

Chapter 23: Every Hero Needs A Villain

The blurry vision of my orthopt-self painted a rather dire scene. I say 'painted' because of the resemblance it held to a work of art that I once saw in a museum. A man surrounded by malevolent figures shaded in hues of black and gray. Someone stood behind him, weapon raised, betrayal imminent. The artist had made the unwitting man the focal point; sharp, clear. All the better to empathize with him. All the better to condemn the figures in the dark.

This wasn't quite the same. I wasn't quite the same as the painted man - I was all too aware of what was happening around me. It simply didn't matter. There was no need for empathy here, though a little condemnation would still be natural. That part would have to wait, though.

The club came down.

I shifted my weight with the blow, bleeding off some of the impact as a gout of pain flared at the back of my head. At the same time, I forced myself to go limp, pulling as much of my attention away from Markus' body. I toppled to the floor, bouncing against it. Blood seeped in small little dribbles from my skull, forming a crimson puddle underneath me.

I winced internally, voicing a silent apology to Markus. I hoped that he understood what I was trying to do; I'm sure that he would wish to do the same. As strange as Jack and Will had made him seem, I was sure that Markus had the bearings of a hero. Heroism required sacrifices; it required pain. I was sure that he would let me know if it became too much.

From my other perspective, the painting changed. Four shadowy figures crowded around an unmoving corpse, broken and lifeless, though they did not yet realize it.

They moved with haste, roughly pulling at my arms and tying them together. My legs, too, they tied. Though I had pulled much of my awareness away from the captured body, I could still feel the way the rope rubbed against my wrists and ankles. They had tied them far too tightly; had I blood that flowed, my circulation would have suffered.

Finally, they had me trussed up and pushed up against a wall. Only then did they begin to question my health.

"How hard did you fucking hit him?" I heard a voice ask. It was unfortunate; I wasn't entirely certain who was talking, just that it was one of the two men whose voices I had not yet heard. My orthopt-self's vision was too blurry to make out many distinguishing details, preventing me from telling them apart visually. However, it made up for it with hearing that was of far greater fidelity than I would expect from an insect. "His eyes are still open, too. Is that normal?"

I saw my former guide shrug nonchalantly, identifying him in the moment that followed via his voice. "Dunno, pretty hard. I wanted to be careful, y'know?"

"Well, how are we going to question him if you went ahead and offed him?"

"I'm sure he's fine," my guide grumbled. "Didn't hit him *that* hard." He ambled forwards with a desultory gait, leaning down to look at me more closely. A moment later, he kneeled in front of my slack-eyed gaze. I gave that perspective slightly more attention. Fogged over though it was, it still provided a superior view. As long as I didn't consciously move my eyes, they would remain in their unblinking, nonreactive state. It made for less than exemplary vision, but I hardly needed it.

The man snapped his fingers in front of my face, waiting expectantly. When I didn't react, he escalated. A few slaps later - those nearly irked me enough to give up the charade and slap him back - and someone finally realized something was wrong.

Idiots.

"I don't think he's breathing," someone said.

My former guide placed a hand over my open mouth, frowning in consternation. After a few moments, he placed two fingers to my jugular.

"Fucking hell, he's dead," he swore. "We spent all that time waiting for him to wake up for no reason."

That was his concern?

It was becoming increasingly difficult not to just stand up and put in some more...*traditional* hero work. Still, I stayed my hand.

Instead, I waited.

I listened.

It's difficult to imagine the inanities of listening to your murderers discuss your recent murder without having experienced it firsthand. I had expected at least *some* degree of inner torment made manifest; pacing, hair-pulling, panicking, what-have-you. If I was a particularly sympathetic character, perhaps even a regret-filled change of heart.

Turned out, there was none of that.

Instead, the biggest concern had been that they would no longer be able to properly question me. It was closely followed by their disgust upon finding my nearly empty coin purse. It was disappointing, to say the least.

Eventually, though, I heard a conversation that made everything worthwhile.



"Shit. The Gray Woman is going to want to know that someone was here asking around about her dust," the yellow-toothed man - who I presumed to be the de-facto leader of the present group - said.

His words caught my attention in a way that their previous conversations had not.

"We still don't know who sent him because *someone* fucking brained him. She's not going to be happy when she hears about that," Tony replied.

"When is she ever?" Lucy spat bitterly. "Fucking Corrupted bitch."

"Alex..." Tony said with a warning. I realized Lucy was actually an Alex. That was good, he didn't really deserve the name. "She's going to cut you off entirely if she hears of talk like that."

Alex, he who was formerly known as Lucy, was pacing furiously. His hands clenched at his sides and his muttering was increasing in volume, having worked himself up to a frenzy over thoughts of the Gray Woman - whoever she was.

"Fuck off!" he shouted. "I can say what I want."

"That's just the withdrawal talking, you *idiot*. The paranoia, the rage. I know that, so I'll let this go. If you talk like that and she hears it, though, she'll extend your punishment. No more of the gray dust for you, ever - and I am *not* willing to die with you."

For a moment, I thought that Alex was going to attack him just for the mere mention of the possibility. The moment passed, and his aggression and intensity changed. It didn't become *less*, really, but rather more tightly leashed.

I didn't think for a moment that it had disappeared.

Regardless, it was information that I did not have before. Whoever this Gray Woman was, she was important. She was *also* a natural superhuman, which I had been led to believe was an extremely rare find in these days. Even worse, it appeared that she had taken the route of a supervillain.

That would make things more difficult.

Though the Marked were extremely powerful in their own right, especially given their overwhelming numbers, there was something to be said for the variability that natural superpowers could give. It was a lottery, with winners and losers.

One man might become thrice as strong as before. One woman might find herself with the ability to sense danger. Another man might become...me.

There was simply no way to predict it.

I was of the firm belief that much of the chaos of my time had been the result of the utter chaos and unknown nature of powers. Those who became heroes, who worked in the light, were known. *Famous*, even. Their powers were documented, studied, and recounted. Yet those who became villains were far more secretive. In the shadows, there was no need for the public eye. There was no need to show your hand, and no need for flashy displays. Not until the proper time. Not until they were ready.

You see, heroes were *drawn* to the work. There was a powerful sort of obligation involved in it, whether they saw it that way or not. When you knew that you could put out fires with ease, suddenly every death to the flames became your responsibility. When you knew that you could catch a bullet with aplomb, suddenly every gunshot victim became a victim of your inaction. Whether or not that was true did not matter - it was still enough to force heroes into the light, oftentimes tackling more than they could handle.

Villains, like this Gray Woman, were different. The only obligation that they felt was to themselves; that was an easy burden to bear, in the end. There was no need to exit the shadows, no need to overplay their hand. They could be the puppeteers. They could be the masterminds. They could afford to be cautious.

I would need to know more.

Fortunately, I would soon have the opportunity.

"...think anyone sent him or he was just curious?" my former guide asked.

"Does it matter?" the yellow-toothed man replied. "Someone still needs to go talk to her."

The room was oddly silent at that. Were it not for the continued mutterings of Alex, who I now knew to be deep into the effects of gray dust withdrawal, I might have worried that I had suddenly gone deaf.

I was becoming increasingly worried. When one's own henchmen - for that is what I now understood them to be - were so terrified of you, what did that mean for the general populace?

Finally, one of them broke.

"Fucking hell, I'll talk to the bitch," Alex asserted. He silenced Tony's warning remark with a glare. "Only got a few days left if I don't get any of her dust soon, anyways. I'm not going out like Chris did. If she doesn't give me any dust this time, I'm taking it from her."

The others looked disconcerted at that proclamation. Despite that, they were not disturbed enough to argue against Alex's tirade with any real fervor. It seemed that they, too, had their qualms with the Gray Woman. Their only true concern appeared to be whether or not they would suffer any backlash from his actions.

With that, I had my connection drawn. Though the night's outing had been messier than intended, it had been effective in forcing a meeting with the Gray Woman. Though that might have still been possible had I escaped, I had my doubts that they would have been quite so forthcoming with information in that scenario.

The absolute certainty that I was dead had done much to loosen their lips. After all, who expected that a so-easily killed potential addict was spying on them even after his clear and certain 'death'? On the other hand, my escape would have likely locked lips entirely.

All in all, I was proud of what I had accomplished. I knew far more about the mystery surrounding a drug that, according to Roy, had been causing the Guard a great deal of trouble despite its rarity. I had even found a supervillain! Sort of.

I had to admit, despite understanding exactly how much damage a determined - and sometimes, even a rather lackadaisical - supervillain could do to a city, I found myself excited. I couldn't help it. This was my chance to do something great. This was my chance to save people.

This was my chance to be a hero.

Maybe it was a selfish thought. Heroes weren't supposed to be thrilled to find that there was a yin to their yang, an evil to their good. In the end, though, I didn't create the Gray Woman. She was already here.

What harm, then, was there in being a little enthusiastic?