sound and camera people to give the go-ahead and count down from three, and then gave a genial smile. Not just to the studio audience, but to the seven hundred thousand-or-so people at home. "Welcome, everyone. I'm Alex Tainer, and this is CGAC's Spotlight feature. Some of you will remember one of our guests from previous visits: James Howland!"

He clapped along with the audience, as Howland stepped out from the waiting area and made his way over to the table where Alex usually sat. I leaned forward in my chair, looking at Howland intently. I'd seen him on camera before, but that was always out in the field. Here in the studio, his carefully-painted 'relatable' face was on full display. He shook Alex's hand warmly, and waved to the crowd before taking a seat.

"Welcome back, James. It's been too long."

"Thanks for inviting me, Alex. It's great to be back."

Alex looked back at the camera, and gestured to the other four seats on stage. "I'd also like to welcome the rest of the Howland family: Sandra, Rick, Mary and Blake!" He glanced expectantly to the right, where a blond-haired woman in her mid thirties stepped out. She ushered three kids, ranging from twelve to sixteen, in front of her, and together they all sat in a row on stage. The crowd clapped appreciatively, and I joined in. After everything the Howlands had done for El Paso, it was great to finally see them all up close.

Alex got some of the introductory pleasantries out of the way, and smiled back at James. "So, could you tell my audience a bit about yourselves? How you two met, and why you eventually settled here. What kind of a home life you have, and what your interests are as a family- that sort of thing."

"Of course," James put in. "I started out in San Antonio, working with the SAPD to stop MS-13 members back in the day. I could use my strength to lift barriers, stop bullets and the like. Of course we had to do that sort of thing in secret back then, but I was just glad to help. And when I wasn't patrolling, I was at home with my dad, or we were out on the road attending Capes for Christ events. I met Sandra on one of those, about eighteen years ago. It was... divine, right from the first moment we met."

Sandra leaned forward. "My parents organized the event, and I was helping with one of the Bible studies for the kids. I remember seeing him and it was like all the lights went out except the ones around him. I could barely concentrate on finishing my lesson."

Rick made a fake-gagging gesture, and the crowd let out a murmur of amusement. Giving him an admonishing look, Sandra continued. "People talk about love at first sight, or meeting your soul mate, but I never thought that would happen to me. I was just happy to do my part for God and country, before he walked in." She gripped James' hand briefly. "Of course my dad hated him at first. When we started dating, he insisted on chaperoning, giving stern glances from behind us the whole time. Thankfully James was just as old fashioned. He wouldn't even be alone with me in the same room at first."

James shrugged. "Those kinds of traditional values were important to my dad, and they're important to me. It's something worth keeping alive."

"And I love him all the more for it," Sandra said warmly. "Eventually we got married and moved back to San Antonio so he could keep up his vigilante crime-fighting there. I used my empathic powers to interrogate prisoners, and figure out what the others were up to."

Alex cut in. "Yes, people have been curious about that. What exactly does your power help you do? Can you read minds?"

Sandra shook her head. "Nothing like that. I'm no Mesmer- I can't peer into peoples' memories or anything. No, for me it's emotions. I can pick out anger, or guilt, or fear, and I used that to help our brave police. I do the same thing now, when we're fighting those terrible BA criminals in the streets of El Paso."

I'd heard that she was one of those telepaths, but not the specifics. I leaned back a bit uncomfortably. A supe who could shrug off bullets or lift a car was one thing, but one who could get inside my head? I didn't like that idea at all. Hopefully I was out of her range where I was sitting. I'd heard she couldn't get impressions from more than fifty feet or so, but that was just hearsay. For all I knew, she could pick up emotions from someone three states away!

Sandra looked fondly at the kids. "When these three came along, I didn't have as much time for crime fighting anymore. I was too busy doing something much more important."

Rick gave another aggrieved face. "Do you have any idea what it's like to have a mom who always knows when you're lying? We couldn't get away with anything! It was so annoying."

Alex gave him a wry look. "I don't know, Rick. My own mom was no slouch either, and she doesn't even have empathic powers. But as for you, how did you feel when your parents decided to move out here? Were you excited?"

"Sure I was. San Antonio is fun, but it's way too big and crowded. I get around a lot with Capes for Christ like mom and dad did, but living in a new city sounded like it would be a big adventure. And it has."

"How did you feel about the move, Sandra?"

She hesitated. "Truth be told, I was terrified at first. Like any good mother, all I care about is the safety and happiness of my kids. But, it was important to James to make a difference where he could, and he wanted Rick and Blake to share in that. We've made a home here in El Paso for the last year, and I've really started to feel comfortable in that time."

Alex nodded thoughtfully. "Rick, people have had a lot of questions about you, both personal and professional. Just how fast can you run, anyway?"

Rick looked a bit embarrassed. "I'm no A-Train, but my top speed so far is about 2400 mph. At first it was real hard getting shoes that didn't just burn to a crisp in the first second or so. When they found out just how fast I can move, mom and dad got in touch with Vought, and they sent down some reinforced shoes and clothes. Now I can run for like ten minutes or so at like... two thousand miles an hour, and not light on fire. It's pretty cool," he said with a smile.

"It does sound fun," Alex agreed for the cameras, but then paused. "Except for the spontaneous combustion part. Two thousand miles per hour is enough to outrun most bullets, right?"

Rick nodded. "Most speedsters in the world can outrun bullets. I usually just tap them mid-run, knocking them up in the air so they don't hit anyone."

"Impressive- really fascinating. Sixteen years old, and you're already a crime-fighting superhero. As for your personal life, I understand you and your brother and sister are all homeschooled?"

Sandra put a hand on Rick's shoulder. "That's right, Alex. We decided when Rick was born that all our kids would be under our personal care until they were old enough to care for themselves. I already had a teaching degree from my time with Capes for Christ, so it made sense that I would teach them. It helps with security, too, if James and I are close by. Our whole family has celebrity status, and I wouldn't put it past some of our enemies to try and strike at us at home."

"But isn't it true that Rick will be headed off to college next year? Are you looking forward to that, Rick?"

Rick grinned. "Big time. And mom doesn't need to worry. I'm fast enough to look out for myself. Besides it's not like I'm leaving the city. I'll be at a local college- only fifteen miles away!"

"I still don't have to like it," Sandra said sourly, and touched his shoulder again.

"I'm sure any mother with grown up children would feel the same," Alex said softly. "How about you, Mary? I've heard what you can do, but most of our audience hasn't seen it yet. Could you show us?"

This was interesting to me too. I watched with fascination as the Howland daughter reached out for her younger brother's hand for reassurance, and then stood up in front of the audience. She closed her eyes, and another Mary stepped out from her, looking identical to the first! Then another stepped out in the other direction, and another, and another.

The first one hadn't moved, but if I hadn't seen it happen, I wouldn't have been able to tell which one was real!

The crowd gasped appropriately, some of them leaning back in their seats as if afraid. The middle Mary stepped forward with her hands spread. "It's all right. They won't hurt you. They're just part of me."

Even Alex seemed taken aback to see it for himself. "That's amazing. How does this work, anyway? I mean some supes have genetic replication, including regeneration, but all of them look just like you. Right down to the hair and clothing!"

Mary shrugged, and James spoke up again. "Near as we can tell, it's a projection that she can do. She can create images of herself that can walk around, and even fight to a degree. But they're not flesh and blood like she is. They're just duplicates of her."

"That's just incredible," Alex said with a shaky smile. "Can they talk at all?"

Mary shook her head. "Just getting them to walk and fight is hard enough. But I can see through their eyes and hear through their ears. It lets me see what's going on so I can tell Rick where to go."

"How... many of them can you create at once?"

Mary smiled bashfully. "I did fourteen at once for my fourteenth birthday last week, but it really wiped me out. I usually stick with six or seven. It's easier that way."

"I understand you may be leaving home as well in the next year or so?"

She nodded. "I'm going to finishing school up in Nebraska. Mom went there when she was my age. She said it was a lot of fun."

I'd heard of finishing schools before, but they were mostly overseas in Europe. They were where young women went to train in social graces, I thought. Basically for people whose career goals began and ended with getting married. It surprised me to hear of one here in the States, though.

"Magdalene Finishing School was founded by Capes for Christ," Sandra explained. "When superheroes starting popping up everywhere, my parents felt it was important to have a place to remind our young people what our true values are, and how to hold onto them. They pooled their money with a dozen or so other families, and set up the school. I was one of the first students." She smiled over at her daughter. "It'll be a wrench for me to see her go, but at least I can be sure she's learning everything a young woman needs to know."

She nodded at Mary, who closed her eyes again. One by one, the duplicate Marys vanished into the air, and then the original sat again.

"That just leaves Blake," Alex looked over at the last Howland child, looking nervous, now that the attention was on him. "I'm afraid we know very little about you, young man. I'm told you look after the crime-fighting gear your brother and father use out in the field?"

He nodded. "In the van. I keep it all running, and go with them at night to watch the cameras and warn them. I stay in the van where it's safe though, with mom and Mary."

Alex waited for him to continue, but then had to prompt him for more. "How does a twelve-year-old know how to build engines and computers, anyway? Is that your superpower?"

Blake shook his head sharply, and James reached for his hand. "Blake's power is a little more disturbing," he said softly.

This was also interesting to me. I knew exactly what Blake's power was from other sources at the tv station, but I wanted to hear how his father would explain it to the crowd. I'd also heard that Blake had been sick recently, with some kind of stomach bug. Apparently he'd spent hours in the bathroom, and was only now recovering.

James gave the crowd a serious look. "Blake's touch is... deadly. Just the slightest brush of his skin on someone else's, and it sets up a kind of harmonic resonance in their internal organs. They die instantly."

The crowd let out a grave noise, and Blake looked down, averting his eyes. "I see," Alex said softly.

"Obviously we can't take him with us in the field," James went on stolidly, "but he can at least help us from the surveillance van. He's kind of a prodigy when it comes to that equipment."

"But you're touching him," Alex said, gesturing at their still-joined hands.

James nodded. "When he was a baby, we handled him all the time, just like anyone would. Because he was the child of two supes, we felt extra protective of him. He was even born at home, where we knew it would be safe. The midwife was Sandra's sister Judy."

He reached out and took his wife's hand. "Sandra took care of all his needs at first. As a result, he was more than a year old before we let anyone outside of family anywhere near him. Near as we can figure it, only blood relatives can touch him safely."

"I killed someone," Blake said into the air, and the crowd let out a surprised series of noises.

"That's right," James said sadly. "Just after his first birthday, we hired a nanny: Tia Hawkins, to look after him. She had excellent references. We had no idea what Blake's power was back then, or even if he had any."

Sandra leaned forward, looking sick to her stomach. "When I handed him to her, she just collapsed! There was no warning. I was barely able to grab Blake back, before she hit the floor. It was horrible."

"I am so sorry," Alex said, clearly shocked at this. I knew how he felt: I'd never heard of a supe with the literal Touch of Death before reading up on him last year. Poor nanny. Poor kid!

James nodded in appreciation. "We did tests on animals after that, and determined it was skin contact. Ever since, he wears gloves in public. The only reason he's not wearing them now is because we're all here to look after him. We decided as a family that we won't kill unless it's absolutely necessary, so obviously we can't use Blake's power in the field. Rick and I can disable people without killing them for now. Hopefully as he gets older, Blake will be able to control his power, and then he can join us on the streets."

Alex leaned over. "Thank you for sharing that with us, Blake. I know it wasn't easy to just say it like that. If you don't want to talk about it I understand, but I'm sure these people would like to know how you feel about that."

"It's ok," Blake said faintly, and looked up again. "I'm used to being kind of the Blake sheep of the family. Pardon the pun. I read a lot."

He gave a tentative smile, and the crowd seemed to sense his anxiety and desire for acceptance. Even I felt the pull from my seat up on the second level. "At least I can touch my family. Dad builds model airplanes and ships with me sometimes. I get in fights with Rick and we wrestle all the time. I'm stronger than I look, so it's pretty even. When he doesn't cheat, anyway."

Rick gave him a scandalized look. "I don't cheat!"

"Sure you don't," Blake responded sarcastically, and I found myself smiling. He looked down again, and sighed. "When I think forward, it just sucks, you know?" His dad squeezed his hand, and he gave a pained look to the crowd. "I wanted to get married some day. Live an important life like mom and dad do. Or just get a girlfriend like Rick has, but that won't happen."

Sandra gave her other son a surprised glance. "Girlfriend?"

Rick spread his hands. "I was going to tell you. I swear."

"Hm," Sandra said suspiciously. "We'll talk about this later."

The crowd seemed to take the interchange as a tension-breaker, but I knew lines when I heard them. None of this last bit was real- it was all a script the family was reading out for the people listening. I still felt bad for the kid though.

Blake seemed to gain some confidence. "I'll never be able to help like Rick and dad can, but I'm glad I can contribute. That's enough for me."

"Hear, hear," Alex said appreciatively, and the crowd clapped for Blake for a few seconds. He waited for the noise to die down, and then his face sobered a little. "Now that our viewers have gotten to know you a little better, we should talk about the events in New York over this past month. The shocking revelation that superheroes were once ordinary people, altered with Compound V into what you are today. How did you react to the news, being supes yourselves?"

James and Sandra shared a meaningful look, and she answered. "We were floored, naturally. I met Madelyn Stillwell myself years ago at a CfC event, and she seemed like such a lovely woman. The idea that she could have done something so heinous, so evil... it still makes me shudder to this day. That nanny, Tia Hawkins? She might still be alive today if it hadn't been for Stillwell and her co-conspirators. I can tell you it makes me sick just thinking about it."

Alex paused, and I recognized his usual tactic for building tension. "Has it affected your faith at all? To learn that your gifts were man-made, I mean."

"Not in the slightest," James said right away, his voice firm and unyielding. "I've been a believer since I was five, and nothing will ever change that. I knew even back then that God had great plans for me- that I would be important and valuable to America and to the rest of the Church."

"And you, Sandra?"

Sandra hesitated. "To find out that the most fundamental part of myself- this gift that lets me understand my husband and my children so deeply- was something that was bottled and injected into me? Of course it shook my faith. But we talked about it as a family. We decided together that it was God's will that we ended up with powers, no matter what instruments He used to give them to us. However we got them, we have them now, and it's our responsibility to use them."

She looked over at the kids, and one by one they nodded. I got the impression that Blake agreed last, though.

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The main set of the interview was winding down, with Alex focusing more and more on the work the Howland family was doing for El Paso.

"People talk on and on about MS-13," James was saying, looking seriously out at the crowd, "but these Barrios Azteca people here in our city can be just as brutal. Sandra can understand that better than anyone."

His wife looked pained at that, and nodded. "I can see into the minds of the few we've managed to capture, and I can tell you they're not like you or me. All men are emotionally shut down- that's what it means to be a man- but these guys are something else. It's like they're dead inside. I can only feel anger and hate from them, most days."

"We felt it was high time you knew the truth about the BA gang," James went on for her. "For months now we heard of a new leader of the gang- someone who crossed the border from Mexico and killed the previous people in charge. He went only by the nickname 'HC', and we've only recently gotten more detailed information about him. The truth is, HC is a supe, like us."

I'd already learned about HC from reading briefs cycling through the news office, but it was still impressive to see how this news affected the crowd. Fear was evident on nearly every face, and the group went silent as a grave. Alex was the first to recover. "Do you know what this... HC's powers are?"

"It seems to be mind control of some kind, but I'm sure it's not telepathic," Sandra said with some confidence. "I've gotten close enough to sense him twice, and he's not an empath in any way. Most likely it's an airborne chemical. Some kind of dust or drug that he exudes, that makes people around him suggestible and controllable."

"That explains how he was able to take control of the whole gang single-handedly," Alex said shakily, and James and Sandra nodded. "The people under his, uh, chemical influence; are they permanently under his control?"

James shook his head. "We've tested the various victims of him and the other Barrios Azteca, and determined that the effects only last a few hours. The gang members are another matter. They're with him almost 24/7, so they've been exposed to his drug repeatedly. Fortunately, it seems like supes are immune to his drug. My family and I are safe from his powers, just not his people."

"So he's controlling them? They're not really responsible for their actions?"

James clenched his hands into fists. "Make no mistake on this. These are dangerous, hardened criminals. They deal drugs to everyone including kids, regardless of the harm it causes and the lives it destroys. They will kill you without hesitation if you're in the way, or if you're even in the area they're operating. They've been around HC for so long they've developed a tolerance to his... sickening gift. These rapists and murderers follow him by choice. He's not controlling them with his power- I'm certain of it!"

Sandra put a hand on his shoulder, and he leaned back, looking a little drained. "The Barrios Azteca gang recruits from both sides of the border, whether it's Mexicans or Latinos in our fair city. They destroy the livelihoods of decent, hardworking Americans, and then use the desperation they caused as a recruiting tool! It's evil, plain and simple."

"And what do you have to say to the average immigrants from Mexico, who want to get into America?" Alex asked carefully, glancing over at her super-strong husband. "The people who just want a better life for themselves and their children, and want to stay on the right side of the law? Can you really blame them for crossing the border illegally to get here?"

"Of course I feel for them," Sandra said, looking sympathetically at the cameras. "Those poor souls just want the same opportunity we have on this side of the border. But they can't just come here willy-nilly. They have to enter our country the right way. The legal way. Otherwise, how can we tell if they're any different than the criminals we face every night on the streets?"

It was a total cop-out and I knew it. Administration after administration had been making it harder for Mexicans to become Americans. The 'right and legal' way could take decades, during which time the asylum-seekers at the border lived in constant danger and hardship. But clearly the Howlands didn't see it that way. Maybe if they were able to capture this HC person, it might ease tensions on the border. If they could find some antidote to this drug he put out into the air.

That was it for the main interview, but the next phase included audience questions. People would step up to the lectern, and ask one or two things of the Howlands, either as a group or individual. I was actually looking forward to this part, because these Q and A sections weren't usually scripted. At least a part of this whole interview had been.

The first few questions were cookie-cutter: what kind of hobbies do you have, do you keep any pets, that sort of thing. The fourth person at the lectern was forty or so, with a light beard and a long jacket. That itself was unusual given it was only early fall, and the weather outside wasn't that cold yet. Still, the studio was heavily air-conditioned, and I remembered wishing for something like that myself more than once.

"Mr. Howland," he began. "It's been over a month now since the Plaza Theatre shooting, where you faced off with six Barrios Azteca enforcers during a movie. Five bystanders were killed and dozens wounded. Now that you've had time to think back over those events, is there anything you would have done differently in hindsight, or are you certain you did all you could?"

The question was phrased aggressively, but the man didn't look that accusatory. He just looked out at James Howland with an expectant expression. I found myself doing the same. The Plaza Theatre disaster had been a particularly vivid one for me- I'd been there taking photos of it after the fact. Some of those BA people had been pulverized by Howland's fists, having been hit hard enough to shatter bones and hurl them across the room. For someone who claimed to do everything he could to solve situations nonlethally, it had been a pretty brutal scene.

Howland stood and stepped forward a bit. "I still remember every detail from that night. Every move I made, every shot I heard. I can still hear the screams of fear and pain from the crowd as they tried to get out of there. As you said, I've had time, and time hasn't changed anything for me. Thinking back on it, I can't remember anything I should have done differently. Make no mistake, people: my family and I are fighting a war here. Not just one for safe and drug-free streets in El Paso, but for the very soul of America! As horrible a truth as it is, people die in war. There's no way around it. Civilians have died in droves, in every war in history, and not even supes can change that."

He sighed. "No, I regret that people died, but I'm absolutely certain that more people would have died if I'd done things differently. I hope that answers your question."

"It does," the man said quickly, "but I have a follow-up, if I may." He glanced over at the other Howlands on the stage. "You see, my best friend died in that incident. Based on your extensive experience in urban combat and shooting situations, I have to ask, how long do you think it will take... your wife to bleed out, after I shoot her?" He pulled a gun from his coat and aimed it.

The crowd around him screamed, and Howland's eyes widened. He darted back to the others, and their whole family clustered around Blake, who was in the middle. The attacker opened fire, spraying bullets up on the stage. At least two hit Sandra, in the back and arm as she wrapped herself around the kids! The nearest person who could stop him was at least ten feet away!

That strange buzzing feeling was back in my head, and I saw everything... slow down. The crowd's screams became muted, and then silent. The escapees slowed to a crawl, and then a stop!

The shooter's gun flashed with light again, and then I saw someone run out from behind Howland, jump down off the stage, and slap several things out of the air. It was Rick, the older child. He then balled up a fist and punched the shooter in the jaw, but it didn't seem to faze him. He was frozen too.

The buzzing ceased, and things sped up again. The noise was overwhelming, even from where I was up on the second level. The shooter jerked back from the direction in which he'd been hit, and collapsed on the ground, his gun firing once more into the ground.

Had I just watched Rick use his super-speed... and actually seen it as if he was just running normally? What was happening here?

James spent a few seconds with his family, probably checking to see if they were all right, and then turned to the crowd. "It's all right, everyone," he shouted out, apparently trying to reach even those now outside the studio. "It's safe now- he's down. Everything is under control."

Sandra stood, looking a little shaky, but smiled out at the people still in sight. "I'm all right." She spread her arms experimentally, showing some kind of bulletproof vest under her dress. The whole family was probably wearing them.

I'd been taking photos and video footage of criminal activities in El Paso for more than five years at that point. I'd been in four different active shooter situations. This one was different. I should have been trembling with fear and adrenaline, but I was just in shock. Not at the man who'd just tried to kill the town heroes, but at how I'd observed it.

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"How the hell did he get a gun past your people? You said you would vet everyone, and searched them before letting them in the building, much less the studio!" My boss ranted from behind me, at the CGAC-TV head of security.

"The gun was one of ours, from the locked armory in the basement. I was just down there. The lock was cut clean through, and a gun was missing. He was obviously planning this for a long time. He must have checked out our security weeks or months ago, so he could sneak down there before the interview."

"How would he have even known about the armory? We don't keep that information public, or even on our own servers."

"He must have been a former employee," the head of security responded evenly. "Or had help from one. Vought security has him in custody for now. When I get a crack at him, I promise you I'll find out if he was working alone, and if not, who helped him."

"I expect nothing less," my boss said darkly, and I was vaguely aware of him leaving the room. The dozen or so others around us seemed to noticeably relax as a result.

I'd barely been listening to the exchange. I was just playing the footage back, again and again on a small tv. The shooter pulled his gun, and then as Rick seemed to materialize in front of him, he collapsed on the ground, his gun clattering to the floor. That's what it showed each time.

But I'd seen it happen! I'd seen Rick run out there and punch him. Those things he'd been slapping at had probably been bullets, slowed down to just a few feet per second from my perspective.

By now we'd all given statements to the police and to Vought security. The remaining studio audience members had been detained and were being questioned. Vought International didn't mess around when it came to people trying to kill their supes. All of our own people were told to keep this in-house until our news team could figure out how to broadcast the story to the public. Unlike other people who'd tried to kill the Howlands, this guy wasn't any kind of obvious criminal or terrorist. His reasons, as proven in this recording, had been entirely personal. They'd probably describe him as a lone wolf and not a terrorist or gang member, since he didn't look Arab or Hispanic. I'd been in the business long enough to know that white people were never terrorists, even when they were.

No, I wasn't just disoriented or confused. This was twice now that time had been messing with me, just this morning. When anything weird like that happened, all GCAC employees had standing instructions on what to do.

It wasn't like I had any other options, anyway. We were all stuck in the building for now. At least I only had to go up two floors. The elevators were locked down for evidence, but the stairs were fine. A short climb later, I arrived at another reporter's door inscribed with: Gwen Sylvia, Supe Affairs Desk.

I knocked, and heard a faint 'come in' from inside. She wasn't at her desk, but next to the far wall in front of the tv. Which was showing the scene from earlier. She glanced back at me, taking in my ID badge. "Can I help you?"

"Ahab Kane," I identified myself briefly. "I'm an Assistant Reporter at the crime desk."

"Ah. So you were just down there for this?" She gestured at the TV, and I nodded. "Look at how they all cluster together as a family in a crisis. That's dynamite PR right there."

"Definitely, but I'm not here about the shooting," I said hesitantly. I wasn't sure I should go on at that point, but there really wasn't any going back. If Miss Sylvia was half as tenacious here as she had been back in New York, she wouldn't just dismiss my visit. She'd only transferred here a year ago, but had already built a reputation for taking no nonsense and giving none. "I've experienced something that the Supe Affairs reporter should know," I admitted in a rush.

I carefully outlined the two incidents so far, and she listened intently. "And you're sure there's nothing else that could have caused this... effect? Any change in activity or diet, or exhaustion? I know you've all been working overtime down there to prepare for this interview."

They were obligatory questions and I knew it, but it still stung. "I'm not hallucinating or imagining this. Time sped up for me, and then it slowed down. I need to know why. Am I a supe? It sounds insane just saying it, but I can't think of any other explanation! I need your help, Miss Sylvia."

"Just call me Gwen," she said offhandedly. "And my whole job is to investigate the weird and insane, so by habit I don't rule out anything, no matter how strange it sounds."

She gestured me to a seat, and feeling a little relieved, I took it. At least she didn't think I was as crazy as... I did right now. "First off no, you're not a supe. The FDA classified Compound V as a controlled substance under the jurisdiction of the Pentagon, so I doubt you were exposed to it. And if you'd been injected as a child, you would have shown signs a long time ago. There's a reason Stillwell chose kids instead of adults for her illegal experiments. Infants can adjust to their changing DNA much more easily than grown-ups can."

"Then what else could have caused this?"

Gwen shrugged a little. "Sometimes supes can affect others around them, intentionally or not. Take this HC guy for example. He exudes a dust which makes people suggestible. Unfortunately Vought keeps a tight grip on their supe files, so I can't exactly ask them if any of their heroes can cause temporal disruptions in other people. None of the supes I have on file can do that." She leaned forward, steepling her fingers above the desk. "You said time slowed down during the shooting. Most witness statements I've heard go either like 'it all happened so fast', or 'time seemed to slow down'. Are you sure it wasn't just an adrenaline response to sudden danger?"

"I'm sure. I've been in danger before, and this was completely different."

"All right. What about the first time, when everything seemed to speed up and you lost time? When did that happen exactly?"

I thought back. "It was about ten thirty. Or eleven, by the time I realized time had sped up."

"Had anything unusual happened just before that? Where were you?"

"I was on the third floor, in the hallways. I'd just gotten out of the bathroom." I took a deep breath. "Now that you mention it, there was something weird. When I was in the stall in the bathroom, the TP roll thing was empty. There was someone in the stall next to me, and I asked him for a roll. He handed one to me, but I heard him whisper, 'keep it a secret.' I have no idea why. He was still in there when I left."

"Ok, that is a little strange," she admitted. "Did you recognize his voice?"

I shook my head. "But we have security cameras on most floors. Can you look up the footage? We might be able to ID him."

This would be the point where most people would roll their eyes, but Gwen just nodded. "Give me a minute."

She tapped away at her keyboard for a moment, and I looked out the window. She had a pretty good view from up there. I wondered if I should have gotten into Supe Affairs instead of local crime reporting. Nah, it wasn't for me. Perks aside, I'd rather be out in the danger, reporting what I saw and heard, than just commenting on other people doing that.

"Here we go," she said, standing and turning the monitor to face me. "We have four cameras on the third floor. None in the bathrooms of course, but this is one hallway down."

She fast-forwarded through an hour and a half of this morning. I pointed out myself, as I walked down the corridor and turned left. Then again as I returned to the elevator. Over a dozen people moved up and down the hallway through the time, but only three turned left. There was another elevator on the other side of it, so that could mean anything. "Wait, stop." I pointed at the screen, as she complied. "That's Blake Howland! The youngest one. He was there... half an hour before I was!"

"Sounds about right. The Howland kids were getting bored with all the arrangements their parents were making for the interview, so they wandered the building for a bit. I saw the creepy one, Mary, myself." She looked unnerved. "I swear, that one gives me horror movie vibes every time I see her."

I chuckled. From her interview Mary had seemed normal, but she did at least look a little too picture-perfect to be true. Factor in the idea that she could literally duplicate herself, and she might have a future in the film industry. Actually, there was no chance of that- her parents would never let her do something so 'Godless'. "He could have been in that bathroom before me," I reasoned, trying to get back on track.

Gwen pointed to the gloves the kid was wearing on camera. "The hand you saw when he handed you that roll; was it gloved?" I shook my head after a moment, and she went on. "Did it touch you at all?"

"Actually, I think it did."

"Then it wasn't Blake," she said confidently. "You would have died instantly. It had to be someone else."

Her statement did make sense, but something about it was still troubling me. It was clear Gwen wasn't going to pursue that theory at all though, so I workshopped other ideas with her. After ten or twenty minutes of going through possibilities for what might have caused my time changes, we were running on empty.

"I don't know, Mr. Kane," she said sympathetically. "Until this time thing happens again, I think you just have to wait and see. If there was a supe wandering these halls that we didn't know about, they might have been able to cause this. If it helps, all of these effects supes generate in others are temporary. I've never heard of any of them lasting more than a few hours. A day at most. Just to be safe, I'm sending a recommendation over to the crime desk, and insisting that you go home for the rest of the day. They should be letting us out of the building any minute now anyway. That way if time messes with you again, at least you won't be in danger, or dangerous to anyone else."

"Thank you," I said dejectedly. "And call me Ahab. I'm sorry if I wasted your time."

"This is literally why I'm here," she reminded me, opening the office door. "Let me know if there are any updates, all right?"

"Will do. Have a good day."

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I probably should have let it be, but I just couldn't. I thought I remembered the hand being smaller than usual. A kid's hand instead of an adult's. And yes, it had touched me, but it had been eleven years since Blake had killed anyone with his touch. His own father believed he might one day gain control of his abilities. Maybe that day had come sooner than he'd thought.

And then there was the whispered message. Whoever it was had asked me to keep it a secret. At first I'd thought he meant passing the roll. Weird time changes sounded like something important enough to keep secret instead.

Maybe Vought had sent another supe to our building; most likely to keep the Howlands safe. Someone with time manipulation, possibly. If so, they were terrible at their job. Someone had shot Sandra Howland twice. If not for her vest, she might have died back there.

I couldn't let this go. Whatever was going on all had to do with the Howlands. I had their home address from my job, so that night I packed up some birdwatching tools and drove out in that direction. Maybe I was being stupid, possibly to a career-suicide degree, but I'd learned to trust my instincts.

I couldn't be careless about it, though. Capes for Christ had bought them that home, which meant that Vought had had plenty of time to reinforce it and fortify it. I'd have to keep my distance. Fortunately there was a tall hill nearby, which was now apparently an abandoned machine plant. I didn't want to risk cutting the wire to get through, but I was high enough to get a vantage point on the house. Or more specifically, Blake's room. It looked like he was on the second floor on this side.

My binoculars had been calibrated for owlwatching, so they didn't have any trouble zooming in on him. All I could see through the window was his computer screen and the end table, presumably next to the window. I was surprised to see a computer. Somehow I'd figured the Howlands, who insisted on homeschooling all their kids up to college or finishing school, were luddite-like.

It was foolish thought, in hindsight. They used plenty of technology in their work, including their family van. Blake had been a big part of outfitting it for crime-fighting. It was probably bulletproof, too.

Like the window I was looking through as well. It was doubtful that the Barrios Azteca gang cared about what Blake had on his computer, but they might be ok with killing a kid. That window was almost certainly bulletproof, and all the others were probably the same.

Blake was actually at his computer, working on some document. His internet usage was probably sharply restricted by his parents, so it was most likely a school report or something. I waited for maybe half an hour before he closed the document. He opened up some kind of program and then shut off the monitor. I didn't catch what that program looked like or what it did. Whatever it was, it looked like a habit to him. Something he'd been doing for a long time and was second nature to him by now.

His mom came in, apparently to tuck him in. He was out of sight by now, and I saw her lean down briefly before shutting off the light and closing the door.

That was that, I supposed. Maybe it hadn't been him in that stall next to me. Maybe my mind really was playing tricks on me, and this was all one big nothingburger. Leaning back against the fence in defeat, I gave one last look through the darkened window. There was night light in there and the blinking power indicator from the computer's monitor.

Wait- power indicators didn't blink like that. Whether the monitor was on or off, the power was supposed to stay constant. It took me a few more moments of staring before I put it together: the blinking wasn't random. It was a steady, repeating pattern. It was an SOS!

There was no mistaking it. Three short dots followed by three long, and then three short again. Blake was asking for help. It had been him in that stall! Memories flooded back into me, of my time in Houston and the situation I'd faced there.

There was still security near the house, and it was probably layered with alarms as well. There was nothing I could do to help, tonight at least. At least I now knew that help was needed.

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"You broke into their house?" Gwen said harshly, looking at me as if I'd suddenly grown horns.

"Of course not," I said quickly, spreading my hands. "I was nowhere near their house. This was through the window, at a great distance. It was an SOS- I'm sure of it. That kid's asking for help, Gwen. We have to do something."

"Based on what? Your super-creepy and totally inappropriate spying? The Howland family is one of the most closely scrutinized in the whole city. The whole state, probably! We can't just go hurling accusations around at them, because you thought you saw a pattern on some computer screen!"

I shook my head, trying to keep my voice even. "I saw him start up that program, Gwen. He's been doing it for a long time, I'd guess. Probably every night since he got here. This isn't my imagination. It's deliberate! Maybe it's his family and maybe not, but he's definitely afraid of something!"

She still looked troubled at the idea of speaking out, and I could hardly blame her. Reluctantly, I decided she had to know my own story. "Look, before I moved here I lived in Houston. I had a pretty nice apartment, up on the third floor. There's not much birdwatching to be had in a city that large, but I did get the chance to watch my neighbors from time to time. I've always had a knack for noticing patterns. Back there, I noticed some strange behavior in one of the families living nearby."

I sighed. This was going to get ugly. "This man liked to go to his daughter's room, late at night. After his wife was asleep. At first I told myself he was just worried about her. Maybe she had sleep apnea or something, and he wanted to make sure she was still breathing. But I could also see into their kitchen. I saw how that girl looked at him in the mornings. I knew what he was doing."

Gwen's expression was turning horrified, but I hurried on. "I did what I was supposed to do. I called the DFPS, but nothing came of it. He must have been careful not to leave a mark, and the wife didn't believe he'd done it. I called again and again, but they never protected that poor girl. Then one day the family was gone! I got back from work and their place across the way was empty. I still don't know what happened to them. Maybe the wife wised up and got her kid out of there, or maybe he's still with them, abusing her every night. That haunts me every day. I can't let it happen again. Not if I can do a single damn thing to stop it."

"I would feel the same, I'm sure," Gwen said, her voice a little sour at my story. "But Vought keeps all supes under a close watch. Do you really think they'd let one of their supes engage in pedophilia?"

"You mean like they keep the super-terrorists under a close watch? Or HC for that matter? Vought didn't even know about Compound V, and it was under their very noses the whole time! Or worse they did know about it, and they're lying about it now! So either they're ignorant, or they're evil. Besides, maybe it's not child abuse as we know it. Either way Blake needs help, and he's clearly not willing to ask his parents."

"This isn't just any family, Ahab," she said softly, looking worried. "These are the Howlands we're talking about. Do I really need to make some cliched comment about a white whale right now? Look, I have contacts inside the Vought offices in NYC. Let me reach out to them- see if there's any reason Blake has to fear his parents. I know you want to do something now, especially after what you saw in Houston, but it's not just your reputation at stake here. If you go after the Howlands without proof, Vought could bury you. Maybe literally, given how fervently some people here support the Howlands."

I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything more from the conversation. Agreeing that child abuse is bad is easy. Figuring out how to stop it, or even recognizing that it's happening... is less so. "All right, but I'm going to look into their past myself, too. I'm not the only one who thinks that Vought is less than trustworthy, after that whole mess up in New York."

"Vought owns this station," she reminded me darkly, and then let out a frustrated breath. "Look, just stay away from that house, ok? I'll do some checking today, and get back to you with what I find."

I nodded slowly. "Thanks."

As I left her office, my mind was already arranging strategies about where to start. The Howland's history was mostly public record already- as you'd expect from celebrities. If they had any dirty secrets, they had probably been buried by Vought years ago. Gwen meant well, just as I had in that old apartment, but she wouldn't get any answers from them. I was on my own for now.

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That night I came prepared. It had taken some doing, and owing a favor to a somewhat unscrupulous man in a tech store, but I had what I needed.

The parabolic mic was already mine, from my days back in Houston. I'd used it many times before, and felt a wave of nostalgia upon seeing it again. It was ironic that the most horrible thing I'd seen back there had been while I was at home, and not at work.

Loading up my car, I drove carefully northeast towards the area in question. Gwen had wanted me to stay away, but at this point I was straight-up ignoring her. I could have rattled off a list of reasons why, but it all boiled down to just doing the right thing. You don't postpone action when real harm is being done. If you do, you're just as bad as the people doing the harm.

This time I parked half a mile away, and walked eastward for ten minutes or so. The machine plant I'd seen last night was still abandoned, and I'd learned that it would probably be that way for months more. It was perfect for surveillance and possible contact. The trouble was, the place was surrounded by a wire fence. I could cut through it or dig under it, but any damage would be noticeable and I had to be a ghost here.

Wincing at the brute-force of the method, I placed my bolt-cutters against the gate and clipped the lock open. I'd have to get rid of both the cutters and broken lock, but at least it was less obvious than leaving a hole in the fence. I replaced the lock with one of my own, of the exact same design. Hopefully no one would notice it had been replaced.

Then I was inside. After disposing of my other materials I made my way into the plant. It smelled of moss and grass, showing just how long it had been empty. There were signs of animal habitation too, suggesting that the fence had been breached in at least one place. Not trusting the elevators, industrial or otherwise, I found some stairs and climbed my way up to the fourth floor.

Perfect. Here I was high up enough to get a line of sight on Blake's room, but far enough away from the fence for easy notice. Smiling, I opened up my laptop and set up the laser gear.

This was why I owed my tech guy a favor. Ordinarily getting a laser connected to a laptop with a translation program for Morse code would have taken a few days, or skills I just didn't have. Sorkin had whipped all of this up in an hour or so, in exchange for a job recommendation. He had a troubled employment history and more than one criminal conviction, but Sorkin claimed he wanted to go legit and get a normal job. I hoped, rather than expected, he was genuine about that.

Pulling out my binoculars, I peered through the windows, both here and over there. It was easy enough to set up the parabolic mic too, which could pick up sounds even off of bulletproof glass. This way I could hear what was going on in there as well.

Sure enough Blake was at his computer. He looked alone, but I counted the number of moving shadows in other rooms before I could relax a little. Aiming the laser carefully at the wall above his computer monitor, I typed a message into the laptop. Here to help.

Blake twitched in surprise, his eyes on the red light blinking on his wall. The message was repeating, and he looked out the window from his chair. He smiled slowly, and waved. His mouth moved, but my mic didn't pick anything up.

That made no sense. He'd spoken clearly at the interview. Unless... he was being listened to?

Hastily, I reached for my laptop again. Are they listening?

As soon as the message completed, he nodded. Apparently he understood Morse code perfectly. Pretty sharp for a twelve-year-old. He returned to his computer, and typed out a bit more on his document. I had to zoom in the binoculars again in order to read it. It was just one word: thanks.

He'd been asking for help for months, maybe even the full year, with no indication if anyone was listening or even cared. He'd reached out to a total stranger the other day, knowing that it might mean getting him in trouble. I felt a sense of kinship with the poor guy, having been all alone in this, whatever this was. Anytime, I typed out, and he smiled out the window.

I'm Ahab, I introduced myself, marveling at how quickly he could pick up what my laser was broadcasting on his wall. How can I help you, Blake?

Blake's smile died, and he turned back to his computer. "My name's not Blake. It's Kieran Morris," he typed out.

I stared at his computer monitor in shock. This wasn't just child abuse- it was kidnapping, too? What else had the Howlands lied about? If that was even their real name. The other day in that bathroom. You touched me, didn't you?

He nodded. "I don't kill people. That's just something they make me say cuz they don't want me touching anyone."

I'd suspected as much, but seeing him confirm it did bring a bit of relief. Ok, I'll report your story to everyone. They'll have to let you go then.

"Blake?" A voice echoed through my mic, and I recognized it was Sandra. Through the binoculars, I could see her shadow under the door. The kid's back stiffened, and he rapidly typed "my mom's name was Ella" before selecting the whole block of text and deleting it. "Just a minute," he called out, and I could hear the tremble in his voice.

The door opened, letting his blond-haired captor into the room. She looked around the room, and peered out the window into the darkness for a moment. "It's late, sweetie. You should be in bed."

"I was just finishing up." He saved his document and closed it, before turning off the computer.

"All right, I'll tuck you in." She helped him into the bed, just out of sight from my position, and leaned down. Flashbacks of what I'd seen in Houston raced through my head, and I gritted my teeth. At least she wasn't physically abusing him. Yet. I had to get the real story out, for his sake.

Then she stood up right away, now upset about something. She walked over to the window and looked out again, this time clearly searching. I cursed under my breath and gathered up my stuff. I'd forgotten about her empathic abilities! She must have sensed something off in Kieran's emotions, and she was looking for me now!

I was well out of her stated range, but that meant literally nothing. They'd lied about their 'son' Blake, which meant they could have lied about everything else, too. Making sure I wasn't leaving any trace, I fled the upstairs of the plant, running down the stairs as fast as I could do it safely.

Whatever Vought or EPPD patrols had gone through this area weren't in sight right now, thankfully. By the time I made it to the ground floor, I was already pulling out the padlock key. Rushing to open the gate, I closed it again behind me and relocked it. Glancing around, I hurled the key into the darkness away from me. There, I was covered. I'd been wearing gloves the whole time, and hadn't left any fingerprints. Trying to look casual, I stripped the gloves and wandered down the hill in the direction of my car.

In the nick of time it turned out. "You, stop!" A voice called out from behind me, and a flashlight focused on my back. I did as told, turning around and covering my eyes against the glare.

I couldn't see much past the light, but the voice was authoritative, and approaching. It was Vought security, I could finally tell from his uniform. "What are you doing out here?"

"Bird watching," I said casually, lifting my binoculars as evidence.

"Really," he responded dryly, roughly taking my backpack. He was armed, so I didn't want to raise too much of a stink about it. At least he didn't have his gun in hand. "In the middle of the night?"

I shrugged. "That's when the owls are out. I thought I saw a Great Horned owl a few minutes ago, but it was just a normal Barn." Maybe I should put up a little resistance. "Um, who exactly are you, anyway?"

"None of your damn business." He rifled through my pack. "Do bird watchers always carry parabolic mics and laser pointers with them?"

"We do if we want to record owl calls, and figure out how far away they are exactly," I said truthfully. Sure, I hadn't actually used either for those purposes, but the point still stood. "Look, I don't want to cause trouble, but you're obviously not police. This is public property, and I have a right to be here. What you're doing is basically illegal search and seizure."

I didn't even see the blow coming. One second I was standing there, and the next I was on my knees, bleeding into the grass. "Shut up," he said harshly, and spat on the grass next to me.

I spread my hands placatingly, still seeing stars from where he hit me. The bruise on my face would no doubt be a beautiful tapestry of blues and greens by morning.

He pulled out my laptop and opened it. Growling, he grabbed my hand and pressed my right thumb against the authenticator to unlock it. I hid a smile underneath the bruise and pain. I'd deleted the translation program just in case, and it was a good thing I'd done so. All he'd find in there would be pictures and videos of birds in flight and nesting. Nothing but what I wanted him to see.

Unless he didn't care about evidence, and was just delaying until that blonde supe could get over here and interrogate me. I had to get out of here right away.

Running clearly wasn't an option, but I did have an alternative. I spat blood on the ground and stood up slowly. I didn't have to work hard to inject anger into my tone. "Listen, you fascist prick. The world doesn't trust Vought anymore- we know what you really are now. What you've done is just more evidence."

I gestured at the computer. "Speaking of evidence, everything that just happened here has been recorded on my laptop. The moment you opened it, the web cam got a good shot of your face. And if you think you can save yourself by destroying it, think again. All the data is stored on a remote server. You could kill me, but I've got people who know how to access my files. How long do you think it would take for the real cops to come knocking at your door?"

He put his hand on his gun. "Bird watcher, my ass."

"I record things for a living. Whether they're people or birds. Now you can either let me go right now, or you can watch as your life evaporates. Because if you don't, I will rain legal hell down on you and your employers. They'll have to pay millions to shut me or my people up! You think Vought treats its enemies badly? How do you think they'll treat an embarrassing, expensive failure in their own ranks?"

I was bluffing, right down to my core, but hopefully that didn't show. And my outrage was genuine- he'd struck me, for no reason! He could have detained me without doing that, and it was that very crime which might set me free now!

For a long moment we just stared at each other in the darkness. The moon was rising off to our left, highlighting our features, our equipment... and the blood still dripping from my mouth. Finally, he shook his head. "Get the hell out of here." He dumped my stuff into my backpack with unnecessary roughness, and stomped off down the hill. Feeling a little faint with relief, I had to work hard to stay standing.

Damn, my jaw hurt! I'd been shot at before, and someone had even tried to stab me once, but I'd never been punched. And he knew what he was doing. Usually, punches to the face were more likely to break fingers than facial bones. Wincing, I limped down the other side of the hill towards my car.

No, I couldn't go there. I might have been bluffing about recording all this, but maybe Vought had caught all this on camera! I couldn't go back to my car- it could be traced to my real identity. My blood was still on the ground, but it wouldn't do them any good. I'd never been in the system. Not even my fingerprints were on record.

In the end I took three buses back home, with stopoffs and random walks each time. It was a good thing I'd brought cash with me. Hopefully anyone tracing my steps would be convinced I was just out bird watching and then going home. Hopefully. At least I had names to run down now. Kieran Morris, and his mother Ella.

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"What in God's name happened to you?"

The voice was worried and frustrated. It was Sally, my former neighbor and now pseudo-roommate. She'd married my current roommate last year and moved in with us. It wasn't exactly a comfortable situation for all three of us, but with housing prices the way they were nationwide, we didn't exactly have many options.

I'd just come downstairs to prepare breakfast when she'd spotted me like this.

"I was mugged," I said groggily, and she put her hands to her mouth. "Don't worry, it's not as bad as it looks."

"Good, because it looks horrible! Have you gone to the police?"

I shook my head and immediately regretted it. "I was out bird watching, and I didn't even get a good look at the guy. He just decked me, took my wallet, and left. It had my keys chained to it, too."

"You poor thing," she said sympathetically, and moved in close to examine it. "Sheesh. He really did a number on you."

"Yeah, but I wasn't dizzy or nauseous on the way back, so I don't think I have a concussion. I just got my bell rung."

"And then some," she agreed. "Have you ordered replacements for what was in your wallet?"

"Most of it, and I do have my spare car keys. I don't want to drive without a license though. Could you do me a favor and go get my car? It's parked about six miles away- I can give you the address."

"Of course; not a problem. Then when I get back, I can make you look a little more presentable. That bruise would show through normal cover-up, but the stuff I use has a little more kick to it."

I'd hoped as much. Sally worked as a make-up artist in a film studio. She'd even had some minor celebrities in her chair, simulating injuries or historical figures or alien creatures. "Sure, but that can wait until tomorrow. I'm not going to work today. I've already called in."

"Naturally. You need to rest, and take it easy. You were wiped out even before this happened. Even Tyler saw that." She peered at my bruise again, clucking her tongue. "What's the world coming to, anyway?"

I'd regretted lying to her and using her to recover my car safely, but I couldn't pity her in this. People were being hurt all over the planet, in ways most of us had never experienced and would probably never understand. Only people with massive privilege could react like it was a surprise, and only people who were massively naive could lie to themselves that easily.

After she left, I devoted my day to finding Ella Morris. Blake, or Kieran as he should really be known, had referred to her in the past tense, which meant she was probably dead. Still, he was a sharp kid. He probably knew there was a story there, and I'd promised to reveal his story and get him released. At least he knew he wasn't alone now.

Guessing at her age based on Kieran's apparent age, I found five or so Ella Morrises, in Texas alone. I had to narrow the search somehow.

People generally got their accent from early in life. The whole supe family was southern based on that alone, but Kieran wasn't really one of them. I went through recordings from the interview again and again, trying to nail down his accent. Best I could guess, he was from Louisiana or Mississippi. That was much better- there were only three women by the name Ella Morris there, and two were too young to be mother to a pre-teen.

I pulled up a picture of the third and did a double-take. I knew that face. That was Tia Hawkins: the nanny the Howlands had hired, who had died instantly. Her picture had been in Howland files for over a year now.

This was a special kind of sick. Not only had they kidnapped Kieran, but they were forcing him to claim he killed a woman. The woman who was his biological mother, no less! All as another evil way of maintaining control, and keeping him from touching anyone.

But why? Why bother keeping a kid as a prisoner anyway? And what did his touch do, if it didn't kill people? I'd experienced weird temporal effects for a few hours, but nothing since then. That wasn't much use in a fight. I might have been able to see Rick move at super speed as if he was running normally, but I hadn't been able to move that fast myself.

Questions piling on questions.

First things first. I still had some contacts with the FBI office in Houston, so I called my friend there and asked for a favor. A full dossier on Ella Morris and her son Kieran. At least the FBI wasn't in Vought's pocket yet. The revelation of Compound V had kept both the intelligence community and the military firmly apart from anything supe-related.

It only took a few minutes to get the basics. She'd been born in Tampa, thirty-two years ago, the child of a construction worker and a waitress. Schooled there in Florida. No sign of any college education, but she did get a job in a tech firm. Probably as an assistant- the tech industry was still heavily sexist.

This was interesting. Apparently she had a child, born twelve years ago, and given up for adoption. On the form she claimed she couldn't care for him like he needed. She probably didn't make enough money at the time, or maybe she had mental health issues. That must have been a heartbreaking experience for her.

Her life had gotten better after that. Two promotions and multiple raises at work. Apparently she'd had a gift for marketing software to various retailers. Then two years ago, she'd hired someone to find her son. It was pretty common, I'd learned, for parents to do that. Moms more than dads, usually.

That was where her record ended. As for Kieran, he'd never been adopted. He'd grown up first in an orphanage, and then bounced between group homes. That had probably been why Stillwell and the scientists had chosen him for Compound V injections. He had no one to come looking for him, or so they'd assumed.

There were multiple incident reports of violence in the file. Apparently Kieran had been bullied, or perhaps had been a bully. Reports from group homes rarely told the full story. Eventually he'd been transferred to a psychiatric facility called Sage Grove. That was all my friend had come up with.

I pulled up public info on Sage Grove. Whoa. A full-scale riot had happened there, just two months ago! Apparently the patients had gained control of the facility for several hours, killing multiple orderlies. At least Kieran hadn't been there for that.

Weirdly, there was no mention of police intervention in the riot.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" Tyler said from behind me, and I jumped like I'd been bitten by something.

Tyler laughed as I tried to regain my composure, but his smile faded when he got a look at my face. "Jeez. Sally told me what happened, but ouch. Are you ok?"

"I will be," I assured him. "Why were you sneaking around like that, anyway?"

"I wasn't. You were just so caught up in... whatever that is, that you didn't notice me."

It was a fair assessment. "I'm just trying to help, well, a friend. I don't know him that well, but he could use a hand right now."

Tyler nodded easily. He'd always been a mellow guy, which was perfect because Sally was so intense. They balanced each other nicely. "Was he there for that?" He gestured at the images from the riots.

"No, he's just a kid. But he was there years ago, and I need to find out why." I leaned back and stretched. FBI resources or not, I couldn't ask my friend for help on this again. Or not that friend, anyway. "I'm taking a few days off, just to relax. Wanna go on a road trip with me? If Sally's ok with it, I mean."

"Sounds like fun. Where to?" Of course he was up for a trip. Tyler's skills were in data recovery, from damaged phones and the like, but he hated the nine-to-five life. Which was why he was always an independent contractor despite the lower pay and lack of benefits. It was a good thing Sally had a well-paying job.

"I'm not actually sure yet," I said, peering back at the pictures from the Sage Grove riot.

-.-

A year ago if I'd been curious about the Sage Grove riot, I would have looked into the surviving orderlies. At the time, I knew that the higher-ups would never give a straight answer, especially about their patients. What I didn't know was just how limited the orderlies' access to the facility would be. I'd learned since then.

This time I focused on the IT people. Mental institutions usually had an extensive CCTV camera network, and someone had set up and maintained that system. Even if the cameras weren't in the rooms themselves, they'd definitely cover the halls. A few hours with the footage and I might be able to compile a list of patients in Sage Grove.

I was in luck this time. Their IT guy had been let go after the riot, and was now living in Phoenix, which was just over six hours away. Or IT gal, I should have said. Amanda Knowles, who'd worked at Sage Grove for over four years.

She had zero social media presence, no listed email or phone, and no living relatives. Just getting her address had required asking another favor from my FBI friend. She probably wouldn't be receptive to visitors, but I didn't have much else to go on. I had to know why Kieran had been sent to Sage Grove, and I couldn't go through official channels or the Vought people would know.

"This could be a wild goose chase," I warned Tyler, but he just shrugged and got into the car anyway.

"I could use some time away from El Paso anyway right now. Sally's between big movies, so her stress level should be pretty low right now. I'll want to be back before next week- that's when her next big shoot starts."

I smiled. Sally did rely on him a lot when she was stressed. I was buying gas for this little excursion, just on principle, so I wouldn't have to take my own car. For all I knew the Vought people really had figured out who I was, and were watching it. "There's construction on the main road. We should take a left and head out on the 180."

He obliged, and soon we were underway.

I'd known Tyler for years, since just after college. He'd put an ad out for a roommate who was ok with occasional weed use, and I'd responded. It was a risky thing at the time, given that Texas was one of the slowest states to legalize weed. Still, we hadn't gotten in trouble yet, not that I smoked it with him.

He hadn't brought any with him this time, thankfully. Given that he was driving, I wasn't exactly looking forward to seeing him high on the highway. Not that he was a lightweight or anything, but he didn't hold back either.

The trip passed quickly enough, for two guys whose commute was usually only ten minutes or so. Or mine was anyway. His varied greatly. He occupied the time listening to various weird radio stations, including a podcast native to Arizona concerning supes. I tried to hide my annoyance. Everything seemed to be about supes these days.

Amanda Knowles lived on the southern edge of Phoenix, in what looked like a converted factory. The loading dock had been refurbished as a garage door from the looks of it. Sharing a bemused glance with Tyler, I knocked on the door next to it. It was only after a few seconds of silence did I notice the camera mounted on the corner of the building. It was pointed right at us.

There was a click, and a woman's voice came through the speaker. "What do you want?"

Paranoia might have been off-putting to me in other circumstances, but in this case it was a good thing. "I'm Ahab, and this is Tyler," I introduced us. "We're looking for Amanda Knowles. Is that you?"

"You haven't answered my question."

Sharing another look with Tyler, I nodded. "I understand you installed the security system at Sage Grove, four years ago, and worked there up until a few months ago. A friend of mine was a patient there, but I can't find any records of him. He's in trouble, and I need as much information about the place as I can get."

There was a long silence coming from the speaker. "What's this friend's name?"

"Kieran Morris, but for all I know they put him in under a different name. I know it sounds paranoid, but everything I dig up about this place is shadier than the last thing," I said, hoping it would resonate with her.

Suddenly the flap on the door opened, and a small device extended from it. "Stick your finger on that," the voice instructed.

"Why?" I looked at it suspiciously.

"It'll take a sample of your blood. I need to test you for Compound V. Both of you."

That was surprising. "You think we're supes?"

"Doesn't matter what I think. I need to be sure. Now stick your finger on that or leave."

Shrugging, Tyler reached for it. I hesitated until she retracted it, and then apparently replaced the blood-test kit for me. Thoughts of my weird time experiences flashed through my head. What if whatever Kieran had done to me had left Compound V in my system? It was unlikely, given that adults given injections usually either went insane or died. Or both. Still, maybe he'd microdosed me when he touched me.

There was nothing for it. I reluctantly reached for it and felt the pinch as a needle pricked my hand. "How long will it take you to find we're not supes?"

"It'll take as long as it takes," she retorted, and I heard something whirring in the background.

We waited for another minute or so, before the door clicked open. "All right, come in for now, but don't touch the wires on the inside unless you like getting shocked."

The entryway was a sealed chain-link cage, and I could hear the hum of electricity running through the wires. On the other side of it, a short-haired woman with piercing green eyes was aiming a shotgun at us. Even Tyler seemed to get serious at the sight of that, raising his hands slowly.

I followed suit. "Is that really necessary?" I nodded at her shotgun.

"You're not supes, but that doesn't mean you don't work for Vought," she said harshly. "Now how did you find me here? I'm not on any public lists."

"What does Vought have to do with this?" Tyler wondered aloud.

I shook my head. I'd suspected that Vought had transferred Kieran out of the group home and sent him to Sage Grove because he was a supe, but this confirmed it. "I have a friend in the FBI. That's how I found you. And I think Vought was running Sage Grove. Whatever was going on there, it wasn't any ordinary loony bin. Most likely it's where they kept the crazy supes. Not that the Seven are particularly sane from the looks of it."

"What kinda weirdness are we mixed up in here, Ahab?" He asked me slowly.

"I'm not sure. I was hoping she could tell us. That is if she doesn't blow our heads off first."

Reluctantly, Amanda lowered the shotgun. "Nice shiner, by the way. I guess you're only this diplomatic when you're talking to me."

"Oh, you're all kinds of special," I assured her, and she smiled darkly.

"Anyway, Sage Grove wasn't what you think- they didn't send supes there. That's where they made them!"

I let out a breath of understanding. Ever since hearing about Compound V and Stillwell's experiments, I'd been wondering how they'd gotten the data. Sage Grove must have been where they gave the injections. Or one of the places- there'd probably been more. "Were there any kids at that facility?" I asked urgently, stepping closer to the wire mesh. "Kieran was only eight when he was sent there."

She nodded, slowly. "I remember him. Not just because he was a kid, but because of who brought him in." She hesitated a moment longer, and then reached out and pulled a lever. I heard the hum in the wires die off. "Come with me."

I tentatively reached for the handle to the interior door and opened it. Together, Tyler and I followed her through what looked like several more layers of internal security, and then into a server room. I probably didn't want to know how she'd gotten hold of much of this equipment. "Nice," I said casually, and Tyler made a noise of agreement.

She ignored me, and pulled up a list of video files. "After Sage Grove was shut down, a bunch of Vought people showed up and cleared out all the evidence, but I was ready for that. I'd been copying their video files for years, and had plenty of backups."

Tyler cocked his head to the right slightly. "Why would you spy on your employers and risk getting fired?"

She looked grim. "When you see some of these recordings, you'll understand." It was mostly hidden by her body, but I could see her hand move slightly to her side. Probably to a sidearm she had tucked away there. She was testing us, waiting to see how we reacted to the video.

I'd known a little of what to expect from reading up on Compound V, but actually seeing the experiments was truly gut-wrenching. Dozens, maybe hundreds of test subjects, injected and then studied to see what happened. Many died in pain, their internal organs exploding or liquefying. Others lost control of their new powers, harming themselves or other people. I started as I recognized one of the orderlies holding onto a struggling man. "That's Lamplighter!" He looked different out of his usual Seven uniform, but the former superhero was definitely there.

Amanda nodded, pausing the recording, and I was grateful to notice her hand had relaxed again. "He was responsible for sterilizing the rooms after their failures. He got rid of the evidence."

Even Tyler looked sick at this, his eyes wide and his mouth moving wordlessly. Eventually he stared over at her. "This was going on for years? Why didn't you tell someone about it?"

"Who could I go to? The law? Half of them think Vought walks on water! The media? I had no way of knowing if they were in Vought's pocket either. If I went to the wrong person, I'd be dead, and all of this would just vanish. Besides, the people don't want to know about any of this. They'd rather not see how the sausage is made, right?"

"Things have changed since New York," I said softly, still staring at the struggling man paused on the screen. "Now that people know about Compound V, you can come forward with this."

She shook her head firmly. "It hasn't changed enough. I saw the news coverage. There were crowds in New York chanting to allow Compound V for use in law enforcement! Vought can always escape consequences for what it's done. There are never enough people who can see the truth for themselves!"

I sighed. As important as this was, it wasn't why I'd come. "You said you remembered Kieran. Do you have any footage of him?"

"Yes, from the day he was brought in. He was only there for a few weeks, but they didn't give him any injections. Probably because he was turned as a kid, right?"

I nodded, and she pulled up some other files. "Here he is."

A younger Kieran, looking scared, was entering the main gate. Holding his hand was a tall woman, with a strange haircut. "Holy crap!" Tyler breathed. "Is that Stormfront??"

"Everyone's favorite Nazi," I confirmed darkly. "Of course she'd be involved in this. It's very eugenicsy, and that's right up her alley."

Stormfront had been one of the Seven until recently. Files had been released to the press, revealing that her actual name had been Klara Risinger, and she'd been a literal Nazi. Because of her superpowers, she aged very slowly, and had actually been around during the original Third Reich. After the news came out, she'd been vilified by the public- or most of them anyway. According to a Vought press statement, she'd been 'neutralized', whatever that meant.

"If Stormfront brought Kieran in personally, he must have been important to her agenda," I reasoned aloud. "Do you have any footage of what exactly he was doing here?"

Tyler was wandering away, looking at the other files playing in the background. Hopefully his laid-back nature would help him cope with seeing all that horror.

Amanda shook her head. "They did that in private rooms with no records. But there was a constant stream of people being sent into his room, for days on end. People who hadn't been injected yet, from what I can tell."

I winced. "How many of them died?"

"None. As far as I can tell anyway. They would be sent into his room, leave a few seconds later, and then a few hours later another person would be sent in. I never figured out why."

"I have a theory," I responded. "When Kieran touched me, I experienced weird temporal shifts. Time would speed up for me, or slow down, seemingly at random. It only lasted a few hours, but I think it was because of him. They were probably testing him at Sage Grove, trying to figure out how to fine-tune his powers. Maybe they wanted to have people who could speed up or slow down time at will."

Amanda didn't look convinced, and I wasn't really, either. Even if it was true, it didn't explain why the Howlands had kidnapped him. It might explain why his mother had died, though. If she gave him up as a baby, and then tracked him down eleven years later, Vought wouldn't have wanted to let him go. They'd rather kill her and make it look like an accident than lose one of their precious supes.

"Hey, I know him," Tyler cut in. "I saw him on the news this morning."

He was pointing at one of the screens, and we both went over there. She paused the display, and it showed a man yelling at the camera from his cell, apparently in great pain. I didn't know him. "What was the news about?"

"It was about those Howland supes, and their fight against that gang. This is the guy they were fighting. Wee-wee something."

"Huehuecoyotl," I said softly. "He's named after the Aztec god of mischief. They call him HC for short. You're sure it was the same guy?"

Tyler gave me a wan look. "You know how I am with faces."

It was true- he was uncannily good at recognizing people. "What the hell was a drug-powered Mexican supe doing in a psych facility in Pennyslvania..." I peered at the time stamp on the recording, "two years ago? I thought he was living in Mexico back then!"

Amanda gave me a surprised look. "I told you. This is where they're created."

I shook my head. "No, no. Foreign powers got ahold of Compound V and found a way to duplicate it. Some pretty bad people did, too. That's where superterrorists come from. That's where Naqib came from!"

Naqib had been an Arab supe who had popped up in news coverage last year. Most of the information on him was classified, but he'd apparently been responsible for multiple bombings. Most likely his power was explosive in nature. According to Vought, he'd been killed months ago. Again, for whatever that was worth.

"So you really didn't know? Naqib was the exception, not the rule, Ahab." Despite her earlier harshness, Amanda's voice was comforting now. "Vought creates almost all supes, wherever they go and whatever they do. The public assumes what you did- that our supes are here to protect us from whatever superterrorists are out there, but it's all just a big game of chess to Vought. They control both sides of the board. Whenever they need to stoke fear and increase their support, they just let one of their pets loose. The Seven stop the threat, and are cheered as heroes, and the idiots doing the cheering couldn't find their own asses with both hands and a flashlight!"

"I can't believe this," I said, feeling breathless. "I covered the Barrios Azteca gang for years. Some are from across the border, but most are just American criminals. Are you saying they were all put in place by Vought? Just to get people to support the Howlands? And Capes for Christ, come to think of it!"

Amanda shook her head. "No, just the supes. The rest of the gang is probably just what they appear to be- criminals who are just after money and power. Only HC is working for Vought. In fact, he probably has an arrangement with the supe family working in El Paso. He gives them information on where to go so they can hit some meaningless small-time drug dealers. On camera, of course. Meanwhile he keeps the threat going in other places, and gets paid by Vought for his trouble."

"Good God. I mean I knew Vought was hiding things- big, big secrets- but this is worse than I ever imagined. This is... diabolical!"

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I'd barely noticed how long the trip back home took. My mind was too preoccupied with what I'd learned, and the implications therein. I had to keep reminding myself that my priority was Kieran first, despite how important everything else was.

Thankfully, Amanda had agreed to help us. She wasn't willing to give us any copies of her recordings for fear they might be traced back to her, but she did tell us how Vought kept in contact with its pawns, and how it paid them. With her help, I was confident I could expose HC's true allegiance to the public. Not that it would help Kieran at all. Vought would just prop up another bad guy, and he'd be back to square one again.

It took another few days to nail down the exact details of HC's relationship with the Howlands. Amanda was mostly right- he did call them on a secure phone in advance, telling them where and when to hit some fringe members of the gang. There they could publicly fight crime, gaining accolades from the people. All this time I thought I'd been reporting the truth. In reality, I'd just been another dupe.

But no more. As fate would have it, HC was planning on a showdown with the Howlands tomorrow night. No doubt he and James and Rick would have some highly televised, yet somehow-also-secret clash. There would probably be a heaping pile of property damage, maybe a few civilian casualties to add flavor, and then a dessert where a defeated HC would supervillain away into the shadows, for a later confrontation. Now that I knew the whole score, it was so obvious in hindsight! I felt like an idiot.

I compiled my evidence, or at least the truth about HC himself, and made my way in to work. Thanks to Sally, I looked at least somewhat presentable. I hadn't worn makeup since a dare back in college, but I'd seen myself in the mirror. Even I, with my experience around tv cameras, would have had a hard time noticing the bruise.

Gwen was in her office, and ushered me in after I knocked. "Welcome back. I hope you're feeling better- you were gone for several days."

"I am, thanks. I actually took some of the time doing some investigating of my own. Here," I handed her a flash drive with the information on it. "I've been looking into HC- the superterrorist with the drug powers. Apparently he's been chatting with the Howlands, secretly!"

Gwen's eyes widened, and she glanced down at the drive. I held my breath a little. I had to be very careful here, with exactly what to tell her. Not because I didn't trust her, but because telling her too much would only put her in danger.

"How do you know that?"

"I have a source inside the BA gang," I lied. "He thinks his boss is reporting to the DEA, but I checked the number. It's James Howland's!"

"Are you sure he didn't just call to taunt, or to threaten Howland's family? It wouldn't be the first time the Barrios Azteca gang has gone after family- that's why they have security in the first place."

"I'm sure. My source sent me HC's phone records. He's called Howland dozens of times now! It's always just a few hours before the family goes out patrolling and runs into the gang. That's more than just a coincidence. They have to be coordinating this. That must have been what K- what that kid was saying with his SOS message. He must have known what his dad was up to!" At least I hoped it looked that way. Lies were always easier to believe if they were close to the truth.

She went over to her computer and plugged in the drive. All the phone records were there, just as Amanda had promised. "This is incredible!"

I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd nearly messed up, saying Kieran instead of Blake, but she apparently hadn't noticed. Then she straightened up, looking grim. "I'm sorry, Ahab, but we can't broadcast this. Vought owns GCAC-TV, and the Howlands are supes. It would never get approval even for editing, much less distribution!"

I nodded. "I know. It's just my luck, right? I stumble on the juiciest story of the decade, and I have to sit on it because of some ownership rules. Look, I get that we can't release that, but I just wanted you to have that info. I don't know if my source is talking to anyone else. If he is, this story will break somewhere else. If and when that happens, you'll need that info for whatever superhero story you're going to write. It'll give you a leg up, at least."

She looked surprised, but then nodded gratefully. "It will. Thank you. May I ask what you're going to do now? About the Howlands and HC, I mean."

I shrugged. "Go back to work, I guess. Just because I can't do anything about this doesn't mean there aren't other stories waiting to be found. If I found this one, I can find others."

She smiled slightly. "I'm glad to see this hasn't discouraged you."

"Perish the thought," I said easily, nodding to her and then heading out. As I closed the door, I breathed a sigh of regret. Leaving that with her was more of an insurance policy than anything else. I still didn't know for sure if Vought knew I was looking into them. If they did, I was a dead man, and someone had to know at least some of the truth. Maybe if the story got out without me, Kieran would have a chance to escape from his captors.

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I wasn't exactly sure what my plan was, later that night. Both the Howlands' van and the BA gang were supposed to show up here in the square in ten minutes or so.

Improvisation isn't my strong suit, and it never has been. Unfortunately, I didn't really have many other options. I'd made a few calls to Mexico earlier that day, which could even the odds a bit. Maybe they would cause some chaos while I tried to escape with Kieran, but there was no telling if it would work. I couldn't even tell anyone what I was about to do.

For a moment hiding there on the north end of the town square, I felt an inkling of what Amanda must have been going through. To know such horrible things, and yet be unable to tell anyone for fear of retribution. She'd been right to fortify herself in that factory building and protect that footage. But she'd been wrong to not seek out people willing to use it. I would have wanted to help right from the start, even if my broadcast company wouldn't touch this story with a ten foot pole.

I resolved to quit my job after this was done, regardless of what happened.

Someone was coming. A dark green van rounded the corner in the nearby parking lot, and then drove right into the square. The Howlands were early. I had my pack, and pulled out my binoculars. The van pulled up next to the fountain and the side door opened. The fountain was dry of course- running it in a place as arid as El Paso was only done during business hours, and the sun was already setting.

Come to think of it, I couldn't see any ordinary citizens around either. Maybe the square had been made off-limits. Did that mean the property manager and business owners were in on this grift, too? Or the mayor for that matter?

I shook my head and tried to stay focused. Hoping I was out of Sandra's empathic range, I kept my eye on the five of them just outside the van. Or four, actually. Kieran was still inside, in the front passenger seat, typing into his laptop with gloved hands.

Why had so many of those test subjects been brought into Kieran's room, back in Sage Grove? If they were trying to perfect time manipulation, why not keep it with one test subject? That would have been easier, I assumed. Unless... maybe Kieran's touch affected different people in different ways. I only had one case to study- my own- after all.

Then the splinter in the back of my mind, which had been bugging me for days now, suddenly grabbed my attention. Rick had super-speed, and super-reflexes, to be able to function at that velocity. I had wondered why the shooter back at the studio had even gotten off a shot, much less multiple ones. He'd even warned the Howlands before opening fire! Rick should have been able to speed over there and disarm him immediately, but he hadn't.

Memories clustered together in my mind. The whole family crowding around their son/prisoner just as the shooter fired. Rick only running out after that. Earlier, when Mary had done her duplicate trick, she'd grabbed her 'brother's' hand for encouragement first. And most telling, when I'd been outside the Howland home, Sandra hadn't picked up on Kieran's troubled emotions until after she'd kissed him goodnight.

They weren't supes at all! They got their powers from him!

My jaw dropped with the implications. They weren't just keeping him prisoner, they were using him to maintain their image! The perfect Christian nuclear family, with abilities to match. Were they even related to each other, or were they all playing a role? No wonder they had to keep him close. No wonder they had to keep him lying about his abilities to make sure no one else touched him.

This changed things dramatically. I was willing to bet James wasn't a supe either, which meant my job had just gotten a lot easier. I wouldn't have to wait until the show got started and then try to sneak off with the kid. I could expose them all, right now. With a little help of course.

I pulled out my laptop, thankfully with the program I'd loaded back onto it, and focused the laser through the passenger window. I had to re-aim it several times to get Kieran's attention, but he finally noticed the little red dot and froze.

It's Ahab, I typed into the computer, and the laser began flashing repeatedly. Have they touched you yet?

From my own experience the effects didn't last more than a few hours. I was hoping it was the same for them. Kieran looked out the window fearfully, and then shook his head.

Good. Wait for my signal, then close and lock the door.

He nodded, the ghost of a smile touching his lips.

I packed up my stuff hurriedly, grabbing my camera from the rest. I was about to make my way down there when I caught sight of someone else coming up the side of the hill to the west. It was Gwen!

Fortunately she was approaching from the west, out of sight of the square itself. I moved towards her quickly and as quietly as I could manage. The BA gang would be here any minute! "What the hell are you doing here?" I ground out, not touching her but definitely getting in her path.

She held up the thumb drive. "I found routes and schedules in this info you gave me. It had a showdown here, tonight. I came to make sure you weren't going to do anything stupid and suicidal!"

I let out a hiss of frustration. Gwen was a big wrench thrown into a complicated machine here. "Look, I just figured out something huge, but I don't have time to go into it. Trust me, I'm not trying to get myself killed or embarrass the station or anything. Just... stay here and out of sight. Please."

"Hell, no," she objected harshly, and looked over at my bag before peering at me up and down. "You're obviously here to cause some kind of trouble. What, do you have a gun somewhere?"

I smiled, lifting my camera. "This can be a lot more dangerous than any gun, in the right circumstances. Look, you can come with me, but it'll be dangerous. You're safer up here."

"Duly noted," she said sarcastically, and when I started moving downhill, she was in step with me.

Well, she was here by choice. At least that little weight was off my mind. I was still nervous, though. I had the feeling that the next few minutes would determine the future of not just my life, but of hers and Kieran's as well.

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"Mr. Howland?" I called out as we approached. Superpowered or not, sneaking up on people in the crime-fighting business wasn't a good idea. Even if they were just pretending it. "Sir?"

James stepped out from behind the van, wearing his work suit, followed by Rick. Specially designed by the Capes for Christ people, their 'uniforms' accentuated their shoulders and chests, just like Sandra's and Mary's de-emphasized theirs. He shook his head right away. "This square is closed, sir. Official Capes for Christ business. You can't be here. You'll both have to leave, right now."

"It's all right, sir," I said obsequiously, and stepped close to him. Looking to both sides and lowering my voice, I leaned towards his ear. "We're with Vought," I lied quickly. "I know all about the schedule, and I know the BA gang won't be here for another few minutes. We'll both be gone by then. We don't want to be around when the fireworks start."

He'd been looking at us suspiciously, but that changed to relief as I leaned back. "Good. I thought we were in trouble there for a minute. What do you need?" He went on, suddenly all business.

I lifted my camera. "Just to take a few shots of you and the family near the van. The shooter who attacked you the other day also got into our computer system and corrupted a bunch of information. We've recovered most of it, but we need some splash images for the story going out tomorrow morning. I figured you'd want to have them before, rather than after."

He nodded sharply. "Ok, but make it quick. Do you need the whole family, or just me and Rick?"

"All of you, please." I gave an internal sigh of relief. One of the most unfortunate parts of show business, or all business really, was that if you pretend like you know what you're doing, most people will believe you do. They probably had all sorts of Vought shills swarming around them, and I fit in as just another peon who needed their attention.

He moved Rick out in front, and then leaned back to look at the van. "Sandra, we need a quick photoshoot out here."

Out they came, one after another. First, Sandra, and then Mary, and then... nobody. "Get out here, Blake," James said sternly.

"Now, Kieran!" I called out, and then stepped back, moving Gwen with me as I did so. The van's door slammed shut, and I heard the click of a lock inside.

James' expression darkened as he turned back to me. "What the hell is this? You're not with Vought!"

I smiled, with maybe the first genuine happiness I'd felt in weeks. "Well you're not exactly being truthful yourself, are you?"

He growled and walked over to the passenger door. It was locked, too. Sandra tried the back while he went for the driver's door. Mary and Rick just stared at them, when they weren't glaring at me.

"Open this door right now, young man," James shouted into the car, and thudded on the doorframe with his fist. The last doubts in my mind vanished. James wasn't a supe either- he was no stronger than he looked. He took a breath and slammed his elbow into the glass, which didn't even shake.

"Maybe you shouldn't have made it so indestructible," I said from the side, and he glowered at me over the front of the car.

"You're in a lot of trouble, Blake! Don't make us come in there," Sandra said from behind the van.

"His name's Kieran," I corrected her coldly. "And you're the ones in a lot of trouble." In perfect timing, car lights appeared on the far side of the square, driving fast towards us. "Ah, the BA gang, right on schedule. You know, for drug dealers and human traffickers, they're very punctual."

"What the hell is going on?" Gwen asked insistently, and I took another step back.

"Long story short: Blake is actually Kieran, and his touch doesn't kill people but gives them superpowers. They're all just ordinary people, and have been holding him hostage. I'll give the long version later."

The nearest Barrios Azteca car skidded to a stop nearby, with three others close behind. Heavily armed men jumped out, lining up in front of the Howlands with assault rifles and semiautomatics aimed. Behind them, a heavily muscled man stepped forward menacingly. I recognized him as HC, from both the recordings and my own research after the fact. His haughty expression faltered for a moment, and I glanced back at James. His hand was moving quickly, at his side. A message of some kind.

That was the last piece of the puzzle. HC knew they didn't have any powers on their own. He knew they were vulnerable right now!

I was, too. I grabbed for a mask from my pocket and quickly put it on. It wasn't full PPE gear, but it should protect me from his airborne drug. At least for a while. Gwen put on one of her own, which wasn't that much of a surprise. Ever since HC had shown up, most El Paso residents had one at hand, in case he attacked an area near them.

"What are you waiting for?" I called out to HC through the mask. "They're your mortal enemies, right? Order your men to shoot, or use your drug to take control of them! Do it!" I urged him, feeling a certain vindictive pleasure.

His own men looked a little confused at his hesitation, but James growled and spoke up. "They know that if they try to kill us, the bullets will bounce right off me. They know that Rick can break all their legs in the blink of an eye, that Sandra can get inside their heads at any moment, and that the real Mary is safe inside the van! They know that many of them will die if they open fire!"

"No they won't," I said confidently, trying to project my voice. "And that is the real Mary there. The Howlands have no real power on their own. Right now they're just people, and they're vulnerable."

"You're lying," one of the gang said to me, shifting his aim in my direction. I was very careful to stay perfectly still. "I felt it myself. She got into my head. She could tell what I was feeling!"

"At the time, yes. But they all get their power from another source, and they don't have it right now. I mean why haven't they attacked yet? This should be a full on fight by now, but neither the Howlands nor your boss have started anything! They haven't used their power yet, because they can't!"

Again a lot of them looked to HC, but he didn't say anything. "He knows this," I said loudly to everyone. "Your boss has a business relationship with the Howlands. That's why neither side has won yet. He tells them where to attack, and they don't destroy anything critical to your activities. Meanwhile they don't stop him from expanding operations in other places!"

"Why should we believe you?" The same one said to me again, but I could hear a tinge of suspicion in his voice.

I shrugged. "You don't have to take my word for it. Here. Take a look at the news coming from over the border." I fished out my phone and turned it on. Flipping through pages, I turned on the news. Then I tossed it in his direction, and he grabbed it out of the air with his free hand. He looked at it with distrust growing on his face.

The voice coming from my phone was too far away to hear clearly, but Gwen grabbed my arm. "What did you do?" Her face was turning white.

"You were right, in that our station would never broadcast it, Gwen. That's why I leaked the story to some friends of mine across the border. Vought has no obvious business holdings in Mexico, and no real reason to keep an eye on their news. The story is actually breaking right now."

The timing really was lucky for me- that the nightly news in Mexico coincided with this meeting in the square. A few of the other gang members got calls, probably from family or friends across the border. Most seemed curious for now, but a few of them looked increasingly horrified.

"Dios mío," one of them said, staring at his phone. "He's right! Everything is in here! They knew every drop, every hit. He planned it all," he looked over at HC, who to his credit, remained stone-faced despite all of it.

"How many of us have died?" Another said raggedly, turning to him as well. "How many of our own have you sacrificed, just to line your own pockets? How many more were going to die? What, were you just going to recruit more and kill them off, too?"

"Traitor! Coward! Rat!" Voices began to rise in the gang members. The Howlands were remaining perfectly still. They probably knew that if they ran, they'd get the attention and ire of the crowd.

I let out a sigh of relief. It was over. The BA gang would never trust HC again, and without him in charge, they'd have to be a lot more careful about where they committed crimes. The Howlands would be exposed, and Kieran freed. They'd probably go to jail, despite what Vought might want.

But HC closed his eyes, and there was a rush of wind emanating from him in every direction. His gas-drug! I was careful to breathe only shallowly, and I could tell Gwen was doing the same. As I watched, the Howlands seemed to relax, their eyes losing focus. They just stood there, no longer tense but in a sort of fugue state. Of course. They weren't supes, after all. They had no immunity to HC's influence.

HC gestured to the BA cars. "We're all leaving. Now."

"No we're not," the first gang member to speak to me said, and the others all nodded. Their guns were either lowered or pointed at HC now. "Your drug doesn't work on us anymore, remember? You don't call the shots now."

He stepped up to HC, who was showing his first signs of fear. In one smooth motion he pulled a handgun and shot HC in the head.

Blood sprayed onto the ground behind him and HC dropped like a stone, thudding to the pavement. That sound echoed through my mind just as much as the gunshot had, and I could only stare. In shock, I was dimly aware of a few of the gang smiling or cheering vindictively. The shooter spat on the ground next to HC's body. "That was for Nico," he said savagely.

Then he grabbed one of the semiautomatics from another man and aimed it at the van. A dozen others followed suit.

"Wait!" I shouted, but it was too late. The Howlands were still under the effects of the drug, and didn't stand a chance. Bullets sprayed into the side of the van, rocking it. All four of them died, probably before even hitting the ground. Blood painted the side of the van as they fell.

This was horrific! I hadn't wanted any of this!

The gang's apparent new leader looked down at the bodies mercilessly. "Get the last one," he said, gesturing to the van. The others circled it, and four of them took aim at the passenger window. They started shooting, careful to avoid ricochets, while the others kept the rest of the van covered.

"Wait- stop! Please!" I shouted to the leader over the noise of the shots. "Please. He was the Howlands' prisoner- I swear. They forced him to help them. He never hurt any of you!"

"Stop," he called out, reluctantly from what I could tell. I don't know how the others could hear him over that racket, but they slowly did as ordered.

My hands spread, I took another step closer to him. "Please don't hurt him. He's just a kid."

The man's eyes flicked to his left. To the bodies next to the van, which included two kids. After a moment, he nodded. "But if I ever see him again-"

"-you won't." I assured him quickly. "I'll make sure of it. Vought might send another supe to mess with your business, but it won't be him. I swear it."

He held my gaze for another few seconds, before raising a hand to the gang and beckoning. They funneled past us towards their car. All except one. "What about them? Do we just leave them here?" He asked his leader, eyeing Gwen and me suspiciously.

Thankfully our guy nodded again. "If it weren't for them, we might never have known about HC or the Howlands. Besides," he gestured at the bullet-riddled van and the bodies. "This should make a good news story, don't you think?"

Feeling utterly drained, I could only stare at the carnage, as the gang left. They didn't even bother taking HC's body. Some small part of me decided that made sense. They weren't loyal to traitors after all. And with the subtle reorganization of law enforcement in this area, the cops wouldn't be showing up here for a while, I realized.

Gwen was still white with fear, staring at all the bodies. She jumped when I touched her arm.

"Come on," I said softly. "The kid's probably terrified in there."

"How do you think I feel?" She protested, but followed me over anyway.

I thought better of opening this side door. Even if it still functioned after all the shooting, I didn't want him to see the bodies. Going around the van, I knocked on the other door. "Kieran? Its Ahab. You're all right now. It's all over."

Hesitantly, the door unlocked from the inside and slid open. Kieran stared out for a moment, and then stepped down onto the pavement. Not knowing how to feel at first, I leaned down next to him. "It's good to finally meet you in person," I said respectfully and extended a hand. With his own gloved hand, he shook it.

He looked over his shoulder with fear in his eyes. "Are they-"

"They're gone," I clarified quickly. "Both your captors and the gang. You don't have to worry about them anymore." Granted, it had happened in the worst possible way, but it had happened. Kieran was free now.

"This is Gwen," I gestured to my right, and he shook her hand too. "She's a friend. And she's probably a little upset with me." I straightened up and peered over the engine at the mess on the other side.

"More than a little," she said from behind me, and another gunshot rang out.

I didn't even feel it at first. There was just a strange pulling sensation in my gut. I turned back in surprise, looking at the pistol in her hand. She must have had it right from the start.

Then the pain hit. It was like cracks spreading out from a broken window, sending little tendrils of agony through my abdomen and up into my chest. I felt warm blood seeping down my side, which was strange, given how cold I suddenly felt.

"Ahab!" Kieran called out. He tried to run to me, but Gwen held onto his hand firmly, still keeping her gun pointed at me. My legs felt numb and I stumbled to the ground, sliding with my back to the van's wheel.

"You ruined everything!" Gwen shouted down at me, still white-faced, but apparently with rage and not fear. "The Howlands were just actors, and we can always get more of them, but HC was irreplaceable! Do you have any idea how lucky we were to get a Latino superhero with drug-based powers? He was perfect for this role! Now because of you, he's dead!"

I still couldn't quite believe this was happening. Through the pain, I tried to focus on her words. "You're... with Vought?"

She scoffed. "You didn't really think they'd set up two supes in town without making sure they had people in the news media who could make sure they were covered right, did you? I tried to talk you out of this, Ahab, I really did. But you just had to be so damn stubborn. And you, young man, should never have reached out to him," she said viciously down at Kieran. "This is all your fault, too. You had a good thing going here. All you had to do was play your part, and you could live comfortably. Safely. All while doing an important job in your society!"

"A captive performer is still a captive," I managed, gasping with the pain.

Kieran finally broke away from her grasp, leaving his glove behind in her hand. He grabbed ahold of my arm with his bare skin, but Gwen only laughed. "You can't help him. Even giving him time manipulation powers won't save him now. I'd say he has a few minutes left. Come on." She reached down and grabbed him again. He struggled, but she pulled him away.

I couldn't move. I could barely feel it as I slid to the side, falling to the ground. I thought about the bodies just behind me. That was my fault, beyond question. My last thought before passing out was simple: I may deserve this, but Kieran doesn't. Good luck, kid. Maybe you can get out of this.

-.-

I don't know how long I was out, but when I came to, I felt strange. My whole body felt like it was tingling. Buzzing even. And I could feel everything again- somehow.

I reached down to my side where I'd been shot. My shirt and pants were stained with blood, but the skin underneath it was unbroken. What the hell? I stood up quickly, still feeling that buzzing sensation. It looked like I hadn't been out for long; there were no sirens in the distance yet. Maybe Gwen hadn't left yet.

Running down the hill in the direction she'd come from, I cursed myself. All her delaying tactics and dismissal of my fears. The fact that she was a recent transfer, from New York where Vought was based, and her very job itself. I should have seen it coming. At least I hadn't told her about Amanda and the recordings. She should still be safe from Vought.

As for how I was even moving, that was an even bigger mystery. I pulled out my little utility knife and flipped it open. Doing so on the run wasn't easy, but I wanted to test something. I nicked my thumb with it, and saw blood drip down the finger. Then it stopped flowing. I ran my other fingers over the skin... which had sealed up, almost immediately!

This was instant regeneration! I'd read about supes with powers like that. There was only one explanation: Kieran had saved me. Somehow, he could control which powers he gave.

There wasn't time to ponder that, though. Down below in the parking lot, I could see Gwen and Kieran. She opened the door to her car and practically threw him in. Keeping her gun pointed at him, she followed into the driver's seat.

If she got going, I wouldn't be able to catch them! I sprinted at them, belatedly noticing that my breathing hadn't sped up to match. I might as well have been strolling. Meanwhile, the car had started moving.

I charged at the side of the vehicle, and was rewarded with a momentary look of shock on her face before I collided with the window. I didn't weigh much, but I also wasn't holding back at all. The glass shattered in on her, and I grabbed hold of the wheel, turning it to the side. The car swerved, smacking into the parking lot's wall, but thankfully not very hard. Kieran wasn't strapped in!

We struggled for the gun through the shattered window. With a grunt, I leveraged the gun out from her hands and pointed it at her. Kieran took the opportunity to unlock his door and jump out of the car. I held a steady aim at her, as he ran around to my side. "You're alive!"

So he hadn't expected that either. At least we had that in common. "Apparently," I said to the side, and then looked back at the car. "Your car's not going anywhere, Gwen. Neither are you. You stay perfectly still in there, or I will shoot you."

"You don't have the stomach for it," she said defiantly, but at least for now she was staying put.

"You just shot me, and it really hurt. Trust me, you don't want to push me right now," I warned her darkly. Keeping an eye on her, I stepped back a few steps. Kieran moved with me. "Are you all right?" I asked in a low tone.

He nodded. "I think so. Are you?"

Grimacing, I felt glass shards being forced from my arm and hands, and dropping to the ground. "I guess I am. You didn't know you could heal me?"

"No. I just grabbed you, and really didn't want you to die."

"Either way, you saved my life. Thank you, Kieran." He smiled in the darkness, and nodded. I caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of my eye, and fired a shot over the car. "I said don't move!"

Gwen froze, and raised her hands, glowering at me.

"What are you waiting for?" Kieran asked me, glancing over at Gwen. "Shoot her, and then let's get out of here."

I stared at him for a moment. Despite all the blood and horror of the past ten minutes or so, somehow the idea of a kid insisting on murder was even worse. "No. There's no need to kill her."

Gwen must have heard us despite our lowered voices. Her face went white again. "She's seen what I can do!" Kieran said urgently. "If you let her go, she'll just tell Vought, or those Capes for Christ people."

He was perfectly right. Once Vought found out that Kieran could actually control the powers he gave people, his value would increase exponentially. He wouldn't be just a useful curiosity anymore- he'd be their golden goose! But he was also completely wrong, and not through his own fault.

He'd grown up in the system. He'd known his real mom for what... a day before Vought had murdered her? Kieran had never had anyone to teach him right from wrong. Well, anyone other than a soulless, evil corporation and some actors pretending to be God's servants.

"Listen, Kieran. I know your mom died a year ago. Do you have any other family? Anyone else who can take you in?"

I didn't expect him to have anyone, but I still felt bad for him when he shook his head. "All right. Now, for maybe the first time in your whole life, you have a choice. You can go back to Vought if you want. They won't want to hurt you, but they will control you, probably for the rest of your life. Or you can leave, and go wherever you want, on your own. Or... you can come with me. I know a few places we could hide, while we figure out what to do next."

His eyes widened. "You want me with you? Won't you get in trouble?"

"I was planning on quitting my job anyway," I said easily. "Besides, I'd rather uproot my whole life than let a kid get controlled and experimented on like that. You're as sharp as they come, Kieran, and you deserve a better future for yourself."

I meant the offer even as I made it, but there were a bunch of details to work through. I wasn't on anyone's radar just yet. I would have time to empty out my bank account- to go home and pack a few things. Where to go was trickier. The safest place was Mexico, probably. Once there, I could use my contacts to stay out of Vought's sight. Getting across the border would be a problem. Maybe Kieran could give me flight powers and I could fly him over an unoccupied area at night. If he was willing to come with me at all, that was.

Kieran smiled broadly. "I'm with you, then," he said happily, and I let out a relieved breath.

Nodding at him, I straightened up and approached the car. "Take this message back to Vought, Gwen. If I get so much as an inkling that any of their other little stooges are after either of us, the truth about all of this will be made public. If you thought the world had a field day with the truth about Compound V, then you know what they'll do with this. Kieran will be safe, no matter what Edgars or any of the other Vought higher-ups want."

I was so focused on her face that I didn't notice her pose at first. She'd gone stiff as a board, eyes still wide open. Then I saw Kieran's arm through the window. He'd reached in and touched her.

"What did you do?" I pulled him back from the door and opened it. I put two fingers to her neck, and then listened at her mouth. "She's dead!"

He'd killed her. With just a touch. I stepped away from the car, both from Gwen and from him.

"I just did the opposite of what I did for you," he said calmly. Innocently, as if he'd done nothing wrong. "It worked, didn't it? We're safer now."

That was true enough, but it was also beside the point. "Killing is wrong, Kieran. It doesn't matter why you do it. It never matters."

He shook his head, uncomprehending, and I just sighed. I reached out and took his hand: a gesture of trust in this case, rather than control. "We can talk about that later. I've got a lot to teach you, and I get the feeling you'll be teaching me a few things too." Wasn't that how parenting worked, anyway?

All those bullets back there, and six bodies in the area. A missing supe kid, and a dead tv investigator. The end of the publicized fight between two groups, both being led by fakes. I was walking away from a hell of a story here.

But I was also going towards something. We both were.