The Eagle and The Heron

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The Eagle and The Heron

by Ilzalith

Summary

"You can understand the predator wanting to be near the prey, but not really the other way around."

On February 19th, 2019, Madelyn canceled her late-night meeting with the Homelander. Five days later, John is introduced to Richard, his younger half-brother. A newly-epileptic man who has somehow only just developed powers. Homelander goes from being a single, solitary thing to being half of a perfect whole. He wants Richard to live.

On February 19th, 2019, Richard wakes up in a body that isn't his, that should not exist, with powers that he can't explain. Five days later, Richard decides that Vought needs to be destroyed, root and stem. Richard goes from having a real family to being surrounded by strangers he knows from television. He needs Homelander to die.

Chapter 1: 1.A Ganymede

Homelander had his phone with him at all times. Every self-respecting hero had to, logically, and the world's greatest hero most of all. This particular day was a youth outreach event that had been scheduled months in advance, and he could use any distraction he could get. So, when his phone made the nearly silent beep he had set up for when Madelyn texted him, he pulled it out from the spot on the back of his belt and took a peek.

Something big is happening. Raincheck for tonight.

The sound of the snot-nosed fucking kids around Homelander faded out in favor of a heavy drumming sound. Homelander felt hot around the sides of his face, and something ugly tried to claw its way out. This wasn't the first time she'd brushed him off. It had been more and more, now that she'd decided to get knocked up by some stranger. Fucking in vitro.

If this works out, you'll thank me later.

A second message came up, not too long after the first. A moronic idea, really. As if he didn't slave away for her. Everything for her. He'd earned some gratitude, especially after the day he was having, and would it kill Madelyn to give him what he deserved? Whatever it was, it could wait.

But he didn't say that, obviously. Not in a text. Nobody was that stupid.

Okay. I'll check in later tonight.

Phone back on his belt, and he was on again. The kids didn't even notice, and if they did, who cared? It was ten more minutes for the 90-minute event, taking selfies and signing merch, and then he'd be out of the slog.

Two hours later, on the 99th floor, things were not going well. Madelyn had cancelled. That part had been expected, even if it stung, but she wasn't answering his texts. He'd had to go to Ashley, of all people, and all she'd done was apologize and say that Miss Stillwell was unavailable.

It had been one shitshow after another. Lamplighter had to be let go, since there was only so long he could keep that loser on the team. The investors were tense, apparently, even though Mister Marathon had been replaced with basically no issues.

Now, Edgar had been looking for a replacement, and Homelander couldn't care less. Yes, The Seven needed a seventh member, but none of them mattered as long as Homelander was there. Noir, too, if he thought about it. After no word from Madelyn for that long, he cancelled the meeting. Some crap with image and branding, going down the list of contenders. Madelyn was supposed to be there, and since she still wasn't done five minutes before, there was no point in going.

He could just… drop down. Ashley couldn't stop him. Madelyn might even be grateful if she really was stuck working on some last-minute thing. Homelander didn't do that just yet. Instead, he tilted his head and really looked.

X-ray vision in the movies was nothing like the real thing. It had to read well on camera – the same reason they never used real bald eagle calls. Homelander had to turn it on, and then he could see through pretty much everything. A thousand human bodies, all meat and skin and some bone to hold them up, which he had to parse from wiring and each other. Usually, this part was easy, since he knew exactly where Madelyn's office was on the 82nd, but she wasn't there. Hm.

It was harder then. He could find her voice, let himself hear as much as he needed to as he looked, but it wasn't like he knew where each voice was by the inch or anything. Volume mattered, and so did distance. But he found her, somewhere lower. The… 65th, if he had to guess. The sixties were all labs and medical rooms. Somewhere in that area, sitting in a private meeting room, on a laptop.

"And you're sure that the samples are all clean? We can't have a false positive."

A pause. She'd muted the device, probably to stop exactly what was happening. Madelyn could be so adorable, sometimes.

"I'm trusting you on this, so if things go tits up, it's your ass. You know that, right?"

Who was she even talking to? One of hundreds, probably. Homelander couldn't begin to guess.

"I understand that we can clarify once the asset is here, but you said it can't be moved until everything settles. We understand that, but you need to figure it out until then."

Something delicate? An asset, so probably someone, if Homelander were to guess. The list of people Madelyn might brush him off for was short. Specifically, it didn't exist. So there had to be a good explanation, even if she hadn't shared it yet. Edgar, probably. Or maybe the rapture had started, and nobody had told him yet. Hah.

Homelander was left to stew while he waited for her to finish, so he had the chance to think it over. He really wished she had answered his calls – he could have recorded those and gone over them a dozen times, dissecting every hitch of breath and loaded pause for something, anything to go off of.

A person, so a supe. Not Soldier Boy, since he'd been dead since before Homelander's debut. That was a nice thought, having the greatest hero of the twentieth century on his team, but no.

It could still be a new member of his team, but he had the latest copy of the doc they were going to discuss at the meeting that day. There were dozens of candidates, but they all had established media presences. If it were one of them, he would be told, and they wouldn't need to test or sample anything. The Seven didn't recruit randoms. They took the best of the best from Godolkin, or Teenage Kix, or any of the dozen regional pageants or youth teams. Entrepreneurial solo acts, if they really outperformed in polling. There were some real

powerhouses locked away in a blacksite somewhere, but those freaks were all liabilities. Couldn't be that.

Homelander's mind offered the next logical choice, but he tossed it aside immediately. No. Madelyn wouldn't do that to him. Edgar, maybe, but Madelyn was running this show. She would never even think of it, so he wouldn't either.

At some point, Homelander wasn't sure when, he started pacing. He wanted to fly off, be somewhere else, but then he wouldn't know if anything happened. He pulled out his phone again.

Something big is happening. Raincheck for tonight.

If this works out, you'll thank me later.

It was for him. Maybe a sidekick. Or maybe something was wrong, and Madelyn didn't know that he hadn't been informed yet, somehow. It was an easier idea than where his brain was going, so he followed that idea. He was just being ridiculous.

He kept that feeling going until well past sundown. When he couldn't take it anymore, he took the elevator all the way down to the 82nd. He'd been extremely patient, giving Madelyn a whole ten minutes after she went back to her own office.

She was beautiful, like she always had been. Perfect in every way that mattered. As much as Homelander wasn't so sure she should raise a child at her age, there had been improvements from it. Two big improvements, specifically.

Homelander didn't knock, because he never knocked, but her heart was already going like a drum before he opened the door. A stressful day, probably. It picked up a hair when the door opened, before slowing down. It was a natural reaction, from what he knew. If someone was already stressed, a sudden noise would make it worse, and then their heart would calm down after understanding that they were safe. Took a long time, though. A weaker man might be suspicious.

Then she stood up to say something, but he spoke first.

"Working late today?"

Her smile was always so pretty. The one she only used for him.

"You could say that. I wish I could have come to see you earlier, but back-to-back meetings. You know, Mister Edgar."

He did know, but words could be a funny thing. She wished, but she wasn't sorry. He closed the door behind himself as he walked in. Locked it, too. Ashley was probably skulking about.

"I can imagine."

She always smelled so nice. Somehow, after a busy day, she smelled even better. It had taken some getting used to when she was sweet and metallic during pregnancy, but ever since, there

was a perpetual hint of something else. Baby powder and milk, he was pretty sure, and something a bit like onions, which he liked less.

Her hand was on his chest, adjusting his suit, which was perfect. All these little tricks she still used to get to touch him.

“How has your day been?”

Terrible.

“It’s been okay. A shame about, well, you know. But the meet and greet went fine,” he smiled as he talked, and she smiled back. “Oh, I had to cancel the meeting with Image and Branding. There wasn’t much of a point. You understand.”

She had to have known. But he needed to see her know it. She was moving him towards the couch, and Homelander let her do it. Nobody else had that kind of power over him.

“That's fine. You’re right.” Of course he was. “We’re still only considering options, and nobody will be contacted until auditions.”

None of this mattered. If she wasn't going to take the first step, then Homelander would have to. He paused an appropriate amount of time. Letting the words that didn’t matter hang there. As though he cared.

“That’s good. Say, did anything happen down in the labs? I heard something odd from one of the geeks.”

Her heart didn’t start racing, or anything like that, but she did pause. It had to be important, then.

“I… John, can I be terrible? There’s something I need you to do for me.”

He wanted to stand up and walk out. As if he didn’t do every single fucking thing for her. As if he wasn’t where he was in the world, so that he could raise her up. As if she didn’t take and take and then forget all about him when she had what she needed. Homelander wanted to die. Instead, he smiled as warmly as he could.

“Of course. Anything.”

She leaned closer.

“I know I’m asking for too much, but I want you to let me keep it a surprise. I hate not being able to tell you, but I don’t want you to get hurt if I’m wrong. You deserve better than that.”

Not disappointed or upset, but hurt. It had to be serious, then. Her hand was on his face, and he leaned into her touch. Always so gentle, even though nothing she could do could hurt him. He put his hand over hers, holding it there. Homelander actually did need to be gentle with this sort of thing.

“So I need you to trust me to hide this until everything is perfect for you. Even if it doesn’t work out, I’ll tell you. But you need to let everything settle before then.”

She tried to pull him close, and this time he didn’t let her. She pulled herself closer instead.

“Say that you’ll wait. Say that you trust me.”

Her eyes were wet, or maybe it was just the lighting. That was the thing with women, most of the time. All she had to do was cry, and Madelyn would get everything she could ever want. Homelander had to fight and bleed and kill just to get the fucking scraps like a dog. He hated that she did that, and it had been happening more and more since the pregnancy.

He wanted to ask. He’d be right to ask. But there was no way around being cruel if he did that.

“I’ll wait. I trust you.”

He pulled back when she tried to kiss him and adjusted until he was lying on the couch, his head on her lap. He’d been performing all day already. He didn’t need that. Homelander needed her to trust him to know what he could handle. To believe that he could handle anything. If he couldn’t have what he deserved, the consolation prize would be fine. Madelyn was brushing her fingers through his hair, and he let his eyes close.

“You’re always so good to me, John.”

It wasn’t enough, but Homelander had a capacity for enduring.

The next day, Madelyn wasn’t in the office, and she still didn’t answer his calls. Even when she was on maternity leave, he’d called every single day and gotten an answer. They’d talked for hours on the phone. Or he’d talk, and she’d listen, and he'd listen to all the faint noise in the background. Same thing, really. And now, for something that was much less important, he got nothing. At least then, there had been some chance she could die. That had been the main reason he’d called every day.

The rest of his team, Lamplighter included, the prick, could sense the incredible patience he was holding onto. Even the Deep avoided his moronic little questions for the day. They all did the bare minimum, just enough to keep the weight of the world from getting any heavier.

It would have been easier a few years back, maybe if he and Maeve had still been closer.

Not even Ashley was in the tower, which seemed strange. He’d figure that little fact out when he went down to Superhero Relations and asked one of the nobodies down there. Another Ashley, because apparently they were mass-produced now. Unlike the other one, this Ashley had black hair. She let him know, in the same way that the others might, nervously, that the floor secretary was handling all calls to Madelyn Stillwell’s office.

In a moment of curiosity later that night, he confirmed that she wasn’t going home either. The full-time au pair was there, but Madelyn herself wasn’t. The baby was fine. It wasn’t Madelyn’s fault that he couldn’t… be what she needed. A failure of science. Of course, she

would have chosen him if she could. Things would be different then. She wouldn't have had to wait until she was well past her prime. She wouldn't need a nanny. Madelyn could dedicate everything to… something in his throat was tense. Homelander stopped thinking about it.

It was another day before the main Ashley was back. Unhelpful as always, and now insisting she couldn't say much and that Madelyn would know more. Three more days before he saw Madelyn again. Heard her, more accurately, going on about something inside a helicopter as it landed. Some guy on a gurney, the asset he was sure. Younger than him by at least 10 or 15 years. Awake, but bedridden for some reason or another. Homelander tried not to think about it. It was somehow both harder and easier now that everyone was in the same building.

He overheard snippets during the day. Nothing useful. Something about seizures and epilepsy and a dozen other things he didn't care enough to know about. Scans and tests, too. It sounded horrible, in a distant sort of way. The power of a god brought low by a subpar brain.

Apparently, this supe also knew Madelyn, at least by name. Miss Stillwell. She brought him his phone the next day. Then every time Homelander checked, the man was looking through it.

It seemed miserable. Trapped in a room he didn't want to be in, looking through his phone. Waiting desperately for somebody, anybody at all, for a distraction. Completely disinterested in the view to the outside world, because nothing that existed out there could change anything that existed in the room. Being watched by who even knew how many people, all waiting to find a use for you. Homelander couldn't imagine living like that.

The call finally came in on the fifth day. Madelyn, from her personal line. She'd been careful to pick a time when he was free, but Homelander let it ring twice before answering. He always smiled during their calls, but this one felt brighter.

"Madelyn. Good to hear from you. I'm a bit busy, so let's be quick."

"John, can you come down to meeting room 64-B?"

He'd been off by one. Hm.

"Of course."

The elevator ride was short. Every floor had four discrete meeting rooms. Vought International had thousands of people working in the tower, so there were meetings at all hours, even within the same team. Of course, the labs very rarely used theirs outside of holiday parties.

It was the big moment. He could have peeked, but that would ruin Madelyn's surprise, and she'd worked so hard to hide everything from him. She'd earned it.

It actually was a meeting room. There was a big white table in the middle of the space. Madelyn and a man in a lab coat that Homelander didn't recognize on one side. Probably a

regular doctor. On the other side, closer to the door, the enigmatic supe he'd been keeping an eye on, standing with both hands on the table to prop himself up, a wheelchair behind him.

The first thing that Homelander noticed, now that he was seeing the guy in person, was just how bad his posture was. Being sick was one thing, but bad self-presentation was another. Freshly shaved, so it wasn't like he was a total invalid. He looked at Homelander, and his eyes were so very green. His heart was definitely picking up, too. That was pretty common with fans. It was only natural.

"Uh… Homelander. Hi."

Riveting. He looked to Madelyn and the little weasel next to her.

"Homelander, I'd like you to meet Richard Shuster. Richard, you're already familiar with The Homelander."

"Yeah. Yeah, I am. It's nice to meet you."

Maybe he was frightened, now that Homelander was really paying attention. Nervous in a way that had less to do with meeting the most famous person in America.

"A pleasure. Madelyn," he said, turning slightly to look at her again. "You called."

"We were getting to that. Could you take a seat?"

Sure, he could. It wasn't like America's greatest superhero had anything to do. The weasel spoke up next.

"Wonderful. Ah, Homelander, Sir, you are familiar with your origins, correct?"

The doctor genuinely seemed more nervous than the civilian. Homelander didn't like that one bit. A bad sign, especially with this line of discussion. Still, he nodded, waiting for something relevant.

"Well, there was… what I would call an inventory tracking issue. Late in 1992. A, uh, relevant sample was, um, misplaced and then stolen."

"Your point, Doctor."

It was not a question.

"You and Mister Shuster are related."

The world outside of the meeting room stopped, and all other noise faded away as his focus locked in on the human in front of him. Homelander was singular. Completely and utterly unique. Now they wanted him to believe… what? That there had been a clone, or something, that Vought hadn't known about?

"You would be half-brothers, genetically speaking. I have the results here," The doctor pushed a folder in Homelander's direction, which he snatched up and opened. "With second

and third opinions from other doctors working here to confirm. You share 25% of your DNA, lining up with–"

"Stop talking."

The doctor stopped talking as Homelander read the notes. The other supe, Richard, was looking at him. There was some uncertainty, but not as much as Homelander expected. He had to have known already. It hadn't happened in the building, or Homelander would have overheard. The day Madelyn was missing, maybe the meeting on that first day. Madelyn must have told him first. Primed Homelander's… primed him to be ready for this meeting. Confirmed that everything was real, just like she had promised she would. Trying to protect him, in a way.

The folder was closed, and he put it back on the table. Homelander could feel his own heart racing. There were a million things to do now. When he smiled at Madelyn, it was from a joy he hadn't felt in years.

"Well, Madelyn, it looks like we have our seventh member. We'll have to talk to Image and Branding about this, but–"

"I'm sorry, no."

The future Homelander had only just started to form with his hands was thrown against a wall. Brothers and superheroes side by side. Having Richard get tested to see if he had the same struggle as Homelander. A movie, so he could finally have someone better to work with on set. Richard was ruining it.

"I appreciate the gesture, but… I don't think I'd be a good fit. I'm not a superhero."

Not a superhero? Who would ever turn this life down?

"Not a superhero? I – Madelyn, he's a supe, right?"

The weasel tried to get another word in.

"Shut up. Madelyn."

"That's part of the issue, Homelander. Richard, from what we understand, didn't show any signs of having powers until very recently. As you know, most supes present some kind of ability before the age of ten."

Richard had to be… 25, or maybe 30? That was a big gap.

"But he has them now, right? So it doesn't matter."

There was a tension in Madelyn. He didn't like it. She was still hiding things. Protection was one thing, and this was another. Richard spoke first.

"From what I understand, Doctor Reed here is, well… Doctor? I don't really get it myself."

There was a pause until Homelander gestured for the weasel to speak. Did he have to do everything around there?

“Mister Shuster seems to have developed some kind of… unusual… cerebral growth. If I were to speculate, it seems that the… growth… has caused the parts of his brain that connect to his powers to become active. This lines up with the start of the status epilepticus that presented several days ago. He had powers before then, naturally, but only in regard to superhuman hardiness. The new powers, so to speak, were… dormant.”

Homelander wasn’t a brain surgeon. He couldn’t see anything specifically wrong with Richard’s brain. It was all meat. But the term brain growths didn’t sound good. People died every day from things he couldn’t see.

“And it is… getting worse?”

“From what we can tell, his condition is improving, but we have less than a week of information.”

“It isn’t every day now, but it would be really bad if I seized up mid-flight.”

Richard could fly. His brother could fly, but his brain was stealing that from him. Stealing it from Homelander, too. Richard smiled at him, and Homelander didn’t know why. He blinked several times. He needed to rein this in.

“Madelyn. You’ve been very quiet. Is this why you brought me here?”

She was very still when she spoke.

“The next few months will be critical. I wanted to make sure the two of you had a chance to connect before anything happened. Richard also wanted to meet you.”

That was a good thing. So why did he want to walk out? He couldn’t look Richard in the eye, or Madelyn for that matter. He had a brother, and in a year, he might not have one anymore. Maybe she had been right to hide this, and wrong to tell the truth.

“Homelander.”

He looked up at Richard. The younger man had a tension to him. Like he didn’t know how to say whatever he was trying to say.

“I don’t think this is going to kill me. But until I know for sure, I want to take that time for us to get to know each other. We’re related, but I have… had… a family until now. Uh, the seizures, they’ve kind of fried my brain? I don’t really, like, know me. But I would like to get to know myself with you, if that makes sense.”

It sounded like a question, even though it wasn’t. What kind of life had Richard lived, to pussyfoot around like this? And here he was, asking Homelander to spend hours and days letting Richard find himself, as though he didn’t have more important things to do, like saving the country.

But it wasn’t like Madelyn. Madelyn would take and take, and give him scraps when she had so much. Richard didn’t have anything now. He didn’t even have himself. Maybe he had a family of strangers he didn’t know, and maybe he had a job that wouldn’t matter. Homelander could fix all of that. Wash it away. And he would get everything the other man had, in a sense. Homelander was a hero. Of course, he’d save his brother.

“I’ll do it. If you think about the hero stuff. I don’t need an answer today, but once we know you’ll be okay.”

Homelander could wait. Richard just didn’t get it yet, but he would. He had all the time in the world.

Chapter 2: Ganymede 1.1

I didn't remember having picked out specific powers. Obviously, I did, because I had them, but I didn't remember that part. My first actual memory started in a hospital bed. There was pain and cold before that, but those are feelings, and not memories, so we should start in bed.

The room was, from what I could tell, nice. Nicer than what I was used to, at least. It was also cold to me. Not AC-cold, but actual cold. There's a difference.

My body felt tired. One day, in my twenties, I had worked twenty hours straight, on my feet. A few years later, I worked sixteen-hour days for two weeks straight. Both of those times were small potatoes. This must have been what death felt like, surely.

There was a light, but I couldn't go into it. There was also a person in scrubs, saying something in English. Definitely not the emergency room in town, then.

"Mister Shuster, can you hear me? You're going to be okay. You were in a supe-related incident."

Not my name, but okay.

"Huh?" Was my very intelligent first response.

Things continued in a way that was probably normal. I hadn't stayed in a hospital bed in years. Decades, actually. He asked if I could understand him (yes), if I remembered what had happened (no). He asked for my name, and didn't look happy when I told him. The nurse stepped outside. I was pretty sure this was one of those times when a nurse told their patient that they'd be really popular in a few minutes.

The nurse came back with a doctor. The doctor had what I called a white people smile, which I did a lot. The kind of thing where you didn't actually smile, and just stretched your lips. An acknowledgement that it was an appropriate time to smile.

She asked a lot of the same questions, along with a few others, before checking my vitals on the machine next to my bed. I'd seen those in movies, I was sure. Weirdly, I didn't have an IV, so they weren't giving me saline or medication. Just… checking. Didn't say her name, either, and there wasn't a name tag that I could see.

"Mister Shuster, this is Saint Vitus Hospital, in Denver. You were transferred here after what we believe to be a supe-related incident." She kept using that word. "You've been experiencing frequent seizures. Do you remember anything about that?"

"No. Can't say I do."

"That's okay, Mister Shuster. We need to run some tests before moving forward. One of those tests is genetic tracing. We'll need to take a cheek swab. Do you consent to this?"

Something about her wording didn’t sit right, and yet.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

It was a painless process. At most, slightly uncomfortable to have a cotton swab in my mouth. The nurse was gentle enough.

“Alrighty, Mister Shuster… we have what we need. We can also get an IV running, if you feel that’s acceptable. Due to the incident, we might not be able to use a typical needle.”

“Uhm, okay. Nurse…” I looked down. He did have a tag. “Peters, when you say supe-related incident, can we break that down for me?”

He looked back at the doctor, like he was trying to relay some silent message. She was looking at me.

“Well, Mister Shuster, that is actually what we’re trying to figure out. To summarize, we believe that you and your family were affected by a superhuman power. The entire building was frozen by some unknown means.”

“I… what? That, uh, that doesn’t make sense.”

Another look. The nurse looked pained, and the doctor looked like she wanted to be anywhere else.

“There’s bodycam footage. Of the site of the incident, I mean. I wouldn’t recommend seeing it just yet. What’s important is that you're safe, and we plan to get to the bottom of this.”

We?

“Okay. Can I… when you say frozen?”

“There are ice formations at the site. You were very lucky to only be at the edge of the structure.”

Yeah. That was what the word frozen meant. It had been a stupid question to ask. If I were lucky, then logically someone was unlucky. They couldn’t show me the footage. There was a question I wanted to avoid, but I had to ask it.

Pain. Cold. I woke up some time later. The room was colder, or maybe it was nighttime.

The same nurse. The same questions. New responses. The name was still not right, but everything else was closer. I had been touch-and-go for a bit there.

A different doctor. This time, I did ask the big question.

“We’re sorry, Mister Shuster. We have a team doing everything they can, but things are not looking optimistic. The other victims have been frozen for over twelve hours now.”

“I’d like to see the footage.”

“That can be arranged, but I’d like you to take the next few minutes to reconsider while we have someone set that up.”

There was no sudden recognition as I looked at these strangers, but it didn’t feel good. I had a list of names and ages. The doctor had been right. This felt grotesque. I had always been squeamish about gore, but even bloodless pictures seemed pretty clear. These were dead bodies. Eyes open, mid-shout, going to stand. Whatever happened to freeze them in place, it was like glass, and they had seen it happen. Every breath of air I took was cold, and I had a suspicion about what had killed those people.

“I killed these people, didn’t I?”

“I, Mister Shuster, as we explained,” the nurse sounded more tense now. Like he was in danger. “The investigation is still ongoing. We don’t have any answers for you at this time.”

“I’d like to be alone, if that’s possible.”

It was. Definitely not all the way alone, considering, but close enough that there was no danger.

I could focus on it. The cold feeling. Like one of those menthol lotions I’d rub on the inside of my nose if I had a cold. Like dunking my head in a bucket of mouthwash and trying to breathe in. I breathed in, and when I breathed out, there was a fogginess to the air. A blue glow too, almost.

Super breath. Probably ice, or cold, or liquid nitrogen. It probably did something when it came into contact with solid matter. Expanding or freezing around the air, maybe. I could feel something else. Other powers. I just had to choose to hold them instead.

I did not. One power that could ruin lives was plenty. I did touch them in my mind, though. Just to try and understand how it worked.

I could hold three powers. I had access to more than that, and it felt like I could make more or modify the ones I had. Cold breath (name pending), flight, super senses, super strength, and a very large power that I wasn’t even letting myself consider because what the fuck was that.

Pain. Cold.

The next time I woke up. New nurse. I skipped the questions and asked to use the bathroom. After that, and after answering them anyway, I was given something to work off of.

“Somebody from Vought is here to speak to you, Mister Shuster. Now that you’re awake, is it okay if I let her in?”

Vought? TV show Vought Industries, that Vought?

“Why is, um, a person from Vought Industries here to see me?”

Her tone was patient.

“International,” she said, correcting me. “And during a routine screening here, something pinged our system, and we contacted our network. This is a Vought international hospital.”

Ah. Saint Vitus. Vought was a medical company, and they made superheroes. I had powers. If anything, this was the measured response. They could very easily sedate me, or restrain me, or just shoot me dead. It was probably some nobody from regional management, then.

“Oh. Okay. Yeah, let her in, please.”

A few minutes later, a woman walked through the door. Older than me, maybe in her 40s or 50s. Well-dressed. Not wanting her to be anyone didn’t change who she was. I’d seen the clip of her in lingerie transforming into Homelander, then getting her neck snapped. His neck? Whatever. I'd also seen her get her head lasered in. Homelander killed her twice.

“Richard Shuster. I’m Madelyn Stillwell, Senior Vice President of Hero Management at Vought. It’s nice to meet you.”

Big title. Was there a Junior VP? She sat down in a chair by my bed. She smiled, which seemed pleasant enough, but she was a bad guy. Not a good sign. You never wanted the bad guy smiling at you.

“Likewise. What can I do for you, ma’am?”

“Well, Richard – can I call you Richard? We have a bit of an issue on our hands. Do you recall ever going to a hospital before?”

Well…

“No, I don’t. You believe that my… that the incident may be related to your company.”

It wasn’t a question exactly, though it was structured like one.

“Got it in one. I like working with smart people.” She really seemed to be generous with compliments. “We were trying to figure out a timeline for that, and, well, nothing. You were insured with your former employer, but it doesn’t look like you ever went to a clinic before last month.”

That sounded unusual and probably made a path to the main point. I didn’t interrupt.

“Our hospitals try to keep medical history in mind, and when we couldn’t find anything, a standard screening was used to check for a few notable elements. Can you tell me about your parents? Maybe they mentioned something about a family medical history.”

Didn’t love that line of questioning.

“Miss Stillwell? I, uhm…” Didn’t remember them because I wasn’t Richard Shuster. “I have some pretty big gaps in my memory right now. I’m pretty sure the seizures are new. I don’t think I would have, like, survived, you know?”

She didn’t seem surprised by that information.

“Thank you for letting us know. We can definitely try to find ways to jog your memory. Your phone, maybe?” That was a thought, and I could see my interest reflected back at me. “While we wait, there are a few blood tests we would like to have done. Set up an IV, too, while you’re still with us.”

“That seems reasonable.”

If they could get a needle in. I wasn’t using the durability power I could feel in my brain, but they seemed concerned about it. For all I knew, I was bulletproof.

Spoilers, they could. None of the powers I had going had anything to do with durability, so it wasn’t too shocking when the needle went in. They expected it to work, probably. Madelyn was still in the room. It was hard to see how she could be a threat to me, but the general impression I got was that she was trying to be non-threatening. Or maybe her default was to keep her hands in her lap.

Blood was drawn, and then an IV bag was connected to the same line. I made sure to ask what things were.

Saline, one liter, for hydration.

Acetaminophen, which was just Tylenol, for the general unwellness I was dealing with. Fuck me, I guess.

Lorazepam, which was –

“For epilepsy, and a mood stabilizer.”

Nurse Peters, the same one as the first time, was pleasant.

“Were you doing research?”

She was already adding it to the IV bag as we went. I had been prescribed that one like five years ago, or maybe next year.

“I think so, yeah.”

“That gives us something to go off of. I'll…” Peters looked at Stillwell. “I'll have this sent to the lab.”

Madelyn smiled at the nurse. Mouth closed. More like her lips stretching than an actual smile. And Peters was gone again. It felt weird. I had killed several people, and they were leaving me alone with this woman?

“Richard, what do you know about superheroes?”

I knew how they were made. I knew that one of them was going to kill her. Twice, apparently, but probably only once.

“I know Vought is the superhero company.”

“That's right. You're–” she paused. Why did she pause? “Vought International has been the company in charge of superheroes since its inception. We know everything there is to know about supes.”

“And you're trying to tell me I am a supe.”

I thought I could rip the band-aid off. Skip to whatever offer she wanted to pitch me.

“No. I think you already know that. The system ping was for a genetic marker. That's why I wanted to ask what you knew about your family history.”

“I'm, uh,” Did Richard know about this? “I'm adopted, I think. I saw the pictures of, well, you know.”

Richard’s parents had light hair, and he wasn't old enough that his parents would have gone all the way grey. It was the kind of thing that was personal enough that maybe I could get away with knowing, even if Richard never talked about it.

“Well, from what we can tell, you’re related to a prominent hero. It’s why I came to see you.”

“Okay. Is, uh, are they… alive?”

“He’s alive, yes. I can't share more at this time.”

“Okay.”

Madelyn Stillwell had said she was a VP. She probably didn’t even work with heroes herself, other than whatever thing she had with Homelander. Which meant that they sent her because of Homelander. I wasn’t going to say that, obviously, but that had to be the link. Maybe I was his son, or his clone.

She leaned closer.

“Listen, Richard, I understand that you may not feel comfortable yet. With the seizures, this may be a situation where you need help. Vought would be willing to help you because of that connection. Medically, financially, legally.”

There it was. Hospitals weren’t free. I had probably killed those people. Vought had a connection to this hospital and probably infinite money for lawyers. Richard had a job before. Did I have a bank account? They were a… I had the clip on the tip of my tongue. A pharmaceutical company that made superheroes.

“What would you want from me?”

“Just for you to come in. We can run some tests, and you can find out what is happening to you. Personally, I would like you to meet your brother. Is that something you’d be open to?”

Clone was still on the table. She was probably lying to me, somewhere in there.

“I’d be open to getting more tests done. But I need some time to think. Would that be okay?”

“That’s fine. We can discuss that later.”

It felt too easy.

They couldn’t get me my phone just yet. It was probably in the ice, even if they didn’t say as much. What they could do was start a few more tests in the lead-up to transfer. A CT scan, and lying in bed with a whole bunch of things stuck to my head.

Pain. Cold.

Apparently, they were getting shorter now, which was a good sign. I couldn’t tell the difference, and the room didn’t have a clock. It was also definitely a brain thing, according to the doctor whose name I didn’t know yet. Nothing showed up in my bloodwork or the CT scan. Vought would have much better tools in their own facilities, she assured me. I was very lucky to be getting the help I needed, I replied.

Early the next day, or technically the same day, according to the nurse, because of how late things had been going on, they had me sign a document. Some kind of form so that I could travel, from what the doctor said. I skimmed it. Something something release form. Something something consent to blah blah whatever. I didn’t know Richard’s signature, but I made an effort. Then I was out.

My room didn’t have windows, but the plane did. The sky was just turning blue as we boarded. I’d never been in a plane that small. It had to be private. Madelyn was there the entire time, as was another new nurse.

I still felt tired, but I was losing so much time to the seizures. I didn’t sleep. I wasn’t sure if I needed to now.

Bus, club, another club, another club, plane, next place, no sleep. If I made that joke, would somebody get it? The nurse, a different woman, did not.

“It’s a Lady Gaga reference. From an interview, I think.”

She chuckled. Explaining the joke made the joke better, clearly. I blacked out twice.

From the plane to a helicopter to what had to be Vought Tower. Somewhere in New York. It was about midday, from what I could tell before I went into the elevator. Down some number of floors, to what had to be the labs. In a different genre, this would be where I got dissected. I did not.

MRI first. I was given a new doctor; this one had a name tag. Doctor Reed was apparently a clinical researcher, but he had some background in neurology. The newest nurse was staying on, and apparently, her name was Lydia. No, I wasn’t claustrophobic, and no, I didn’t have any implants that I knew of.

Pain. Co–

I was still in the machine. Hm. It was short enough that I wasn't done, or maybe MRIs took a long time. He had said an hour or two.

Eventually, I was put into a room. This one had a window, which I could appreciate. I even had a TV, which had cable, at least. A couple of hours later, we had results.

"Mister Shuster."

"Doctor."

"What have you been told about your condition so far?"

"The seizures, you mean? I know it's not my gut or anything, if that's what you mean. My chart should have mentioned, I don't really…"

"It does. Doctor Taggart seems to have been very thorough. Something did come up in the MRI, and I have the radiologist's interpretation. Would you feel okay to discuss it?"

He seemed nice enough, but it felt a bit like he was running through a checklist.

I nodded.

"This," he said, pulling up an image on the TV after doing something on his phone. Fancy. "Is a typical scan from a healthy adult in your age range."

"Definitely a brain."

I was pretty good at those spot-the-difference games as a kid. He pulled up a second image.

"This is your scan, from earlier today."

There was a dark X shape in the middle, and then a white spot in the top corner of the X, on the center line. I nodded, waiting for an explanation.

"The white point is a growth, approximately 5 millimeters in diameter, or the size of a pea, and it's in the region between your frontal and parietal lobes."

"So I have a tumor."

"You have a growth," he corrected me. "I don't want to be too hasty, and tumor is a loaded term. I believe that this growth's placement could have incited the seizures you'd been experiencing, along with the general fatigue."

"Okay."

Doctor Reed pursed his lips.

"I want you to know that whatever you're feeling is understandable. This is intense news, and this is a safe space for you to express whatever you're feeling."

Wow. Thanks, doc.

“Was there anything else?”

“...Yes. I’d like to highlight that I don’t believe at this time that the growth is immediately life-threatening. I have a working hypothesis regarding your powers, too, but it’s very early, and I would prefer to take a few days before we touch that.”

“Well, I’m not dying yet. That’s good.”

“I agree. Thankfully, your condition has not worsened. We’ll be monitoring for the next few days and weeks. Based on those next data points, we can determine a treatment plan.”

If I wanted to, I could obsess on the circle of who felt that they knew what I knew they were thinking. That sounded insufferable and pointless. It was my body, but it wasn’t my body, and if the worst came to pass, I could make powers. I could probably make something for this. There was no point in worrying.

“Great. Uhm, maybe food would be a good idea?”

The next day, Madelyn got me Richard’s phone and a laptop that was apparently also mine, and we briefly had a chat. She was aware of the results, because of course she was. I could consider becoming a superhero once I was better. It was a very lucrative opportunity, and I could do some good. Great. Awesome.

The phone worked, which seemed weird if it was in a block of ice for several days, but I had other things to worry about. I decided to leave the laptop for another day.

I had text messages from half a dozen people checking to see if Richard was okay. I had emails from job applications he’d sent out. I had updates on his student loan payments. I had his socials. Richard was pretty cute. Dark hair and green eyes. He kind of looked like David Corenswet, the guy who played Superman, if he had a tan.

Ethically, was it wrong if I was a slut in his body? I probably shouldn’t. Or I needed to get on Doxy.

Richard also had a banking app. I didn’t know his passwords, but…

Some kind of hyper-intuition, or object reading. I knew I could do it. I could feel it in my brain somewhere. There was a pool of something, energy, I supposed. I just had to think of a power.

But did I want to be hyper-intuitive? No. It seemed unpleasant. Technopath? It would probably be easier to use. Or at least less likely to get me in trouble.

It needed to work up close. I didn’t care if I couldn’t use it from far away yet, but that was an option for later. I just needed to be able to bypass electronic and digital passwords and codes. I started thinking, and –

Darkness.

There was no pain or cold, but time had passed. About five minutes, or maybe six. It had to be connected to the other thing, but it felt completely different. I had the power, though, and the pool was smaller. So was the power, maybe a third of what the frost breath was.

It took more energy to plug it in. The tiniest amount. Did it take energy to swap?

I opened the app. At no point did I receive any information, but I could feel myself inside Richard's phone. I could eat away at the memory, or the battery. I could fill the storage to full capacity. I could type without looking. I opened the app, and the password filled itself.

He had a bit of money. Just under five thousand bucks in savings. Probably a couple of months of his old salary. He owed like fifty grand in student loans. I'd lived my entire adult life in a country where private colleges were maybe 500 a month. Of course, I'd never had this kind of money in savings.

I spent days going through his emails and his social media. I replied to personal messages to say that I was alive, and to thank them for reaching out.

Between medical checkups, I came up with a plan.

Homelander was going to die. He was supposed to die, he'd killed people before, and he would kill again. I could save Madelyn Stillwell, Hughie Campbell's girlfriend, and thousands more if I killed him. I needed to stop him before the worst of it, and preferably before the next kill. Maybe I could kill him, or maybe not just yet, but someday. At some point, he'd been a child in a lab. He was the product that Vought designed.

Madelyn thought I should meet him. She was like his mom, or something. She wanted me to sign on as a hero, and didn't think that meeting Homelander would kill me. Otherwise, there would be no point.

I could take some time. See him. Agree to the meeting Madelyn wanted. I could decide later.

She smiled when I asked about the meeting.

A day later, I was in the room with Madelyn and Doctor Reed.

The conversation was relatively light. Madelyn had me sign a few NDAs, covering any trade secrets, and I signed. She never said who it was, but I knew. Doctor Reed asked if he had my permission to share my medical details, which he did.

"John, can you come down to meeting room 64-B?"

Eventually, I stood from the wheelchair they had given me. I wanted to be presentable, but I still didn't feel great five days into the body. I didn't know what to do with my hands, and I didn't want to eat shit if I blacked out, so I had my hands on the table to brace myself. That was when he walked in.

He smiled as he opened the door and looked at me. It was a nice smile, and Homelander had very prominent canines. It reminded me of a cat.

“Uh… Homelander. Hi.”

The whitest teeth and the brightest blue eyes I’d ever seen. I might have been taller if I stood up straight, but he looked so buff. Objectively, he was a very attractive man. He was also a murderer who could crush my head in one hand. But he wouldn’t, probably. I was his brother, and he wanted a family.

Madelyn handled introductions. She looked perfectly calm to me. He seemed unbothered. She knew we were safe.

Doctor Reed seemed nervous. He probably knew more than I did but less than Stillwell.

The doctor started explaining, and it was the word related that really got Homelander going. Doctor Reed started explaining that we were half-brothers, and when Homelander asked him to shut up, I was sure Madelyn was wrong. But nothing happened. He read, and I could see a hunger in his eyes. There was something else there. An excitement, or maybe a mania.

“Well, Madelyn, it looks like we have our seventh member.”

Oh hell.

“We’ll have to talk to Image and Branding about this, but–”

“I’m sorry, no.”

He looked like somebody had shot his puppy. I didn’t want to be under him like that. It would put me in the line of fire and under a level of scrutiny that I couldn’t handle. I did feel bad for saying it. Homelander had very wet eyes.

I tried explaining myself, but I was making it worse. He stood up and asked Madelyn. It felt immature. A child going to his mother when he wasn’t getting his way. At least she didn’t seem nervous. When she didn’t answer, I stepped in, at least to make an opening for the doctor.

The doctor explained with a fair bit of caution. But the explanation sounded like what he’d told me. The idea that the powers and the brain tumor were connected was new. Homelander had questions, but I only inserted myself briefly.

“And it is… getting worse?”

“From what we can tell, his condition is improving, but we have less than a week of information.”

“It isn’t every day now, but it would be really bad if I seized up mid-flight.”

It was a carrot. Flight was one of those iconic powers. The kind of thing people liked to imagine, and from what I could tell, there were not many fliers in the setting. It connected us. Whatever had made me choose that power in whatever time I had before the first seizure, it was a smart call. He was looking at me. I smiled, trying to be reassuring. Homelander looked

ready to cry. He had every right to feel whatever he was feeling. This was cruel. I was lying to him.

Madelyn explained her justification, though it had to be a bit of a lie, too. Did everyone lie to him?

“Homelander.” If I were going to lie, I would do it well. “I don’t think this is going to kill me. But until I know for sure, I want to take that time for us to get to know each other. We’re related, but I have… had… a family until now. Uh, the seizures, they’ve kind of fried my brain? I don’t really, like, know me. But I would like to get to know myself with you, if that makes sense.”

I was still workshopping my excuse, but it was based on what the doctor said. I was giving him a lifeline. A thing he wanted. Chocolate to a dog. He smiled, his eyes still wet. The lie was helping.

“I’ll do it. If you think about the hero stuff. I don’t need an answer today, but once we know you’ll be okay.”

The window of opportunity was limited. Homelander believed me, and I would get into his head. Then he would die.

Chapter 3: Ganymede 1.2

We had lunch in my room. Homelander was very complimentary of the ten – yes, ten – in-house restaurants at Vought Tower. There was an abundance of menus that he had an assistant bring in. Pizzeria Vought, a Mister Smoo-V, and on and on and on. Jesus Christ.

“What are you getting?”

Homelander hadn’t considered it, apparently. Did he eat?

“We have a Vought-A-Burger concept restaurant right now. Burger and a large shake.”

“Party. Chicken strips and a Diet Coke.”

In the roughly ten minutes it took to have the food brought up, we didn’t say a single word to each other. It would have been easier if I’d blacked out, but I was not that lucky.

Was he afraid? That seemed possible. Homelander kept looking at me when he thought I wasn’t looking. He probably didn’t know how these interactions were supposed to be, unless he watched a lot of soaps.

Once we had food, I started the conversation. It created a barrier between us. A thing we could do to not talk.

“So, Homelander.” He looked startled. Very expressive eyes. “What do you want me to call you?”

“I, what do you mean?”

Give me something to work with.

“What’s your name? I’m Richard Shuster, you can call me Rick if you want, and you are…”

“...John. I don’t really go by it anymore. I’m a superhero full-time.”

“Well, John, it’s nice to meet you. I can talk your ear off, but do you, uh, want to ask me anything?”

He took a bite out of his burger. Thinking.

“You said you had a family?”

Yes. They didn’t exist here, probably. Or maybe they did, and I did. That would be pretty fucked up.

“Yeah. They, uh. My powers.”

I don’t elaborate. I let him fill in the blanks about why my powers would be relevant.

“Oh. What were they like?”

“I have pictures. Wanna see?”

The nod was tentative, and I pulled out my phone.

I still didn’t feel attached to them, but Richard had two Instagram accounts. One for his portfolio, he did design work, and a private personal account that went back years. There was a Facebook too. That went back even further. His parents had accounts there. I scrolled back a few weeks in his IG.

“These are my parents, David and Lisa Shuster. Just… It’s coming back to me, but it’s been slow.”

From their Facebook pages, David was older by a fair bit. There were scanned photos of his dad on Richard’s phone from before smartphones. Some kind of blue-collar worker at a plant or a factory.

He kept looking at my phone. Was he glaring? Maybe a little. I tried to power through, swiping out and scrolling down.

“This is from when I graduated from–”

“I know him.”

Huh?

“Huh?”

“Your father. I’ve seen his face before.”

If I was Homelander’s brother, that meant I was probably related to Soldier Boy. Soldier Boy disappeared in the 80s, and then I was born. Logically, I wasn’t old enough to be an illegitimate child. I had to be a test tube baby.

“From where?”

He didn’t respond. I had assumed it was a jealousy thing. It didn’t have to be.

“John?”

“Sorry. It’s, uh, it’s nothing. Got him mixed up.”

Liar.

I leaned over a bit, trying to make him look me in the eyes.

“Okay. Do you, uh, want to keep going? We can talk about something else.”

He smiled. It was a nice smile. Picture perfect.

“Of course. What do you do for work?”

This was a topic I felt a bit more comfortable with. Richard had been a designer. I had a marketing degree, and I’d taken a lot of graphic design classes. I showed him Richard’s portfolio. It wasn’t my work, but I needed something.

He was really scarfing down that burger all of a sudden.

“So, you do superhero work full-time, you said?”

He was mostly done with his meal by that point.

“The Seven is a full-time job. It would be nice to have some help I could trust, but you know how it is.”

Real classy. I was going to leave that little present alone.

“It seems like a big responsibility. I know it’s… uh… you, Black Noir, Queen Maeve, the Deep, A-Train…”

“Translucent and Lamplighter. Lamplighter is, well.” He sort of moved his eyebrows in a way that seemed like he was implying something. “We’re going to have a slot open up soon.”

Was he going to kill Lamplighter?

“Well, Black Noir is like a legacy hero, right? It’s good that you have someone you can rely on.”

“It is.”

They had a backstory, I was sure. It was kind of a dead end, though, and I shouldn’t try to get too immersed right away. It felt inappropriate. Cruel, yes, but also too fast.

He stood up before I could think of something else.

“Welp. I… this was nice.”

He wasn’t that tall, but boy did he fill up a room. The actor was definitely not that buff, right? It would take some getting used to. Homelander wiped his gloves off with a napkin.

“I have a few things to work on. But I’ll come back tomorrow. Okay?”

Hm.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow, John.”

“...Bye.”

He hadn’t said what superheroes did most of the time. Surely he wasn’t both so busy he had to finish his lunch that quickly, and also so available that he could plan his days around me. I

grabbed another chicken strip. Even the fries were still warm. Fast food didn't keep that long, so I ate quickly.

Homelander wasn't as crazy as I expected. It would have been easier if he were. As it stood, he was a pleasant if awkward guy.

Maybe nothing had happened yet. Homelander attacked, or would attack Becca Butcher, and that made Billy Butcher set on a mission to kill the supe. Plenty of media was set in a near future, so maybe 2019 was early.

I had a list of names. Hughie Campbell, Billy Butcher. It was not a long list. Then there was Mother's Milk, Frenchie, and Kimiko, but those weren't very searchable.

Thankfully, Instagram gave me answers. Hughie Campbell had an account, and the profile picture was a gingery guy with curly hair, so maybe. Private account, and technopathy did not give me access. I had been pretty specific, and account access was probably happening on a server and not on my phone. A follow request would be a mistake.

LinkedIn was a bit better. There were several Hugh Campbells, including one who worked at a tech store called Bryman Audio. Gingery, with curly hair. He matched the actor pretty well, and he lived in New York. All I had to do was get out. Which I couldn't. So, dead end, actually.

William Butcher and Billy Butcher both turned up nothing relevant. Rebecca Butcher gave me a Facebook page that hadn't been used in years. Not a good sign. There were wedding pictures. A brown-haired woman smiling next to a clean-shaven man, surrounded by friends. They seemed happy. All postings stopped in 2012.

Okay. I would speculate. William Butcher was alive somewhere. So was Rebecca. Rebecca had a son. If he were born in 2012, he might be turning seven this year. The specifics could be wrong, but the outline was solid. If he were any older, then he'd be with Homelander, because I'd seen clips of him with a kid.

The next day, I was feeling much better. I blacked out twice that we knew of, but if things were still good, we could talk about getting a release on the first of the month, which was in a few days.

Homelander came by at around the same time. He tried to order the same thing again, but this time I went for pizza. It meant that the food would take longer.

"John, what can you tell me about your family?"

It didn't get a reaction on the level I had worried about. He didn't just run out or hit me or anything. He didn't cry either. Homelander didn't seem like much of a crier.

"Oh, yeah, no. I… we're pretty similar, I think. I have no clue about our birth parents."

That felt like a misdirection.

“I mean your adoptive parents. I…” I could let it slip a little. “Can we talk about how you grew up? You had powers for most of your life. What was that like?”

There wasn’t anything to buffer the pauses. So he was just quiet as he looked out the window instead of at me. I was maybe pushing too hard, but closeness would mean being uncomfortable.

“I… I had a lot of accidents growing up. I didn’t really have, well.” He gestured towards my phone. The meaning seemed pretty clear. “They were afraid of me.”

There had to be more.

“Your parents?”

I needed him to say it.

“The people who raised me.”

I felt a little gross, then. I let it sit for a while, the feeling and the words.

“I think my mom would have liked you.”

Not Lisa. I didn’t know her. My mom. I wasn’t sure if it was true, but my mother was a friendly woman. Hospitable in a way that Americans usually weren’t. Even if she didn’t like him, she wouldn’t say it.

“I wish I could have met her.”

“So do I.”

Things were quiet until the food arrived. We started eating. I hadn’t had pizza in… I didn’t know how long. I had missed cheese. It was only a slice, though.

“I’m thinking of going flying.” I swallowed the last bit of the bit I’d been having. Covering my mouth with my hand. “Once the doctor clears me, I mean. You, uh, I’d like you to come with me. I could use a teacher.”

I didn’t need one. It didn’t take much to figure out the cold breath a few days ago, and Technopathy was almost passive. But I didn’t want to crash if I blacked out, and it was a bonding moment.

“...When?”

“Maybe Friday or Saturday? Depends on whether Doctor Reed clears me or not.”

“I’m happy to help. I’ll set something up for you. Is flight your only power?”

“Uh, no. I haven’t even used it yet, so I don’t really know how it’ll work, but I can… breathe out ice, or something, too. It’s what I’ve figured out so far.”

He nodded, taking the information in. John went quiet after that, though things did not feel cold.

The next day, Madelyn dropped by to leave me some clothes and see how I was doing. Apparently, they had bought me new clothes since mine were unavailable. Nobody had explained why the phone and laptop were easy to get, but Richard's clothes weren't. It didn't matter enough to make a fuss. It looked like nice stuff. Mostly red and white shirts, some underwear, and a pair of jeans. No obvious branding, and no tags either. T-shirt blanks. There was only one piece of Homelander merch, a shirt with a collage print of several comic book panels. I decided to wear that to go flying over the weekend. Let him feel good about the gift.

According to Doctor Reed, things looked good, though he seemed uncomfortable as he said it. The seizures were less often than during the first few days, and while I was still losing like the better part of an hour, the gaps gave me time to recover. With any luck, medication might even make them shrink or stop them completely. I was cleared that same Friday, and Homelander was there hours early.

I chose not to try speculating.

John looked down as I stood up. A bit too long. I had the shirt on, but shoes were probably harder to get on short notice.

"Yeah, sorry. Uh… I don't know if Madelyn mentioned, but they couldn't get me my clothes just yet."

"Oh, yeah, she probably did bring it up. Can't be helped, right? We can go up to the gift shop and find something in your size."

Somebody was in a hurry, damn.

The gift shop was, unsurprisingly, corner-to-corner and floor-to-ceiling merch for The Seven. T-shirts and sheets made sense. A Lamplighter toaster that burned his logo into your toast? A Black Noir coffee maker? Sure, fine. A tentacle-themed toilet paper holder? A mug that was supposed to be the bottom of Homelander's face, but could be any white guy's? None of those made any sense at all.

Inside the shoebox the clerk brought up was a pair of Homelander sneakers. Adidas high tops, which were mostly blue with large sections of red and white stripes, and sizable metallic gold sections, including the laces. They were the ugliest fucking shoes I had ever seen, and I had to put my sock down.

"Homelander? You're my brother, and I'll always care about you. I…" He probably cared about this a lot. I should be nice. "Those shoes look really uncomfortable. Do you mind if I pick?"

I couldn't say it. Even the softer version seemed to sting, though.

"Sure, that's fine."

I went through the shoe section and picked out a different Homelander pair. No gold detailing, and slightly more discreet stripes. There was a Black Noir x Puma collab that actually looked great, but I needed to compromise.

Once we were in the elevator, I broke the silence.

“...How am I paying for these, anyway?”

“Oh, I’m comping those. I can have anything I want from any Vought business.”

A thing he didn’t even have to think about. If I was right, then he was doing a lot of that recently.

“Oh wow. I guess that’s one of the perks of being the best.”

He stood up a little straighter at that. John was proud of his work, at least how successful he was at it. Wasn’t his main deal wanting to do more? Maybe that hadn’t hit him yet, and Vought had him tied down for now. Maybe a lot of things.

“How about once we get some flying in, I give you a tour of the upper floors?

I had a vague idea of how the building was. 99 floors above ground, going by the elevator, and five basement levels. The 99th was probably the big one, for the CEO or something.

“Yeah, definitely. It’ll be nice to know what you’re doing all day.”

I tried raising my eyebrows as I said it, like I was joking. But it wasn’t a joke, really. Homelander had an entire life I didn’t see, probably. People who relied on him, and people who knew things about him. A step beyond that, I barely spoke to anyone, and there was a limit on how much time I could be on the phone.

“Sure thing. We can… one second.”

He pulled out his phone, and things were quiet after that.

It was almost the middle of the day. The wind was tugging at my shirt and really pulling on Homelander’s cape as we stepped out onto the roof. The sky was blue in every direction, but the air was crisp, even with the sun right above us.

“This is the roof. My room is just under here.”

“Oh.”

If Homelander was on the 99th floor, then we were about a thousand feet in the air. Maybe more. I swallowed. John stepped towards the edge. There was a glass railing around the roof, which he hopped over. I didn’t move.

“Come on.”

I could see a clip in my mind. Homelander, pushing a child off the roof of a house. This was… a hundred times that, maybe? I slotted in the flight power and dropped technopathy for super senses. It had been stupid not to make a durability power, but there was no time. I could fly. The flight power felt tight – efficient and simple in a way that the frost breath wasn't.

But I still wasn't hopping the fence.

"John, I, just… give me a second."

He turned all the way towards me. Homelander looked like I had made a particularly bad joke.

"Are you scared of heights?"

"No! No, I just have this thing. Vertigo."

I couldn't see down yet, but I felt nauseous. Like my stomach was moving separately from my body. The moment I looked down, it would be worse.

"...You said you could fly. What's the problem?" I did say that. I could fly. "Just, take your time."

I hopped the fence.

He was right at the edge of the roof. I was maybe three paces back.

"Homelander, promise you'll catch me."

He seemed more alarmed at that.

"I know it's stupid. I just need you to promise me that, John. I've never flown before."

There was a pause. I wasn't moving until he said it.

"Richard, I'm not going to let you fall." He said it like it was obvious. "I know what I'm doing."

He definitely didn't.

"Okay."

I didn't step closer, more like I dragged my feet across the concrete until I was standing an arm's reach away from Homelander. I had visualized this at times. Sometimes I'd fall in my dreams. I usually woke up the second it started.

A few breaths later, I turned to look at him.

"Push me."

"What?"

“I can’t. You need to –”

The bitch pushed me. I closed my eyes and tensed up.

I could feel the wind rushing by my ears as I fell. My heart was going a mile a minute. I didn’t want to see it. I wanted to wake up in bed like every other time. This had been a mistake. I didn’t have any powers. All I had was the delusion that I could fix something in the way that heroes always did. Killing. Now I’d die instead.

“Richard.”

My heart wasn’t slowing down, but the world felt like it was slowing to a crawl. At some point, I’d hit the ground, and everything would stop. I didn’t want to be there. Why couldn’t I be anywhere else? Dead already, even. It would be easier.

“Richard! Fuck!”

I opened my eyes. I was up in the air, John was right next to me, but his arms were down. He looked less than happy.

“Oh.”

Yeah. Duh.

Flight had come to me without active thought. I could still see the top of the building I’d been pushed off. I hadn’t dropped more than four feet. All of the tension left me. Homelander hadn’t needed to catch me at all, so he’d watched and let me float there.

“What the fuck was that?”

But he still flew after me.

“I…”

I tried to turn myself upright, to have some dignity again, and I just kept spinning. He grabbed my shoulder, stopping my momentum, but the world was just slightly crooked.

This had to be so far beneath his skill as a flyer. He was probably Mach three. I could float in place if I clenched. I could fly, sure, but I did actually need help. Had John ever needed help? If he did, did he get it?

This would be easier if he hit me.

Homelander still looked mad.

“I think I’m kind of afraid of heights. Please help me get closer to the… the, fuck, roof.”

He already had a hand on my shoulder, so all he had to do was drag. Whatever force kept me in the air was weak enough that he could overpower it. The moment the roof was under me, I grabbed onto him. I didn’t close my eyes because this was a bad idea.

“...Why are you such a pussy?”

“I’m sorry. Thank you for helping me.” I wasn’t going to cry or anything like that, but I could feel my heart pumping way too fast. I also hadn’t touched a human being in over a week, other than getting an IV.

Eventually, after a few seconds, I felt some pressure on my back through the shirt. There was a… some kind of movement, like a hitching of breath from a laugh. If it were funny, he would have laughed, so it wasn’t that.

I ignored it.

Hugs were not my thing. Culturally, they sort of were – well into college, the girls I knew at least casually would do hugs. I didn’t get the premise. Too much Americanness or something. But I had learned to manage, and a part of me missed closeness now that I didn’t have it. Richard was gone, and he didn’t have that many friends. I could make decisions about who he was now.

She let me tap out, the few times a year we did hug. I could always tap out. It felt like an appropriate thing to do in the moment, and Homelander pulled back like I was burning him.

“I, uhm, well.”

“I think it would be better if we stayed on the roof. We can try flying for real later.”

I changed the subject. We had things to do.

“Oh, yeah, yes. Can you… try jumping into the air, and holding like that?”

A few minutes of trying, and I did figure out how to hold myself in place. It wasn’t a muscle to clench. It was maybe more of a mindset thing. I had to start from the premise that it was something I wanted to do, and it happened without any active thought. Spinning, too, and then actual propulsion. John couldn’t explain how he did it, and I couldn’t explain what I was doing.

If I really tried, then maybe, but it felt a little bit beyond any language I knew. I didn’t know how to explain the process of seeing either.

Several things became clear on that roof, before Friday afternoon. First, I was faster than a human runner, but not as fast as John. Second, I had crazy high acceleration, meaning I could turn faster than Homelander could think about turning, and I wasn’t harmed by the whiplash of going full tilt and then backwards at the same speed. Third, I wasn’t getting motion sick at all. It was all in my head.

Right before one, John checked his phone again.

“You ready for the tour? We can do lunch a bit later.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now. I’m a busy man. Every minute I’m late, a million dollars get torched.”

Showoff.

“Sure.”

He was texting a lot. I only caught one line before he put his phone away again.

ETA 2.

Obviously, it was for the tour. John wasn’t subtle. Homelander was setting something up.

Chapter 4: Ganymede 1.3

The elevator opened directly onto the 99th floor. Everything in this building was out of scale.

Churches and some government buildings had this thing, according to a guy I remembered explaining this concept in a YouTube video. They were built larger than the human scale to give a feeling that there was something bigger than people at work there. I want to say that he called it transcendence. Something about the scale made it feel contemplative and serious. I prefer to think that big things are easier to worship.

This place, it felt like, worshipped business. The elevator opened into a big hallway. Big enough that I couldn't jump up and touch the ceiling, or maybe I could now. You get what I mean. There were double doors on either side.

"Welcome to the 99th." John sounded very comfortable with this spiel. "If we head that way, we'll go to the private dining hall – which is good, but we're trying to get chef Miro from Gramercy Tavern. His pastries are to die for."

"Oh wow."

I had no idea who the fuck that was supposed to be.

"Over here is the meeting room."

It felt casual until I took a few steps closer. There was something. The super senses tingled in reaction, but there was no reference in my brain. At most, I could be sure that I had been feeling something and that something was more all of a sudden.

"Homelander, Sir, you…"

The door opened, and the Deep was there. He was smiling in a sense, but his eyes were locked on me in a way that suggested vague surprise. Homelander was in my peripheral vision, smiling.

"Deep, what a surprise. I'm just giving a tour."

I gave the classic white people smile, but The Deep was not looking at me.

"You're giving the tour?"

"A tour, yes."

The words carried a certain weight. All of these people seemed obsessed with double-speak. The mood shifted just so in reaction.

"Awesome, awesome. It's, uh, nice to meet you, bro."

He offered a hand, which I took. The Deep seemed perturbed, more by the situation than by me. When he opened the door in full, five of the chairs in the meeting room were occupied.

Ah, that must have been the plan.

I could see three sets of eyes and one set of lenses lock in on me. Black Noir and Translucent, whose faces I couldn't see, were turning physically in the direction of the door. They probably had to do that all the time.

"Oh, good, you're all here. I wanted to check in with everyone and see how saves have been going this week. You know." It didn't feel like they did. "Touch base."

Maeve was the only one to offer any immediate resistance.

"During your tour."

"Well, yes, of course! I'm already here, right? You start."

There was a pause. She was smiling in a way that showed off her teeth. It reminded me of John, though she was less… toothy. More Vogue and less National Geographic.

"Sorry." She was definitely looking at me as she said it. "Who are you?"

"Oh, hi, I'm Richard. Uh…" I looked at Homelander. This was his shindig, and I didn't want to ruin it for him.

"He's my brother."

The Deep reacted first.

"Oh. Sweet."

Homelander started to walk further into the room, and I followed. There was, definitely not added for me specifically, an extra chair that I could move next to John's own chair, in exactly the same very fancy style as all of the others. Total coincidence, of course.

"I try to hold regular meetings, just to make sure we're all on the up and up. We make the big bucks because of how many people we help." He lowered his voice to explain that, even though it was probably false, before going louder. "As I was saying, Queen Maeve, if you don't mind."

They went one by one, talking about crimes they had stopped and people they'd saved. Who knew there were so many bank robberies leading to shootouts, or break-ins to just stumble on, or drugs being trafficked? It was Friday, and apparently, they each had two saves in the past week. Maybe some of those were real, but probably not.

"And that's the week," John said, clapping his hands together. "Good work, everyone. Keep it up. How about we all do lunch?"

Everyone had been in the middle of standing up. A-Train spoke up first.

“I’m busy, actually, Homelander.”

“You can go,” I swear to God, there was a look. “Lamplighter, you too.”

…Was he getting rid of both of them? I could swear A-Train was in the show for a while.

Even though they didn’t have Chef Whoever, the food in the Seven’s special dining hall was really, really good. It felt weird that they had so much space for like half a dozen people to eat food. The view was insane, but it was New York. Every view was probably insane. I pecked at a basket of focaccia. They were all eating pretty normal portions.

“I’m going to have to go on a diet, aren’t I?”

Homelander was sitting right across from me. The others were each taking their own tables, which were not small.

“Why would you do that?”

“I don’t think I want to be Homelander’s fat brother, thank you very much.”

I was also going to be a superhero, but he didn’t know that yet.

“You’re not fat.”

“Give me three months of eating like this and say that again.”

I’d been a fat kid, before, and a fat adult. Richard wasn’t in the same situation, but he wasn’t ripped either. It wasn’t that I couldn’t control myself, or whatever horrible stereotypes people had. It was that I needed to be doing something, and food was always an option. Good food, great food even, would not help. Even outside of the public eye, I had some experience with how these things went, and I wasn’t going to survive it if everybody was looking.

“We actually have a gym on the… I think it’s on the 93rd?”

Ah, the Deep. What to do about him?

“Oh, that’s good. Do you use it?”

The Deep was every bad thing about Homelander, to a dramatically lesser extent, and without the justifications I could easily make up for John.

“Oh, yeah. I’m the only one who uses it every day.”

John was my brother. John had a fucked up childhood and a fucked up life. John was exactly what he was made to be.

“Is it any good? It’s either this or a gym membership.”

The Deep was, from what I knew, just like that. There was probably something already, and he would have his life messed up at some point, but that hadn’t happened yet.

“This is probably the best private gym in the country.” He sort of laughed as he said it. “Maybe the NFL has something.”

He was kind of… simpering, maybe? A bootlicker, obviously, but also a brown-noser. I was also like 40% sure he had a gay storyline. If he wasn’t a rapist by this time next year, I could work with that.

“Damn. It would definitely help me if you show me the ropes, then.”

Homelander was halfway into a burger. Did he eat anything else?

"I could train you, if you wanted.” He almost glared at my look. “I don't usually use the gym, but I could make an exception."

It felt like he would be jealous if I smiled at somebody for too long. Nobody had ever wanted this much of my undivided attention. It was a bit annoying, actually.

“I’d be happy to train with you.” Emphasis on the with. “But maybe I should see if I can get stronger at all, before –”

Pain. Cold.

I woke up in a bed.

Fuck.

John was in a chair right by the bed, looking at me, but this wasn’t my room.

“Richard?”

In a way, his voice was small. We were probably alone.

“Hey John.”

There wasn’t a reply. Homelander was very wet for a guy who hadn’t made it to the point of actual tears yet. I pulled out my phone.

“I probably shouldn’t look,” I said, turning the screen to face him. “It can’t be good for me right now. How long?”

He actually looked before answering. Maybe he didn’t know.

“Forty-five minutes.”

My legs were bare, I realized. I didn’t have pants on.

“Oh.”

That was long. His eyes were on mine again. Or was it in mine? It felt more in than on.

“...You scared me.”

It felt pointed, even if he didn’t sound angry. Maybe he never actually sounded angry. How would I know just yet? Maybe he was always angry, and that was his secret. Or maybe he would smile if he was really angry at me.

I wasn’t sorry. I wasn’t going to act sorry. I hadn’t done anything wrong. I put so much effort into keeping this just at the edge of uncomfortable for him. I was tired.

“That’s a long time. Where are we?”

The walls were covered in art, like the gift shop had been covered with merchandise. Every surface had something, and I wasn’t sure I could put my whole hand on a wall without touching a frame. The walls were some dark color, which could only be blue.

There wasn’t a door to the room I was in.

“Guest bedroom.”

“Okay.”

He was still giving me that look. How the fuck was he this… I didn’t know what word I wanted. It was also maybe a bit harsh. He’d never had to do this before. I could offer him a hug, but was that where things seemed to be? No. I also didn’t love the idea of having his hands anywhere on me if he was upset.

That thought felt less pleasant than the other ones, but it was still true.

Maybe one thing could be two things if you looked at it the right way. I scooted myself over and patted the spot next to me on the bed. After a while, when I got sick of him just looking at the empty space, I told him what to do.

“Come on, lie down.”

There was some resistance, but he did, eventually. Stiff as a board, a foot or so of empty space between us, all of the Homelander still on. I stayed lying down, letting him work up to new words.

“You… you just dropped. Right there in front of everyone.”

“Yeah. I guess I did.” Then I bit the bullet. “Where are my pants?”

“You peed yourself. I have a laundry team. They’ll handle it.”

Ew. That was new. Or maybe it wasn’t, and I didn’t know.

“Gross, but thank you. I know you, uh, probably had this whole thing planned.”

That was something I could say sorry for. I still didn’t.

His eyes were on the ceiling now. “It wasn't a plan, really. Just lunch.”

“And the meeting.”

“That was…” He stopped. “I wanted them to meet you. Properly, I mean. Not just in a hallway, or hear about you from Madelyn.”

“I think you wanted to show me off.”

“Why is that a bad thing?”

“It’s…” I stopped the thought. “It would have been nice to know. It’s probably pretty normal, though, for brothers.”

It had never been like this with my sister. We didn’t show each other off to people. I barely talked about her. I assumed the same was true the other way.

“Well…”

“Yeah. Same.”

“It’s pretty messed up. That this was stolen from me.”

Hold on.

“Stolen from you.”

“Well, yeah. I could have known how things are supposed to be, but now I don’t.”

Somewhere in the distance, not above us, a helicopter was flying. Neither of us spoke for a while. Sometimes, when Homelander talked, he was kind of a jackass.

“Someday, you need to tell me how you grew up.” I started moderating myself as he tried to get up. “Not today, and I’m not even saying soon, but someday.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Okay. But you’re the only one who knows anything about where I come from, and you know everyone who knows what I need to know.” The moment I said it, I knew my syntax was fucked. “You know?”

Apparently, it was funny enough that he chuckled.

“...What?”

I was trying to be sincere.

“Well, excuse me, John.” I held back my own chuckle, but I did smile a bit. “My point is that someday I need you to let me find out where we come from. You can point me to the right person, or you can just tell me. I’m being serious.”

He was doing that thing he did. Looking away instead of at me. Part of me wanted to grab his head and turn it my way. The other part was smarter.

“Of course. Just – just give me some time.”

“I can do that. Also, um, can I borrow some sweats or something? I should probably go back to my room.”

“Oh, uh… actually, I was going to ask after the tour, you can stay up here. If you want.”

“Here in the guest bedroom?” He nodded. “I… yes, I would like that. Let me just borrow something to go downstairs and grab my things.”

Before he could tell me not to bother, I was already up. I decided to ignore what it meant that I had clean boxers on. That would go into the unpacked emotional baggage pile, to be forgotten.

“I have some civvies in my room – third floor.” I couldn’t understand why he needed this much space. “You shouldn’t be running up the stairs just yet.”

“I wasn’t running, but it is your room. I’d appreciate it if you could lend me something that fits. The doctors don’t need to see this.”

“Sure, just, uh, wait here.”

He gave me a look, but he went. I listened to his footsteps on the stairs, and then I was alone in his living room. There were, like everywhere else, art pieces on every surface. Marble statues of buff men and beautiful women. Mirrors on every wall, and paintings I didn’t recognize with what I was pretty sure was George Washington.

The two couches were leather, huge, and didn’t look very comfortable.

My foot touched fabric, and I picked the piece of clothing up. It was a t-shirt.

As far as I could tell, I wore a medium or large, and Homelander was probably more of an XL from sheer muscle mass. A slightly threadbare green shirt with a ram and the words ‘Colorado State’ in yellow. I held it up to my chest, and it was about my size.

I wasn’t sure how long I stood there, but then Homelander walked back down.

“Okay, these should…”

He wasn’t stupid. But maybe he was careless. He also looked like he’d been caught.

“John.”

“Uhm, I can explain.”

I didn’t feel like dealing with another thing just yet. I reached out with the hand holding what was definitely Richard’s shirt, and took his pants in the other. He took it. I definitely wasn’t doing this unless I was fully dressed. I stayed silent until my pants were on.

“I’m going to go down and grab my things. I want all of my clothes on the bed by the time I get back. Can I have a hug?”

One of those things was not like the other, and something in John’s face reminded me of those dogs that never learned how to handle a human being near their food.

“You’re afraid of me. I can hear it.”

I was. There was a gravel to his voice that pinged in my internet hindbrain. This was the part where he killed people. Killed me, possibly. There was a narrow path.

“I am. I’m working on that. Can I get a hug?”

John was, in a way that I didn’t think fit him, slow. Maybe it was careful, or maybe it felt slow in the life flashing before my eyes sort of way. I could say that both felt equally likely, but that wasn’t true. So far, if I didn’t know, then it would be easy to trust him. Like him, even. This last thing was weird, but it wasn’t more than I felt I could handle.

He did grab on a little too hard, but he put himself below me. His head under my chin, more or less. I hugged back.

“John, I can lend you shirts, but this can’t happen again. Okay?”

There had to be a line. I needed to draw it, or else he would keep going to wherever his mind went with the other figures in his life. But I didn’t want to hash this out right then and there. If I pushed all of the time, eventually he would either push back or snap. Neither were the options I could deal with.

He didn’t answer. I let him stay there for as long as he wanted to be.

When he did actually let go, he spoke before I could.

“I… don’t tell anyone.”

Literally, what would I even say?

“Part of this whole… deal, I guess, is that we’re supposed to keep each other safe. I won’t tell. I’m going to go grab my things, okay?”

I left him in his penthouse. I happened on two of the guys from his team, Translucent and The Deep, talking out in the main hall area. They didn’t say anything, and I didn’t want to engage either. The Deep did look, though, so I could guess. He was not subtle with his face. He had a thing, I was sure, and if he was friends with Translucent, then… he wouldn’t have friends for that long.

The only one that made me second-guess myself was Black Noir. Standing, almost silently, some twenty paces from Homelander’s door. I didn’t know much about him. Maybe it was a genuine concern.

They were close. It would make sense.

I gave Black Noir a smile and a sort of wave. He waved back. If I was ever going to get my head around John, I would need him too. There was a thing he liked, I could vaguely recall. He had some kind of mental thing, and it was about cartoon characters. All I had to do was get on Ebay.

The elevator ride took a long time.

Maybe everything about this was gross. I hadn't seen anyone die, and nobody had actually done anything that I could tell, and yet I was planning horrible things. There wasn't a good excuse.

Homelander was unwell. This wasn't how family dynamics were supposed to work. He was dangerous to people in general, but specifically to me. I didn't really have anyone else to talk to, and even if I did, they would be in danger, probably.

The clothes stuff had been a lot. I decided to believe it was just a parasocial thing, and not any of the other things it could be. If it wasn't, well, then I didn't have any alternatives.

Maybe the smart thing to do would have been to escape that first or second day. Way back in Colorado. It was too late, and too early.

For now, I needed to figure out what I could do, I needed to convince John to tell me about himself, and I needed to find a way out to save the Robin girl. Everything else needed to take second priority. If I could prove that she was real, then it would mean everything else was real in the ways that mattered. Then I was a hero and not just some freak.

It was more important than thinking things, seeing things, or feeling things that weren't real.

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