

Colorful Heroes: Iridescent by Magnus Itland

Prelude

"I'm a hero. This is what we do."

Did I regret those words when the knife found its way through my jacket and into my side? Yes and no. I did not like it one bit. I did not want to die, even though I did not have a lot of things to say goodbye to. No, I really really really didn't want to die already. I was way too young for that. But the girl had gotten away. He would be caught, and he would be put away. He would not get the chance to do this again. Murder isn't something you can shake off easily. Just to be sure, I clawed at his face, grabbed at his hair. Not a very manly thing to do, but I was trying to leave as much of his DNA as possible on the site. Unlike in movies, stabbing someone does not mean he falls down dead instantly. No. It takes time, especially when you don't hit the heart. Running away now would serve no purpose. It was too late for that. Keep him as long as possible, get as much evidence as possible, get him put away until he is too old to harm anyone ever again.

I'm a hero. This is what we do. We rescue the innocent and bring the villains to justice, even if it costs us our life. But that doesn't mean we like it. As my body stopped obeying me and the haze swallowed me, I wish I could just teleport to the Hospital, like in the game. But even the game was shut down last year. And now, so was I. The darkness turned into light, and the light took me away.

Chapter 1

Light.

I opened my eyes, and saw the softly glowing tiles in the ceiling. Tiles in the ceiling. Heaven doesn't have electroluminicent tiles, does it? Hell even less so, I would imagine. To be honest, I had not known for sure which one I'd go to, if any. I was not much of a theologian, but if I had known I would die protecting someone in real life, my guess would probably have been on Heaven, if there was anything at all. My grandmother would have disagreed, saying that Heaven had nothing to do with what you did, only who you believed in. Well, guess I wasn't finding out. I was in a hospital, judging from the light, the clean bedsheets and the guy in a white coat by my bed.

"Easy son" he said, but of course I was not his son. The age could be right though, as he seemed to be in his mid to late forties. "You're recovering quickly, but you're not ready to get back into the fight quite yet. We have some things to do first."

"I am alive?" I asked. So the stab wound had not been fatal after all! I had been so sure. Well, good news! In fact, I felt surprisingly well given the situation. But of course I did not know how long I had been out of it. "How long have I been here?"

"About 20 minutes. The heroine who found you said you were not breathing, but look at you now!"

"Heroine?"

"Silver Star Girl. Unfortunately she arrived too late to see your assailant, but I assume you did."

"Yes - wait, what? Silver Star Girl?"

"Yes. I guess she is not that famous? And you are maybe new here? Did you even know you were Colorful? You did not have the patch."

"Wait, wait, wait. Hero? Patch? Where am I?"

"Anima Memorial Hospital."

"No, seriously." That was the fictive hospital that heroes went to if they were defeated in Colorful Heroes, the game that I had loved above all else from I was 14 until it was tragically shut down last year. The imaginary Color City, situated in Colorado of course, had been buzzing with heroes that were colorful in more than one sense of the word, although most of them were probably not people of color in real life. Well, who knows, we did not talk much about Real Life while we played. There were players from around the globe, but I think mostly from the US and Europe. That was my impression. But as I said, we did not really talk much about Real Life. We had enough with the life we had. But one thing I remembered quite clearly was that it was a game. Getting stabbed in real life is a very different thing. So how?

"I know this is a lot to take in if you did not know you were Colorful. But you are. And your Main is White, so there is no doubt about your alignment." The sheer presence of the White Light burns evildoers, so it was the only Color that was only available to Heroes. Whatever really had happened, this guy knew his lore!

"Wait, where am I *really*? I know I'm not in a game."

He seemed confused. "Game?"

"Colorful Heroes is a game. Was a game. It was shut down last year. I was stabbed in real life. Not a game. So where am I?"

"I am not playing games with you. This is real. You really are Colorful. In fact, you are almost impossibly Colorful. I have never seen anyone like you in the years I've worked here. Let me get the charts and show you." He stepped over to a terminal and pressed some keys, then went and fetched a printout. It was color coded: White, green, silver, yellow and violet. No, that couldn't...

"Here, see this scan? Your main is White, the Color of Judgment. It burns and weakens evil, heals and protects good. And you have it available in both offense and defense. With this Color alone, you could become a Paladin or a Judge. But there is more! Green, the Color of Life, is available both in defense and support, meaning you can regenerate and heal yourself and others. Silver, the Color of Gravity, is available in offense and utility, meaning you can use gravity attacks as well as fly. Yellow, the Color of Speed and Strength, is available in utility and support, so you can strengthen, speed up and energize yourself and others. Finally Violet, the Color of Dimensionality, is available in utility and domination, so you can teleport and temporarily summon objects and entities from other dimensions. This is an arcane power so should be used very carefully if at all. Especially the summoning of entities can have some highly unforeseeable consequences without proper guidance."

"That's for sure. I mean, you sure got the lore right, but we both know this can't be real. It was a game. Just a game. There is no such place as Color City. There are no superpowers based on colored energies that entered Earth from alternate dimensions after the Supermassive Colorado Hadron Collider punched a hole in the walls of the multiverse."

"In that case, why are you here?"

"That's what I'm wondering too."

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When I refused to believe I was actually in Color City, the doctor accompanied me out of the room. I felt surprisingly well. The pain in my side had faded to little more than an itch, and I did not have any trouble keeping up with the doctor as we walked out into the corridor. I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach as I recognized the corridor that I had run through so many times on my way out of the hospital. As we opened the door, I recognized the cityscape. I had flown among those buildings. And jumped. And run at inhuman speed. There was no denying what I saw. It looked the same. And there were the Portals that let you quickly return to the District you came from. They were shimmering with violet energies. Energies like my own?

After the Colorado Event, a number of magic schools found that their spells were actually working and were truly powerful, for the first time in centuries or millennia. After the wizards came the aliens: A number of planets sent faster-than-light ships to Earth after detecting the dimensional waves from the Event. Some of them were here to help, others not so much. Most of the new alien population however were scientists, studying the phenomenon. In the game, alien heroes were not uncommon. Then again, you'd also run into the occasional sentient robot. Was I going to see that kind of stuff here? Or was it just an incredibly well made lifesize replica, a tribute to a game that died too early? No, even a billionaire could not have built a city in less than a year, and without anyone knowing.

There was no sane explanation. Maybe I really had died, and been resurrected in a different dimension where this game was real. Or perhaps this was my Heaven, to be able to play this game for the rest of my natural lifespan, from the inside. Or perhaps I was in a coma, imagining the whole thing. Or perhaps my head had been frozen down and in a more advanced future, my brain scanned and uploaded into a rebuilt Colorful Heroes MMORPG. But if so, the doctor was either a NPC or a very good role player, because he seemed utterly unaware that this had ever been a game. Well, I had just arrived. My overarching quest in this world would be to find out what had truly happened to me and what this city really was. But for now, I was just glad to be alive. Or whatever I was.

Anyway, whether it was a dream, a game or a hallucination, I just had to go with the flow for now. And that meant the thing that made the world go around: Health insurance. "So, uh, about payment and that kind of stuff." I had a feeling that my insurance did not carry over here.

"Don't worry, we have your biometrics, so we'll just put it on your tab till you get officially registered as a hero. You **are** going to be a hero, right? It would be a terrible loss for the world if the most talented young man in recorded history decided to go back to being a civilian. You could be practically any kind of hero you want, you know. Although you would be particularly well suited for a Paladin role, with your dual healing powers. Of course, my mind runs in that direction, with my job. It is really up to you, of course. As soon as you register your biometrics at the Bureau of Superpowered Affairs, they will electronically verify them with us and we will register you. Don't forget to come back immediately after registration to get your teleport patch implanted."

"Right. I should probably go there next" I said.

"Looks like you will have company" he said with a cheerful grin, pointing up in the air. I looked, and someone came sailing gracefully down from the sky, short cape fluttering in the wind.

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I realized I was standing there staring sheepishly with my mouth open, and that could be misunderstood when I was looking at a shapely young woman. But the shape was not why I was staring. I had played this game till the day it closed down, I had been flying through these skies so many times and seen others do it a thousand times as well. But somehow seeing it in real life - or something I could not tell apart from real life - was entirely different. Seeing her slide down through the air at a measured pace and land gracefully was ... fantastic. Larger than life. Like magic. It was incredible, and yet I had a hard time not believing my eyes. Everything was so real, and there was a real person flying through the air and landing right in front of me.

"Hello again!" she said cheerfully. Again? Her skintight costume was studded with silver-colored stars, of the classic five-pointed type you would see in Christmas decorations, but in various sizes. This had to be Silver Star Girl, the heroine who found me.

"You are Silver Star Girl?" I asked, just in case, and immediately regretted it. This was like telling her she was not famous. "Sorry" I said automatically.

"What gave it away, I wonder?" she said, seemingly not disappointed at all.

"The doctor here told me you found me. Uh, I may have forgotten to ask your name."

"Stephenson. Stephen Stephenson."

"So Dr Stephenson here mentioned you."

"Did he mention the mouth to mouth?"

"Huh? No..."

"It was unfortunately a lot less romantic than it could have been, considering that you were kind of dead at the time. But I alerted my Alliance and tried chest compression and mouth to mouth just in case. And at some point I thumped your chest really hard and your heart must have started beating, for I saw the green glow flare up around you. That's when I realized you were one of us. A Colorful."

"You have NO IDEA how Colorful he is!" exclaimed Dr Stephenson. "Uh, is it OK for me to tell her?"

"Sure?"

"So you know he has Regeneration, right? Green defense? Actually, it is his secondary. Green defense and support. His primary is White, defense and offense."

"Whoa, double whammy for defense! Boy, you have potential!"

"You haven't heard the half of it yet!" said the doctor. "Literally! See, his tertiary is Silver, offense and utility."

"Another offense too??"

"And his second tertiary is Yellow, utility and support."

"Wait, a second tertiary? Is that even possible?"

"Not as far as I know" I said earnestly. I had played the game from closed beta to the servers disconnected on the last night, and there were definitely not multiple tertiaries at any point. Besides, would they both be tertiaries? Wouldn't one of them be a fourthary? Quartary? Quaternary?

"First time I've seen either" said the good doctor. "Also, his third tertiary is Violet, utility and control."

"Now I know you are pulling my leg!"

"I have my doubts as well" I conceded. On the other hand, it was my dream, so if anyone got to break the rules, it made sense that it would be me. Then again, how do we know that we are not all always living in our own dream? That there even is a real world? I had taken it for granted all my life, and look where it brought me.

"Dude, I'm so happy I found you in time!" she said sincerely. There was not a trace of envy in her voice. "This is super awesome. But of course you are aware of the problem if you should choose to use all those colors."

"Uh, leveling?"

"Yes. Power progression. You can take one Ability per Color per level. Actually, that is how levels are defined: When you reach the Color energy level to gain another ability, that's the definition of power level. But the more Abilities you take, the slower your power progression. Someone who takes two Abilities per level, every level, will progress at half speed compared to a single-color. I don't think anyone has ever taken three Abilities per level over any length of time, although a few have done it once, typically to get a travel Ability. I can't even imagine how slowly you would level if you took five at once!"

"It would be kind of a waste not to, though" I said. "Especially in the beginning, when you need every Ability you can get just to stay out of hospital."

"Yes, you would be the world's most powerful newbie, but that also means you would be a newbie forever!"

"Perhaps I should take that as my hero name" I mused. "The Eternal Newbie! It has a nice ring to it..."

"It has a horrible ring to it! You would defeat baddies by making them laugh till they can't stand!"

"That sounds like the best way to defeat anyone" I said. "Eternal Newbie it is, then!"

"You've got quite a handful there" said Dr Stephenson. "Well, I'll leave him in your hands. Make sure to return for the patch!"

"I'll take good care of him, I promise!" she said with a grin. Then she threw me over her shoulder and fell into the sky.

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We were flying through the sky. Or rather, Silver Star Girl was flying through the sky, while I was hanging over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. It was way too far down. Rooftops were down there, but even those were too far down for comfort.

"I am torn" declared Silver Star Girl. "On one hand, I would LOVE to see a level 1 hero with five Abilities. It would be awesome! And hilarious! Imagine the faces of fledgling gangsters who think they have you surrounded, only to find you packed full with superpowers like a whole team! I'd just love to see the look on their faces."

"We could have just taken the portal" I pointed out. "They are free. There was one to the subway exit not too far from the Bureau office."

"On the other hand, it is kind of pitiful to still be level 1 after a week. Still be level 2 after a month, or at best level 3. Still doing newbie tasks after a year. It would be kind of painful to watch."

"I'm only looking to survive" I pointed out, still talking about the portals. This mode of transportation was not safe at all.

"Hey, you clawed your way back out of the grave once" she said cheerfully. "Well, I may have given you a hand, but still. You have five colors and the luck of the Irish. You'll be fine."

"I'm not actually Irish, you know."

"You never know! Those guys went everywhere."

"I think you mean the Vikings. I actually have some Scandinavian blood, believe it or not."

"Use it carefully. There's actually a guy in our alliance called The Final Viking. Evidently The Last Viking was taken, although I've never heard of him. Or her. The Hero Name Registry is supposedly international, you know. Although the Chinese opted out. But their names are probably all written in Kanji anyway. You know, those hieroglyph thingies."

"Hanzi. They are called Hanzi. And hieroglyphs are Egyptian."

"I know that! The Egyptian thing. But I mean, they are not letters. And they are called Kanji. There's one guy I know, Thunder Dragon Youth, he has a Kanji on his chest. On the costume, I mean. I haven't seen his chest without it, unfortunately. He told me what it was called. It was the Kanji for dragon, he said."

"Kanji is Japanese, Hanzi is Chinese."

"They look the same to me."

"Well, English and French probably look the same to them."

"English and French are actually surprisingly similar! Did you know the French say Mardi Gras, just like us? They just pronounce it a bit weird."

"I can imagine." At this point I had pretty much given up.

"So anyway, are you really going to take a lot of Abilities simultaneously?"

"That's my plan. I don't particularly mind doing newbie tasks over and over. One of my greatest superpowers is immunity to boredom. But at the very least I am taking Levitate as soon as I can, so I don't fall screaming to my death when accidentally drop me."

"Relax, we're almost there" she said and patted my bottom.

"Hey, that's sexual harassment!" I protested.

"It would be" she said blandly, "if you were the girl and I the boy. But we are not, so it isn't."

"That's not making things better!"

"Here we are now." We slid downward, much too fast for comfort, but still she somehow managed to land lightly. "With my gravity control, I could carry you all day, but you probably want to display some scraps of dignity when you register."

"That may be hard with you around."

"I know things can be hard with me around" she said. I did not dignify that with a snappy comeback. Instead I paraded in the most dignified manner my rubbery legs allowed, to the Hero Registration Office.

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The Hero Registration Officer scanned my face, my eyes and my fingerprints, then made an online check for my medical records, as Dr Stephenson had predicted. The young lady's mouth fell open. So it wasn't just me! "This can't be right!" she said out loud.

"Tell me about it" I said. "I'd like a second opinion."

She took me seriously, somewhat to my surprise. She placed a call, then another. Soon a guy came to the office where I and Silver Star Girl was with Registration Officer Doris. Seriously, that was her name tag. Doris. The guy led us through a familiar corridor, to the spacious realm of Lady Bluestar, Color City's foremost expert on magic.

"Greetings, young man. I have heard some quite interesting rumors about you. Would you consent to a magical test? It is a white spell, harmless and painless, purely for information gathering."

"I see no reason to distrust the foremost of Color City's magi."

"Well then." She lifted her hand, drawing a sigil in the air, and a wave of white light flowed from her hand and washed over me. I felt the slightest chill, as if I passed through a patch of autumn mist, and then it was gone. The lady in blue pursed her mouth. "Well, well. That was unusual. Quite unusual. Not only is it true that you have access to five colors, but there is something unusual about your very core. Not infernal nor celestial ... are you perhaps a time traveller?"

"I wish I knew, Lady. I was stabbed to death - or so I thought - back on an Earth where there were no superheroes except in fantasy. Kind of like this world before the Colorado Event. Then I woke up here, thanks to that young lady, evidently. I have no idea how much time has passed in the meantime, or even whether this world is real, or a dream, or my afterlife."

"If it is a dream to you, know that it is not to us" she said calmly. I was probably not the first person she met thinking the world was a dream. Excessive magical powers can do things to those who lack sufficient suppleness of sanity, I suspected.

"Do you have any advice for me, queen of the magi? Regarding my colors and such, I mean."

"Follow your heart. No one else knows why you came to this world and this time."

Well, that was as generic as it could get. But the truth was that my heart had already made its choice, and I could probably not have stopped it even if I had tried.

I already had Regeneration - a defensive ability. It had activated on its own to bring me back from the brink of death. So no more Green Abilities were available this round. I'd dearly love to Armor of Light from White, an Ability that absorbs part of incoming damage and distributes it as healing to self and other, while draining health from the attacker in proportion to the attack. It is the fundamental Ability of the Light-powered Paladin type, and together with Regeneration it would make me about as viable as possible for a level 1. Having already almost (or possibly more than almost) died once today, I rather would very much like to be on the safest possible side next time I was heroing. But that left only Silver for attacks, unless I went with a baseball bat or something. Not that I had any money to buy baseball bats with.

Luckily, the Silver offensive branch did have some ranged attacks. Just what the doctor ordered! OK, he did not, but if he had been a psychiatrist he would. I was really not in the mental framework for unnecessary close-up fighting right now after what had happened last time. Gravity Throw was a hybrid offense / control Ability that simply altered the angle of gravity, causing it to suddenly, briefly, pull a person from behind instead of from below. Unless you were quite well prepared for the attack, or a trained acrobat, or had some kind of knockback defense of your own, you would be thrown violently backward and your posterior would meet the ground painfully somewhere between one and five yards away, by default. At higher levels the chance of a longer throw increased, and it became harder to resist. Sooner or later they would hopefully get the message and stay down.

Violet is quite a grab bag of diverse Abilities. I could go for a small summon to assist me, but Dr Stephenson had warned me that summoning was not for amateurs. I was going to take his word for it, but I definitely would make an appointment with Lady Bluestar here to take Summoning 101, because it would be incredibly useful. I had no plans to summon demons or anything like that, but even summoning a baseball bat would have come in handy right now. I briefly wondered whether DC Comics existed in this world, because I'd love to be able to summon a baseball bat and a bunch of vampire bats and call myself Bat-man. But in the end, I went with the safe route and picked Combat Teleport, also known as Blink among players back when this was a game. It has short range but is an instant and can't be interrupted; it takes you out of traps and snares and removes negative status effects like slowdown. Obviously it wouldn't help against sleep or full stun powers, but these were unlikely at very low levels anyway.

Regeneration was automatic and required little energy, but the other Abilities would all require stamina. So I had little choice but to make my final pick Energy Pulse from the Yellow support branch. Energy Pulse restores the energy of the user and nearby allies, and is one of the most popular low-level support Abilities for teams. But even if I was alone, it would be invaluable in a long fight. In fact, the main problem would probably be its cooldown time. I would have to use it tactically, waiting until I was exhausted. That would take a bit of nerve, but with four Abilities I was as prepared as I could hope to be.

I now had taken 5 Abilities, and still did not have a travel power. On top of that, Silver Star Girl's prediction was going to be fulfilled: I would level up at one fifth the speed of a single-color hero, at least for my first level. And I had a feeling that I was going to want five Abilities for my next level too: I felt woefully inadequate. But this was the best I could do. Time to complete my hero registration and get a costume.

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"You sure don't hold back" said Silver Star Girl as we were on our way back to the Hero Registration Office. "Such a greedy, greedy boy. You want it all, don't you." She sounded more teasing than scolding, but we both knew the price I would have to pay for taking five Abilities at once.

"More cautious than greedy" I said. "I can't count on you to pull me back from the brink of death every time, now can I?"

"I wouldn't mind, at least for a while" she said cheerfully. "But I won't need to, since you're going to get the hospital teleport patch as soon as you finish your registration."

"I know, but I really don't want it to get that far."

"It is totally normal" she assured me. "Everyone is wiped out occasionally. As a tank type, your job is mainly to make sure it is you who goes down first."

"I am not really fond of that stereotype. How about winning every time. How about not taking on challenges you can't win the first time you try."

"That's the plan. Can win and do win are just not the same. Mistakes are made. Surprises happen. Remember, the baddies are in much the same situation as us. We try to get the drop on them, but they also try to get the drop on us. Usually, our superior information gathering will allow us to get a better estimate of them, but there are limits to how far you can stretch that advantage before it breaks. Time is often essential, and that means you grab whatever team you can put together and hope for the best."

At the Hero Registration Office, I got my temporary Hero Card, with my metrics encoded but without my photo and hero name. Those would be added after I visited the Colorful Costumes.

Despite the name of the shop, you could actually get costumes with pretty drab coloring, like black or brown. But the Hero Registration Act forbids fighting in plainclothes except in "unplanned defense of self or others". So no jeans and T-shirt costume, or suit and tie. Your appearance should clearly indicate that you are a superpowered individual. Often a hero's costume would be colored according to his or her actual Colors of power.

"I guess that would make me Rainbow Man?" I mused out loud.

"Pretty sure that is taken. Also, that's sooo gay."

"Did you just assume my sexual orientation?"

"I'm not even sure you've ever been to a sexual orientation." She grinned. "If you come home with me afterwards, maybe my boyfriend and my girlfriend and I can teach you something." Then more serious: "Don't become a champion for LGBTQ+ rights unless you're really serious about it. Because if you waver, **both** sides will hate you afterwards. And you shouldn't get yourself hated by all unless your very soul is in the balance."

"OK, fine. How about Multicolored Man? Or if that's taken, Multicolored Guy? Captain Multicolor?"

"I saw a guy on TV once named Capitan Tricolore. You have to be pretty desperate for the name to go with that many misspellings."

"Perhaps he was French?"

"Or perhaps he had dyslexia or something. Anyway, I think your ideas are too bland. You should have something more fancy. After all, you are special."

"It's not like I went to special school or anything."

"So, Iridescent."

"What kind of decent?"

"Iridescent, don't guys use that word? Is this like when you say red instead of anything from pink to auburn?"

"I know perfectly well what pink is, I just don't wear it myself."

"Mauve? Do you know mauve?"

"That is neither here nor there! What I mean is, just because people know iridescent when they see it doesn't mean I should use it as a name. How can a person be iridescent anyway? I've never seen anyone with that color."

"You really don't know what it means! It is not a color!"

"I knew that!"

"It means that you show different colors over time or depending on the angle, like soap bubbles or butterfly wings."

"I am not sure a tanking paladin type hero should be compared to soap bubbles and butterfly wings."

"What it means is that you use different powers over time or depending on the circumstance. It is a very precise description of you actually. Plus, it is a beautiful word that describes beautiful things."

"If it describes something beautiful, perhaps we should reserve it for a woman. Especially with the butterfly wings."

"Hey, you there! We're looking for something iridescent for my friend here. That's going to be his hero name, so if you don't have it you better start making it."

"No butterfly wings!" I added. At least I would have that small victory.

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"Maybe I should go with 'Father of Pearl' instead" I muttered. Amazingly, they had managed to come up with an iridescent costume, looking vaguely armor like with a flak jacket and matching leg parts, surprisingly comfortable yet sturdy boots, gloves and even a half helmet with a visor that at the moment was simply see-through, but had some built in tech that would allow night vision and a heads-up display. There were also ear buds to defend against sonic attacks and for communication, although neither the comm link nor the visor display were active yet.

"Iridescent it is" said Silver Star Girl firmly. "It is short, but packed with symbolism. If anyone does not know what it means yet, they will learn. Oh yes, they will learn. When you reach level 60 - in as many years, if you continue to pick every Ability you can - there will not be a soul on or near Earth who does not know your name. Alien invasion fleets will shudder at your name: Where shall we invade today? Anywhere, as long as it is far from Earth! Iridescent is there! He'd wipe out our fleet in a moment!"

"OK, that's pretty optimistic."

"Hey, you looked like you could need the encouragement. I'd do anything to encourage you."

"Anything?"

"Except sex."

We returned to Hero Registration, and the lady finished my Hero Card. She even spelled Iridescent right, and without asking or hesitating. Do women really go around thinking of things like that during their days? That's kind of disturbing. Imagine that inner monologue. "Rose gold, pink, mauve, auburn, iridescent, azure, turquoise, navy..." How can you even hold down a job, while simultaneously thinking things like that.

"When you and I both press our thumbs to this plate, your Hero Account will be activated. In addition to your Hero Card, this will activate your HUD display and your communications plug. Incidentally, these can be upgraded to implants at Anima Memorial Hospital for a fee. Speaking of which, your Hero Card will of course function as a debit or credit card, depending on your account at the time. Magically enhanced nano-circuitry will record details of your missions, including all Color use. And yes, that includes Color use outside of sanctioned mission tasks. The data will be used in aggregate to keep track of your Power Progression and to calculate your Reputation Points. As you know, RP is the currency of the Hero Community. Hero-centered shops and of course the hospital conducts the transactions directly in RP, while for ordinary shops the RPs are exchanged for ordinary currency by the Bureau. No transaction fees should be added for your use. Please report to us without undue delay if you find shops that add special fees or restrict shopping for heroes. This is a crime against the Superhero Registration Act and could imply ties to antisocial organizations."

"Understood."

"Detailed data from your card's registrations are only available to you, and to law enforcement with a court order. You are under no obligation to reveal detailed data to anyone else under any circumstances, and should report to the Bureau any attempts at gaining access to your personal data."

"Thank you."

"Then, activate when ready."

I pressed my thumb to the plate, and there was a brief flickering on my visor. ACTIVATED it read before fading. Almost at the same time, a pleasant female voice in my earplug also said ACTIVATED. So I guess I was now an active Hero?

"Please proceed immediately to Anima Memorial Hospital to get your hospital teleport patch. This will monitor your vital signs and teleport you to the hospital if needed or upon your request if you are wounded. The surgery is quick and painless and the fee is paid by the Bureau, so there is no reason to delay."

"I will do so immediately."

"I will see to it that he does" said Silver Star Girl. And she did. I kind of wished I had taken Levitate after all. At least I had no lunch to lose.

Chapter 2

I could not say whether Silver Star Girl's girlfriend was girlfriend like a boyfriend or just a girl friend. She did have her own bedroom, but that doesn't necessarily mean they didn't do things. They didn't while I was there though, and I did not ask. I did learn some other things however: All three of them were heroes, and the apartment they rented was one of many reserved for the hero population.

The boyfriend was a Fire Brawler with a Yellow secondary, which gave him the great idea to name himself "Heat and Run". He wasn't too proud of that by now, but it wasn't bad enough to apply for a name change. Besides, it is hard to find a good name for a Fire Brawler. They are a bit dime a dozen in that they tend to do the same thing, so having a secondary is your best chance to distinguish yourself.

The girlfriend was a Martial Arts Brawler called Nekomimi Sis. I could suddenly guess where Silver had been introduced to Dragon Kanji Guy. She was wearing a black catgirl costume with spiky metal knuckles, and her Yellow primary gave her both defense and attacks. "When my Abilities kick in, most baddies just slow to a crawl. It feels almost unfair." I realized I had severely underrated yellow as a primary. Of course, primaries always had a defense or offense branch, often both. My Yellow was a tertiary and had neither defense nor offense, so I couldn't use it that way. Still, having two colors with defense and two with offense was just crazy, so I couldn't exactly envy her. But I did not get the impression that she envied me either.

SSG told the other two about my unique abilities, but we agreed to not announce this to everyone else right away. SSG wanted to play a harmless prank by setting me up with a small team of fellow newbies and not telling them about my ridiculous number of Abilities, just my Armor of Light and Gravity Throw, until after the fighting had begun. I should try to hide my other Abilities until I needed them, and see what happened. I'd record it with my gear, as best I could, and then we could have fun looking at it later.

"Fine, but I'm totally blaming you if they get mad at me" I said.

"Please do! That just makes it even better. Tell them I said I can't wait to see their faces. Although, to be honest, there is another reason as well." She looked at me with a more serious face. "I'm thinking of you, too. If they learned that you have five Abilities at level 1, they would expect you to carry most of the weight. But even if you are the most Colorful man alive, you're still a green newbie showing up for your first day at work. If they expect you to be a superhero's superhero and do all the work, you'll go to the hospital at the first mob. Then they'll get demoralized or either run for the door or get defeated too. No, you need to let everyone do their part until you get into it. Just try to not let any of them get hospitalized unless they do something stupid. They probably will, but so will you, only more so. So don't just stand there and watch someone get beaten up, but don't be the guy who gets beaten up while everybody else just stand there either. OK?"

"OK, but one question: Wouldn't it be easier for all involved if I did a solo task as my first? Not needing to hide anything, not needing to rely on people I don't know, and facing a lot less opponents and a lot less chaos and people milling around?"

"That might work too, but what's the fun in that?"

* * *

I woke up on an unfamiliar couch. It did not take long, however, before I remembered everything. How I had died, or something pretty close to it, and woke up in the world of the recently closed-down online superhero game where I had spent so much of my youth. And today I was about to enter my first fight as the superhero Iridescent. As hard as it was to believe, this was it. I had half expected to wake up in my own bed, or more likely in a hospital in my own hometown, in my own world. If I woke up at all. I had been a bit nervous about that. But eventually I fell asleep and slept like a log. I did not recall any dreams at all. That could be because this was a dream in itself. Or perhaps I was now a computer program and just went into hibernation mode during the night. Or perhaps people don't dream in the afterlife, what did I know? I wasn't exactly a theologian, not that I could remember any theologian claiming that you would wake up in a computer game after you died, if you played it long enough while you were alive. Although I would not be surprised if there was someone out there saying that. Something like "the soul after death will attempt to create the world in which its mind lived before death" or something similar. It just so happens that unlike most people, I didn't live more than strictly necessary in the so-called Real Life...

An hour later, Silver Star Girl took me to a warehouse district. She had the decency to put me down before we came into view of the house where the task was to take place, and my legs were not even shaking anymore when we walked up to the three young heroes who were already waiting outside. According to SSG, it was a newbie team formed from her Alliance, two level 1 heroes and one level 2. Normally you'd do the task of the one with the highest level, but with three of us being level 1, we were doing an easier task first. Both of the other newbies had done another mission task before, so I was the new kid on the block.

"Hello everyone!" intoned my guide and personal airplane. "This is Iridescent, who just joined the hero community yesterday. He is brand new to this and only discovered his Colors after being brutally attacked by a criminal, so he has no training and is understandably a bit nervous about this whole thing. But he has volunteered to be a hero and protect our city, and our world, from danger. So please go easy on him and try to not get him sent to hospital by the first mob, OK?"

"No problem!" said a girl in green. Judging from the color, she was probably a healer support class or regenerating tank, but it is not strictly mandatory to color code your uniform, so I couldn't be sure. She continued: "This is a level 1 task. It is my second, and with a little luck I may level up after this one. But we also have a level 2 with us, so this should be piece of cake. As long as we don't fight more than one group at a time."

"They won't know what hit them!" said the guy beside her. He was wearing red and light blue. Fire and ice powers maybe?

Silver Star Girl discreetly tapped her glasses, and I took the hint and activated team display on my visor. I could now see the name, level, type, health and energy of each team member. The green girl was indeed Support Healer, just like I was classified as Tank Paladin. The boy was Ranged Fire, and the second girl was Brawler Weapons. She was wearing a cudgel on each hip and had a yellow costume, so probably used attack speed or strength. Judging from the quite moderate size of her weapons, probably speed. I could get up their colors by zooming in on each of them, but not from the default view. Curious, I zoomed in on myself and saw my colors listed as White, Green and Silver in order of primary, secondary and tertiary. The display simply wasn't programmed for the possibility that someone could have more than three Colors. Of course not. So they wouldn't know even if they looked at that level.

When I say "girl" and "boy", I mean it almost literally. They were all younger than me, seeming to be recently out of high school. I seemed to remember that the official starting age to register as a hero was 18, although the character creator allowed you to make characters that looked even younger. Their backstory however would have to be that they were at least 18. No jailbait allowed. But in my eyes, these kids were pretty close. If they weren't 18, they were definitely no more than 19. And yet they looked much more confident than I felt.

"Iridescent, you'll be our main tank today" said Pine Relief, the Healer. "We'll try to be careful and not engage too many, but if you would kindly do the tanking, I'll keep you in good health. Those who don't have defensive powers yet, wait till he has aggro, and only engage one enemy at a time. Take that enemy down as fast as possible, then step back to see if anyone follows. In that case, try to evade and say 'ON ME' so the tank can get their attention. This is pretty basic stuff that you have seen in movies a hundred times, but we're all green here and we're on our own without a mentor, so we stick with the basics."

"My attack is Gravity Throw" I said. "It has decent range, so you don't need to be right next to me for me to grab aggro. Just yell out and I'll throw them once or twice, that should get their attention."

"That's awesome! This is like the best team ever!" said Mace Dervish Girl. She had actually needed to add 'Girl' to her name? There was already a Mace Dervish? Well, the registry was international, but still.

"I'll stay back a bit and to the side, assisting Dervish" said Azurefire. I found myself wondering if his fire really was azure, or if that referred to his ice power. Probably the latter, but unnatural colors were also pretty common.

"This is going to be a walk in the park!" said Mace Dervish Girl. "Let's get going! They won't know what hit them!"

"Right" I said. "They'll probably think it is a cudgel, not a mace." As far as I was concerned, it was totally a cudgel.

"OK, let's do this" said Pine Relief.

"See you later!" said Silver Star Girl, grinning way too much as I looked at her one last time before going to my possible doom. I activated my Armor of Light aura, and a soft white light started to surround me. Then, as the designated tank, I stepped through the door first.

* * *

As soon as I stepped into the twilight of the warehouse, half a dozen red flags appeared on my heads-up display. The Hooligan gang is pretty easy to recognize by their uniform, so the threat recognition software in my visor was not really necessary this time, but it did make them easier to see for the seconds where my eyes adjusted to the dimmer light. Well, that's what you get for doing these tasks during daylight hours. Heroing is not usually a nine to five job, but this particular task was set fairly early in the day. Supposedly the Hooligans were using this warehouse to hide something, and would be moving it soon unless we intervened.

"It's a cape!" said one of the guys. "Stop him!" I did not actually have a cape, but that is their nickname for us, since capes are pretty common among heroes. Obviously they did not want to call us heroes, since that meant they were villains by default, rather than rebels, resistance fighters or whatever they thought of themselves. I could see them more clearly now. Two of them held baseball bats, the others knives. No, not all of them: One of them held a handgun! That was not a sight I liked to see, although it was not unexpected. Silver Star Girl had assured me that I was a lot sturdier now than I had used to be in my civilian days, but I still did not feel too sure of my survival if someone actually shot me. So, better not let him. I focused, and felt the energy swirl around my hand before it jumped out and threw the gun-toting thug backward. So far, so good! The Hooligans with the handguns are team leaders, so attacking them first can demoralize the group. But it is also a good way to get everyone in the group to attack you. I guess it is not good for your criminal career to just stand around and look when someone sends your team leader flying. So naturally they were all rushing toward me.

"Go get'em, Paladin!" said Pine Relief. So she had also entered. I had been focused on the gang in front of me. Speaking of which, I better step forward to meet them, much as my legs wanted to turn and run. The others on the team did not have any kind of defensive power at all, so needed to stand back.

"You're gonna regret this!" said the pistol guy, getting to his feet. I already kind of did, but as the song says: *We do what we must because we can, for the good of all of us, except the ones who are dead.* Which in this case was me, and even that was open to debate. I did not feel particularly dead when the first of them hit me with a baseball bat. Still, pistol is a bigger problem. I focused on the pistol guy and he was thrown backward again, landed hard on his butt and

slid another couple yards after that. Nice. As the second baseball bat came toward me overhead, I hit the wielder with a throw as well. Cooldown is pretty short on this attack, but it drains energy, so that was going to become a problem if I was going to use it continually. Still, I would rather do that than get hit with baseball bats and stabbed with knives. The first baseball bat had hit my shoulder disturbingly close to my neck, and it hurt. The Hooligan had probably aimed for my head. An attack like that could easily disorient me, making it hard for me to fight back. Even as it was, it did not feel too good. On a critical hit, I suppose it could knock me out, although my defensive aura should normally prevent that.

"Son of a bitch!" said the first baseball guy. He wasn't entirely wrong about that, my mom was a pious woman but tended to forgive our trespasses only after teaching us a painful, humiliating lesson, to the point where I often wondered which one of us needed to forgive the other. Still, she never tried to bash my head in with a baseball bat. I sent him too flying. One of the knife guys swung at me, only hitting my arm but that was enough to give me a nice gash. My costume was self-repairing, and so was I to some degree, but it still hurt. I sent him too flying, but there were two more knife guys left, and their leader was already on his feet again and aiming his gun at me. He had the good sense to not move closer, but that meant he had less chance of hitting me. Even so, I sent him flying again. A beautiful sight each time. But it also gave the two nearest thugs the time needed to stab at me.

"He's got them" said our healer and tentative leader, Pine Relief.

"Finally!" Mace Dervish Girl spun into motion, and she was already fast at level 1. Not really super fast, if you ask me, but faster than the thugs at least, and definitely faster than me too. The Hooligan swiping at me from my left suddenly found himself hit with a not particularly big cudgel, but a particularly fast one, and as our high school teacher had struggled to tell us, increasing the speed of a moving object added much more energy to it than increasing the mass. So yeah, that thing got to hurt. And if that was not enough, suddenly the air around him began to fog up and his clothes started to crinkle with ice. "Igotthis" said the girl, swinging her second weapon at the hapless gangster. Even her speech was sped up. Somehow I found that amusing. The knife guy did not. He had no time to change his target before the flurry of blows sent him to the floor, where he remained.

The tide had turned. The two damage dealers on our team could dish out quite a bit more hurt than I could; even my one attack power was only part damage dealer, part control power to keep the target from attacking, and part maneuvering to create distance and reduce the number of melee attacks.

"Oh no you don't!" That was our only level 2 hero, Azurefire. The handgun guy had managed to get to his feet again, evidently they are tougher or at least better trained than the others. But before I could send him tumbling one more time, a bright blue flame blossomed around him. It lasted only for a heartbeat, but it was enough to set his clothes and hair on fire, and he screamed. Whoa, that's got to hurt. Smoke rose from all over his clothes, and I was pretty sure I had seen briefly smaller yellow flames inside the blue. OK, so he really did have blue fire. I had seen that in the physics lab once, I think it was hydrogen that was set on fire? Or was that another time? It was a clear blue flame, not quite transparent but more so than a normal flame. This was like that.

Thanks to the distraction, I was too late to notice the knife stabbing me in the side. Again. Memories from the night before I came to this world flooded my brain, and my hands were suddenly slick with cold sweat. But this time, the knife did not go so deep. It cut through my skin, and it hurt, but it did not sink in to the hilt. And then two cudgels hit him in quick succession, and he stumbled backwards. A cloud of white breath came from his mouth, the knife clattered on the floor, and the cudgels hit him again. One, two. He stumbled and fell.

The third knife guy panicked and ran, away from us, and away from the door. This was not good: He might alert the rest of the bandits in the building, and we could not hold off all of them at once. I sent him flying on his stomach, and Azurefire started freezing him down. I felt a gentle warmth flow over me as Pine Relief healed me back to full health. I had started regenerating as soon as I first took damage, but this was another thing entirely, erasing all damage in a heartbeat. I managed to send one of the two bat goons sailing away from me and almost dodged the other, taking only a strafe hit on my shoulder.

"I got the runner" said Azurefire. "Help the paladin." The knifeman who had tried to get away was crawling on his hands and knees, shivering uncontrollably.

"Gotit!" Dervish Girl had gotten behind the baseball bat guy still on his feet, and he had no chance to protect himself. He was down before he had time to turn around, and he stayed down. This girl dished out some serious hurt! Despite my multitude of Abilities, I definitely felt like the weakest link in the chain here. The would-be runner, now crawler, finally collapsed. The gunman had desperately tried to remove his burning clothes and the scenario was turning R-rated pretty quickly. The gun was long forgotten, and my only concern about him was that he might try to run away. Luckily he was close to the wall now. I hit him with one more Gravity Throw, and he hit the wall and slid down it. Our resident weaponized dervish took care of the last standing bandit, then ran around sticking small thumbtacks in the prone forms: Tiny teleport devices that would send them to the prison hospital, where a healthy mixture of guards and physicians would take care of them.

Looking at the team display, I was the most tired of us, having used my attack power freely to defend myself. The two damage dealers were somewhat less tired, despite having done much more damage. And our healer was not really tired at all, having cast only one modest heal. Not that I had needed anything more. This had gone much better than I feared

or even expected. The final glancing blow still hurt faintly, but the pain was fading even as I probed it. There was no point in our Support heroine healing it, and to her credit she did not even pretend to.

"Good job everyone" she said. "This is not too bad, is it, Iridescent?" This was the first time any of them called me by my hero name rather than title. "Let's sit down and get our breath back before the next group." Not that she needed to get anything back, but she was talking about the team as a whole. I sat down on a crate, while the other two sat down on the floor. "I notice that you use your attacks not only to hold aggro and stop runners, but also to minimize incoming damage. That worked well enough with this group, and probably will if we can avoid runners and patrols. But I am always here for you. Even if you take twice as much damage as this, three times as much, four times as much, I can easily heal you back to full health. You barely got scratched this time. But if you run out of energy, your aura will falter and you will be in trouble, and so will we. So if we get into a larger fight, be sure to ration your energy."

"Don't worry, I won't run out of energy as easily as it looks like" I said. I wasn't going to use my two hidden colors until they were necessary, but I felt like I could say this much.

"Well, for groups this size it worked really well" she admitted. "Just keep in mind if we get adds: I am here behind you and I am not leaving you even if all other hope seems lost."

"Thank you" I said. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Six Hooligans down" said Azurefire cheerfully. "Something like 60 left. I bet you girls are both going to level up when we're through. Probably not Iridescent though, since it is his first task and besides, he's dual."

"Oh, he is more than dual" said Pine Relief casually.

* * *

Perhaps Silver Star Girl would get a kick out of seeing the confusion on the faces of the two damage dealers on our team, but I think she would have preferred the expression on my face. I must have looked like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, because our healer felt the need to actually comfort me:

"I don't blame you for not telling us right away, Iridescent. Actually, I bet your friends told you not to? It is your first mission task as a hero, and you are our only tanker. It is better that we underestimate you and take a bit longer time, than overestimate you and the whole team goes to the hospital. I think we should continue to pull small groups whenever possible. Not only does it make it easier on the tank, it also makes it easier to control the battlefield and stop runners. So your thinking is correct, but I hope you will find you can trust us enough to tell us the truth. It is not like we couldn't check it on the display, it is not classified information."

"I guess not" I said sheepishly.

"Although I am not surprised the others did not notice, either. As a pure Green, I am kind of sensitive to that kind of energy, so as soon as you started taking damage, I could sense your Regeneration kicking in and starting to mend your wounds."

"He's a Green?" said Mace Dervish Girl, confused. "But that's a White aura, right?"

"He is a White Paladin with Green secondary, and he took Regeneration from that secondary. His attack or control Ability is actually from his tertiary. That makes sense, if you are willing to live with the slow power progression. Regeneration is not a good tanking Ability alone, since it is useless against alpha strikes. But as soon as you have some damage reduction, it comes in very handy, especially during long battles since it works continuously and takes very little energy."

"I see! So you can block part of the damage with Armor of Light, and heal the rest with Regeneration!"

"It is a pretty good strategy for long battles without a healer. But in this case, it just leaves me standing there watching as he heals himself."

"If it were up to me, I would not get hurt in the first place" I pointed out. "I mean, it hurts. I am sure all of you have been hurt at some point in your life. It is not something you like. Well, unless you're a masochist perhaps, but I'm not."

"That is understandable. I am not saying you should take a lot of damage so I don't get bored! But as the saying goes: Pain is temporary, glory is forever. And I am concerned about your energy use. If we got a patrol adding while we were at the end of this fight, you might have run out of energy before we finished them off. You don't just need energy for maintaining that shield aura, but also for attacks to grab back aggro and stop runners."

"In that case" I pointed out, "I would use Energy Pulse to restore our energy. Of course gathering first for everyone who was low."

"An excellent strategy if we had a Yellow Support on the team" said Pine Relief. "Unfortunately the only Yellow we have is Dervish, who is offense / defense only."

"Yeah, and my Attack Speed actually drains energy faster, so I would not mind having Energy Pulse. But alas, there are only two branches per color per person."

"I know" I said. "I was talking about me. My Energy Pulse."

OK, that was the Kodak moment. And confusingly, even Pine Relief stared at me like I'd grown an extra head, or at least a third eye.

"I don't think I got that right" said Azurefire. "Your Energy Pulse?"

"Yes. My second tertiary is Yellow. Or is that quaternary? Tertiary? I am not sure what it is called. I think I may be the only person who has it."

"You must be kidding!"

"Iridescent" said Pine Relief, "if you really had Energy Pulse, why didn't you say so after the fight?"

"Well, you told us to sit down. And in that case we don't need it."

She shook her head. "OK. I've never heard of such a thing, but I take your word for it. It is a bit hard to trust someone who hides this from his teammates, but I guess again this is something your friends put you up to."

"Silver Star Girl. She said if I revealed that I have five Colors, the rest of you would just leave me to fight alone."

"FIVE???"

"The fifth is Violet, but I only have Blink. I mean, Combat Teleport. Dr Stephenson and Lady Bluestar said it was too early for me to do summoning."

"You have five Colors and Lady Bluestar is giving you personal advice?"

"Sorry if this sounds weird. It is to me too. Seriously. I just woke up here with five Colors, I have never had that before."

"OK. OK. Both of those Abilities have cooldown, not sure how long it is for Combat Teleport, but Energy Pulse at least is long enough that you should save it for long fights or instead of downtime between fights. Speaking of which, looks like we're all fully rested. Let's move on, team."

* * *

This hadn't gone quite as well as I hoped. I had the distinct impression that my teammates thought I was bluffing, or else had lost my sanity. Claiming to have five Colors here must be something like someone in Real Life - in my old world - claiming they could fly or run faster than a speeding car. Or perhaps both, give that I claimed **two** extra power pools.

So when we found six more Hooligans defending a choke point, I held up my hand. "Wait here, let me try a surprise move. You can move in after I get their attention." I had tried Blink right after I learned it, but not after that. Still, I thought this should work. I folded my hands, concentrated, and the world blinked. Suddenly I was standing beside the Team Leader, the guy with the handgun. I swiveled in his direction, and brought my folded hands up as hard and as fast as I dared, hitting his arm. The gun flew from his hand and clattered to the floor a good distance away. "Not so tough without that, are you?" I used Gravity Throw to slam him into the two goons standing next to him, then spun around and threw one who was just lifting his knife against me. They were still lined up so nicely that I got him sprawled on top of another guy. This gave me room to run over to the handgun and kick it over to the rest of my team. "Take care of this thing, will you? They kind of hurt." Then I turned and grinned as best I could at the still surprised Hooligans. "So who is next?" One of them was still standing, with a baseball bat. These Hooligans might be slightly smarter than their in-game counterparts, but they weren't going to win any prizes for originality. I used Gravity Throw to slam him into a wall. "You guys can't even stand on your feet! You should have just stayed in bed. Well, you can do that in a prison cell."

Oh, I had their attention now. And then Azurefire set some pants on fire, and Dervish came in like a whirlwind bashing heads left and right. No one was holding back this time, and it was glorious. Rough, onesided, but definitely glorious. Probably not the word they would have chosen, but it's not like they would have held back if they got the jump on us either.

"That went well enough?" I said as Dervish planted the teleport thumbtacks on the slightly flattened Hooligans and they started to blink out one after another.

"Their faces!" gurgled Azurefire. "Did you see their faces? That was the most hilarious thing in existence! They had no idea what hit them. No idea!"

"Gather around for Energy Pulse?" I asked, and they did not let me ask twice. Even Pine Relief, who had not really had an excuse to heal anyone at all this time with our steamrolling the bad boys. I concentrated, using the sigil Lady Bluestar had taught me to unleash the energy, and a wave of yellow energy flowed through us all, washing away all tiredness.

"Better than coffee!" said Dervish. "But seriously, I can't believe this. How in the world did you get five Colors?"

"Don't ask me, I've never had that before" I said. "If I should make a guess, it would be because I come from a world where this is just a game. But even in the game there were only three."

"Game?" said Pine Relief. "There is a planet where this is a game?"

"More like an alternate dimension, I think. Or perhaps this is just a dream and I am not here at all."

Dervish squeezed my upper arm. "You feel real enough to me."

"Me too" I said. "But it shouldn't be possible."

"Common sense" said Azurefire: "If something happens, it is almost certainly possible."

"Still" said Pine Relief, "I can't believe you took five Abilities at level 1. Do you have any idea how long you will be level 1?"

"A week or two, I assume?"

"Yeah, probably. Dervish and I will probably be ready to level up after this, our second task, since we're both monochrome. Azure has two Colors but took only one at level 1 so as to get it over with quickly."

"I don't understand that" I admitted. "It is always good to have as many Abilities as possible, isn't it? The more tools in your toolbox, the better."

"Yes, but in this case, the more tools in your toolbox, the more it slows you down."

"Well it doesn't slow down each mission task, quite the opposite. You just get to do more of them."

"You make it sound like you enjoy newbie missions."

"I guess I do? They don't pay that much, but as long as I have food and a place to sleep, I'm fine."

"There's that, of course. But there is also the part where the rest of us are going to advance so much faster than you that we won't even be doing tasks in the same zone. You will have to join even new teams with strangers then see them disappear from your life."

"I just had a whole **world** disappear from my life. I'll survive, somehow. Or die trying."

Chapter 3

We finished our first quest as a team handily. After we found a strategy and learned how we worked together as a team, we pretty much plowed through the task. I'd love to say that this was because of my Abilities, but the truth is more prosaic. It was a level 1 task, one of us was level 2 and the rest were about to reach that level. In this world, there is no sudden increase in stats when you level up. Rather, you improve continually with every fight, with every use of your body and your Abilities. Level is just a measure of when you are ready to unlock a new Ability from your Colors. Each Color has its own Ability pool, starting with fairly basic but essential Abilities and moving on to more specialized, situational but also more powerful Abilities that you use more rarely but that can really make a difference when you use them. There are also less important Abilities that you can add when you feel like it, even long after they appear as a choice.

There was one more reason why the mission task was fairly easy for us: Newbie tasks, especially level 1, are intentionally easy. As the Superpowered Intelligence Agency gathers information on possible operations, it lays aside those that seem easiest, and reserve those for fledgling heroes. The tasks are also calibrated as if your team is slightly smaller than it is, to compensate for the lack of experience and high risk of mistakes. All this contributed to us pretty much bowling the bad guys over. There was only one boss in the entire task, and we took him out just like we took out everything else, despite him having a magic item, albeit a fairly weak one. We were tired but also elated, high on endorphins and success. We felt like we could do anything. Well, not right away, but the future was a highway stretching far, far into the unknown, with no roadblocks and no speed limit. And when Pine Relief asked if we wanted to come together again to do her follow-up mission task in the evening, we all agreed enthusiastically. And me not least, because she had included me. Even though I was a level below them now, even though I had hidden most of my Abilities from them, she had still included me. I loved her right there and then, in a platonic way (or at least mostly so, although she was a girl after all). It felt like through this fight against evil, we had all become friends.

My ecstasy died down a bit when everyone went home to clean up, eat and get some rest before the night's mission. I had no home to go to. Pine Relief was a second generation hero, still living with her parents in the outskirts of the city. The other two had moved to the city to attend the prestigious Hero Academy where they had met Pine and a lot of other friends I did not know. So they already had a lot of knowledge, although most of it was theory. Students at the Hero Academy did not assist in actually dangerous jobs, they only had basic training including lots of Physical Exercise and Power Practice, but they learned tactics and strategy and lore, probably much like what I and other gamers had picked up from playing the game for a while. It was a one-year study you could take as the last year of high school, or after high school, if you intended to become a professional hero and you were qualified. I was a bit jealous of them, not so much for the study itself - I did have a decade of hero practice in a sense myself - but of all the friends they had made. I knew I was unlikely to find any of my old friends here, no matter the truth of how I had gotten here. So yeah, my euphoria was rapidly diminishing by the time Silver Star Girl contacted me. She flew me back to her apartment where I got a shower and some food.

"You're going to stay in Memorial Plaza for a long time, you know" she said. It was the starter district, and yes I knew I was going to stay there longer than most. "You should probably hear with the Bureau about getting an apartment there. They have short-term, furnished apartments that you can rent, small and affordable. You are not the only hero coming from out of town, although most are not literally out of this world."

"I should do that as soon as possible."

"It is not like I don't like you and am itching to be rid of you. But I'm level 19 and that gap is not going to diminish for a long, long time if you keep taking every Ability you can at every level. That's a pretty big gap, and I'm going to spend a lot

of time in zones where you should not even fly low. So... It's not urgent, but you should look into it. I am sure you want the freedom to roam as well, go see the town, go to a restaurant with your friends, and feel safe in your neighborhood."

"I would love that." I did not hold it against her, although I was not quite as enthusiastic as my words. I would be all alone in a new world. More alone than I had ever been in my whole life. But I had new friends now, and I knew I could make friends, more and more friends as time went by. I was starting from scratch, but I had begun building a new future. "If you could drop me by Memorial Plaza again, I will look into getting a place today. If I am lucky, maybe there is one I can move into already tonight so I can go there after the mission tonight."

"I am pretty sure they always have some spares. People are moving out of there every day, you know."

I knew that. And I knew I was going to stay much longer than the rest. There was no way I could imagine myself not taking all the Abilities I could as early as possible. I was the only person in the world who could do this, it would be a crime against humanity to not make the most of it.

* * *

The Bureau did indeed have a service for settling the hero population, including fledgling heroes like myself. This makes sense given that normal landlords might be reluctant to rent to superpowered individuals who spend their days in violent conflict. The law that required shops to not discriminate against heroes did not extend to landlords, and wisely so in my opinion. Anyway, whether the apartments were owned by the government or by some company contracted by the government, they had some small but functional apartment fairly centrally in the Memorial Plaza district, within walking distance from Bureau offices and subway, so ideal for us who didn't have travel powers yet. I got myself a small apartment with a balcony on the third floor in a large block on the slope with a fairly good view of the nearby area, with the Plaza itself to the left a bit. It was good that I liked it, since I was likely to stay here much longer than the other tenants...

The whole apartment-hunting business took so much time that I did not have any time to spare to get to the mission task. Silver Star Girl, who had helped me so far, flew me part of the door.

"Well, I guess this is it for now" she said as she put me down. "Guess you won't crash on my couch again for a while."

"Probably not" I admitted. "I don't know what I should do without you, but from now on I will have to try."

"You'll be fine" she said. "And it's not like we'll be living worlds apart. You know how to contact me if you're in a pinch. Although if it's about getting from place to place, you can probably get there quicker with a cab."

"I am not going to forget you" I said.

"You better not" she said, and we hugged. I watched her sail off into the night sky, and only when I could no longer see her at all did I walk the last block to the office building we would investigate. Or more like invade.

* * *

"The tank arrives! We are saved!" Azurefire waved at me as I hurried to join the other three near the building.

"I don't see YOU needing a tank! You can just freeze everyone down and then set them on fire at your leisure."

"If I liked to run a lot, maybe. Also, those guns are bad for my health."

"Guns are bad for health" I agreed. "At least when used."

"I can tank now!" said Mace Dervish Girl. "I chose defense for my second Ability. Fast Evasion. Actually it adds speed to all my defensive movements, be it dodge or block or parry. But evading attacks is the best, of course. I am looking forward to testing it!"

"Looks like you have already prepared for a life without me."

Pine Relief sighed. "I told her to concentrate on offense for this level, since you should be able to tank for us just fine at least until we get to level 3. But she had her power progression all mapped out before she even graduated from the Academy."

"Besides, we could take on more people in the team, then we might need more than one tank" argued Dervish.

"That's not a bad idea!" said Azurefire. "I mean, we are kind of wasting a Paladin of the Light as the only tanker here. His combat healing is basically wasted."

"That's kind of true. I radiate healing energy every time I get hit, ironically."

"I am perfectly capable of healing everyone here and as long as we have a tank, there is no need to heal anyone else."

"I mean, if we got like four more people" said Azurefire.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it" said the healer. "Remember, this team was created as an alliance team. If we get any more newbies in the alliance, we will take them in if they want. If we catch up with someone in the alliance, they are also welcome. But we're not going to fill up the team with random people just so we can use up all our healing. That way lies madness."

"But what if there don't show up any more members in our alliance?"

"Then we continue to make Color City safer, one mission task at a time. We're a really well balanced team, and we're getting steadily better. Now, are we ready to give our Hooligan friends a small surprise?"

* * *

Apart from being an office instead of a warehouse, there was another difference that I noticed pretty quickly as I entered ahead of the team: The welcoming committee was larger, even though we were still the same four people. Not only was everyone inside supposed to be threat level 2, which was disturbing in itself as it meant they were tougher and more skilled. There were now two team leader type guys with shotgun instead of one, and three baseball fans instead of two, and you still had the three knife maniacs. Not a pretty sight. I particularly disliked the gun guys. I grew up with a lot of respect for guns. "Guns don't kill people, people with guns kill people." And these guys were people with guns. In the previous task, we had found a tactic to disarm the gun guy quickly. That wouldn't work when there were two of them. I reminded myself that I was no longer a normal person, but a superhero. The mere presence of the Color energies within my body strengthened me to some degree, even at level 1. Besides, I had a magical healer to back me up. (Well, once she came into the room at least.) But I still had that sinking feeling in my stomach. Old habits and all.

"This is a sanctioned hero operation. Please drop your weapons and cooperate peacefully." We were supposed to say that if they gave us the chance, so I did.

"In your dreams!" said one of the gun guys and raised his weapon. I did not need to raise my hand. Silver energies swirled and he was thrown on his back. Unfortunately the other one was less of a talker and more of a doer. I heard the sound from his weapon at about the same time I felt the impact in the left side of my chest. It was pretty far off center, but still, this couldn't possibly be good. It wasn't too good for him either, evidently, because he said something that would definitely not fit within the comics code, and dropped his gun.

Oh, right. The Colors are Extradimensional Principle Energies and their effects functionally indistinguishable from magic. And one effect of Armor of Light is to reflect part of the incoming damage back on whoever caused it. Distance is not a concern, certainly not a short distance like this. Not sure how it works with time bombs. Another effect is to convert some of the damage into healing, radiating to every ally nearby, including myself. Even so, most of the damage passes through, at least at level 1. And as you might expect, it hurts.

In movies, when you shoot someone, they just fall down dead, unless they are important characters who has to say some final words after they fall down but before they die. In reality, a bullet from a handgun won't throw you backward and it certainly won't kill you instantly unless it hits your brain stem, although a shot to the heart or the aorta or the large neck artery will end you in a matter of seconds too. (Remember that Newton guy, with the apple and the prism? He also discovered that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. If your gun packs enough power to throw the other guy backward, it will also throw you backward unless you brace yourself against something. Handguns don't pack that kind of power, and aren't very accurate unless you're up close.)

Also in movies, when you shoot a superhero, he'll grin and say "That tickles!" or "Are you done yet?" or some such. But I was not that kind of superhero. It hurt. It did not hurt horribly, but it definitely hurt a bit, and from the impact it felt like the bullet had definitely penetrated my skin and done some tissue damage at least. But it did not kill me. And it was not going to. Even now, with each heartbeat the wound was swirling with Green energy working to repair my body. But at level 1, that was a pretty slow process. Thank goodness this was just a small-caliber, low-energy handgun. As long as he did not get to keep shooting me, I should be fine in a few minutes. Until then, I had other things to do. I was surprised by how calm and rational my mind was even though I had just been shot. But that was the same thing even back on old Earth, when I was stabbed to death or nearly so. I had not had time to panic, and this certainly wasn't a good time for it either. Not when I had this amazing opportunity with all the ducks lined up in a row!

I teleported, but not next to the team leaders this time. Instead, I appeared to the left of the whole line of goons, and threw the closest back with a successful Gravity Throw, hitting three others along the way. "Hooligan bowling!" If this wasn't going to grab aggro, nothing was. But just to be sure, I repeated the trick as soon as the very short cooldown on the Ability allowed. Now most of the Hooligans were sprawled on the floor in a mess of arms and legs. "Like mating snakes!" I said out loud. I don't take a particular pleasure in insulting people, but it is my job as a tank, and it helps if they have shot me first.

A sweet, green wave of healing energy washed over me, and the bullet that had been lodged in my side clattered to the floor as my body restored itself without it. Indistinguishable from magic! Dr Pine Relief is in, evidently. And so were the rest of my team. As the first gun maniac clambered to his feet, he let out a comical squeal as smoke was pouring from his trousers. 'Pants on fire' was not just a children's rhyme when my friend Azurefire joined the fray. In fact, it was his favorite first move, since if you don't have powers of your own to put out the fire, you either need to drench your pants or get out of them as fast as possible, neither of which is good for combat morale, the more so if you are a team leader. Hard to do any shooting for the duration, either.

As the gangsters were getting to their feet, I bowled them over again. This was a lot more fun than having to actually get hit with bats and knives, but unfortunately it did not last. After the second time, they crawled out of the cluster

before getting up, so I could not hit more than one at a time. Fortunately, this was the clue for Mace Dervish Girl who could now attack them one at a time. And one on one, a guy with a baseball bat does not have much chance against a surprise attack by a girl that is twice as fast as him and has practiced with her weapon since she first discovered her powers. She could practically run rings around them as long as she got them isolated with no one else to back them up. They were a bit tougher than the rookies from the previous mission task, so it took her a couple more strikes to get them down and out, but it was never really a contest. While Azurefire took down the team leaders, I backed away slowly to not let the remaining goons surround me while Dervish Girl picked them off from behind, one at a time. When the last of the baseball bat guys turned around to help his friend against her, I sent him flying, giving her time to finish her job.

"Hey, I did not say ON ME!" she protested.

"He is the tank, don't muscle in on his turf!" said Pine Relief.

"Aww, when am I supposed to test my new Ability if you don't let me start small?"

"In the Training Room?"

"But you don't get Rep points for that!"

"You also don't get hospital bills."

"I'd be fine, really!"

"You're fine right now. Keep peeling off from the tank instead of distracting him."

"You guys! I am wasting my brand new Ability here!"

"I told you to take one that was useful to the team. We'll be level 3 in a couple more days. You could have taken Higher Impact at level 2 and delayed your defensive moves till level 3 or even 4."

"I told you, I have a complete roadmap to 60 that my teachers and my mother have approved. I can't just change things up because we suddenly have a tanker."

"Changing things on the fly is an essential part of being a hero."

"Guys? Guys? Could we take this later? I have my back against the wall here, literally."

"Fine. But it's your fault we don't have any downtime anymore. We used to hash things out in the breaks."

* * *

It was later than we expected when we finally finished our first level 2 task. These goons were not the total rookies we had rolled over earlier in the day, and there were more of them, and they did not always line up nicely for Hooligan Bowling like the first group. Sometimes they did, and it helped a lot, but often it was more chaotic. The final boss was tougher than the last: I managed to keep him down but I did not have much time for his gun-toting flunkies, and I got shot repeatedly. Now, this was not too bad since our Healer was paying close attention, but with Azurefire being busy taking out the boss and our dancing Dervish getting blocked by the swarm of canon fodder mooks, it went on for a rather long time. I could see Pine Relief's energy shrinking steadily, which was making me a bit nervous. In the end, I had to gather us for Energy Pulse in the middle of the fight, which was a first. Ironically it was the damage reflection that won the day: They took only something like 20% damage, but it adds up. I had damage reduction, regeneration and a Support Healer to back me up, they had neither. They were definitely not used to their hands feeling like they were on fire every time they pulled the trigger. As their health started going down, they got increasingly nervous and hesitated before shooting again, which further tilted the fight in our favor, since I regenerate and they don't. I also tried to keep goons between me and the guns whenever possible. In the end, once the boss was down, we just had to mop up the rest. They were pretty demoralized at that point, and even more tired than we.

"I have to admit" said Pine Relief as the last Hooligan blinked away to the prison hospital, "if not for your Energy Pulse, I would have had to dip into my blues." That was the nickname for the small blue pills that could briefly restore some of your energy. They were developed by Centaur, a friendly alien AI that had visited Earth to study the Colorado Event and stayed to help. Among its contributions were a rainbow of pills that heroes could use in a pinch. By far the most common were blue for energy and green for healing. Supposedly harmless and non-addictive, they were somewhat expensive due to the inhumanly complex production process, which was right now only possible using Centaurian nanotechnology, although a magic equivalent was in clinical testing. Theoretically only heroes were supposed to use them, but there was a bit of a black market.

"To be honest, I should probably have bought some greens myself" I admitted. "I just... Well, I was flat broke really when I came here yesterday, but of course the Hero card works as a credit card as well."

"To be honest, I didn't buy mine. My mom makes sure I don't leave home without a box of green and a box of blue. So hey, take a couple greens just in case. I'll tell my mom we got into a long boss fight, she's been in plenty of them so she'll understand. I haven't told her that you have five Colors, since you seemed to not want it widely known."

"I guess it is not technically a secret, but I'm afraid it would attract unwanted attention that I - and we - are not ready to handle. Like supervillains wanting to dissect me to find out how it works."

"Yeah. It sucks, but it's probably best we don't speak about this to anyone, not even family and friends."

I took the three green pills and found a piece of paper towel to wrap them in. At least office buildings tend to have a restroom or two on each floor.

"Do you have anywhere to stay?" asked Pine Relief when I came back out from the restroom.

"Yeah, managed to rent a cozy little apartment on the slope, right in the Memorial district."

"Sounds nice. If not, you could have stayed with us tonight. My brother is waiting outside with a hovercar, since it's midnight and all. I'm sure he can drive you home at least. He's doing that with the other two."

"I don't want to inconvenience your family, but yeah, if it's OK with everyone."

"My mom would have loved to meet you, but she's pretty good at noticing when someone is hiding something. It's not like she can't keep a secret, but... The fewer who knows, the better, right?"

"Right. Also, where I come from there could be misunderstandings if a girl brings a boy home."

She laughed. She actually laughed out loud! That was a bit humiliating. "Sorry, but the other two were there yesterday. My mom is ... OK, not quite a helicopter parent, but she likes to meet my friends. It's not like she doesn't trust me, but she thinks I am young and innocent."

"Well, you're definitely younger than me" I said. "Not so sure about the innocence, I mean I think I can compete with anyone in that regard."

She giggled. "Not often you hear that from a boy. I'll be sure to tell my mom."

Huh. The girls in this world sure were friendly compared to back home.

Chapter 4

Once again I woke up in an unfamiliar room, but at least this time it was in a bed. I pulled the curtains aside and looked out on the sprawling Memorial district to the south and below, with Memorial Plaza to the south-east with the titanic statues of the heroes who gave their life to save the world. There was no mistaking it: I was still in the dream, afterlife, computer simulation or whatever it was that had taken me to Color City, the city that had been just a game for me from I was 14 till I was 24. No, not just a game: It was already the axis of my life, more so than my education or my family or my crushes. When I had to leave home, when I moved town, my home away from home remained. It was the constant of my life, and then it died. And then, so did I. Or perhaps not. I would have to solve this riddle, somehow, sometime. But I had to start at the bottom, working my way up. Gaining influence, gaining trust, gaining a network that could support me in my quest. Right now I was a level 1 hero, a fledgling with credit card debt living in a rented 1-room apartment in the heart of the newbie zone. But I had woken up again. That was a victory. I was not dead - or if I was, death was not all it was hyped up to be. Or perhaps more. "Death - the restorer of worlds" is not a phrase I had seen in my earthly life.

As I poured milk over my breakfast cereal, I thought back on last night's battle, which was the reason I didn't get to bed until well past 1 AM. I realized that I had been the one who was least surprised by how hard it was, compared to the previous task. Even with minimal downtime thanks to my Energy Pulse, it took an hour and a half longer than expected. One thing was the two extra Hooligans in each group, and even more for the boss fight. This was because level 1 tasks were intentionally newbie-friendly, starting with smaller groups of enemies and less leaders and bosses. This was scaled up at level 2 and again at level 3, when you got the normal distribution of enemies. At level 3, a team of four or above could expect a boss for every group, along with the two team leaders each with two mooks of each weapon type to back them up. For larger teams, there would be even more challenges. Given that I would be level 1 still, the chance of me surviving as a tank was zero. Well, surviving ... I would go to the hospital, presumably. But the point is, I would have to be replaced. But the team did not seem to realize that yet. Of course, this was their first character, but wouldn't the Hero Academy prepare them for this? My "Hero Academy" had been a decade of playing more characters than I could count, from every color and class, although I did gravitate toward tanks and brawlers. The mission tasks in the game took less time than they did now that it was real life, but there were a lot of things that were similar. Including the way the tasks scaled up for newbies.

The other thing that seemed to take them by surprise was the difference in toughness and skill of their opponents. We had gotten a task with threat level 2, while the previous one was threat level 1. But the power level of the heroes had not changed much. It increased gradually as you used your Abilities in a meaningful way. Eventually you reached a tipping point where you became able to gain a new Ability, but there was no fanfare, no light show, and no sudden rise in stats. Your stats slowly and subtly increased over time as your Affinity with the Colors increased through use. So we were basically the same strength but facing stronger opponents. This was also something I'd expect them to learn at the Hero Academy. Perhaps it was much like our high school, you enrolled and you were there and you learned a bit, but you forgot a lot more than you remembered. You'd think someone who had devoted their life to becoming a hero would try to remember everything, but what do I know. My approach to learning had been very different.

I had gotten a comms message from Pine Relief telling me that we had a task at 3 PM, and confirmed that I would come. Most likely it would be easier than the last, if we got the same type of enemy, but only marginally easier. Our Abilities would have grown slightly more powerful, especially for the others. For me, the difference would be negligible, but the rest had only taken one Ability per level, so they should notice a significant improvement. Three or four more tasks, and they would be level 3 already, and we would have to change our strategy completely.

* * *

"OK team, we can do this!"

That was our Green leader, Pine Relief. We were gathered near the door to another run-down warehouse that was almost certainly home to some Hooligan operation. Why did they even try, in a city with so many heroes? Of course, a higher-level hero could have just swooped in and steamrolled them in a minute or two, but then again a higher-level hero could do something more difficult and dangerous, while we could not. So they may have banked on there not being any heroes left over for minor tasks like this. Well, they were wrong, since we were here.

"Yesterday, we fought dozens of villains like this," she continued, "and we won decisively. It took time, it took effort, it took teamwork. But we won, and the city is a safer place because of it. Not only the city, but the world relies on heroes like us to protect the innocent, punish the villains, and restore justice. And we are stronger today than yesterday. Not only our powers are growing, but our experience. A couple days ago, we were wide-eyed recruits showing up for our first battle. Now we are becoming veterans. We know what to expect, we know what to do, we know how to work together to win. Let's do this!"

'Becoming' was the key word here. We were baby heroes, still absolute rookies, whether we admitted it or not. But we were taking our first steps toward becoming real heroes who could one day protect the world better than a bunch of cops with handguns could. And we were allowed to do these rookie tasks now, so we could learn and grow.

"We are heroes" I said and activated Armor of Light. "This is what we do." Everyone cheered, and I walked first into the building.

* * *

It would be an exaggeration to say that we steamrolled the Hooligans, but we did better than last time at least. The most memorable event was when Dervish finally managed to grab aggro, rushing in while I was still getting their attention. She was beating some knife-wielding guy, and beating him soundly in all fairness, when another guy beat her upside the head with a baseball bat. Those things can actually kill a normal person, did you know that? They are far from harmless. Their disadvantage over a shotgun is mainly the range, and unlike knives they can't reach your inner organs directly. But they can break bones, including the skull, and kill you by blunt trauma. The neck is particularly vulnerable, but the head is not safe either. Luckily even level 2 heroes are somewhat more sturdy than civilians. She still went sprawling on the floor. I blew the guy away, and Azurefire set his pants ablaze as is good and proper.

"Ow ow ow ow!" said our Brawler, getting to her hands and knees while I sent the knife guy sliding as well. "That's not fair!"

"It is incredibly fair" said Pine Relief. "I'm not healing you until after this fight, so you can enjoy the feeling of being a tank."

At this point the whole team had realized that I was more of a threat than the girl crawling on the floor, and they all attacked me while she retreated to safety for a while. I did take some hits, that's unavoidable with crowds this size when they're not properly lined up for Hooligan Bowling.

"Whoa, that feels good!" said Dervish.

"What, are you some kind of masochist?" said Azurefire. "Not that there is anything wrong with that, of course."

"No, I mean, when he gets hit."

"OK, make that sadist. And I do think there is something wrong with that."

"No, I mean, every time he gets hit, I feel a little better."

"That's what I'm saying!"

"She is referring to the heal he radiates whenever he gets attacked" explained Pine Relief. "Basic White Abilities have a heal component, that affects both the wielder and nearby allies. Normally you don't feel it because you don't take damage. But when you are wounded, you definitely notice it."

"What did you think I meant?" asked Dervish.

"Well, what can you expect when you say strange things like that?"

"You guys? Not that I particularly mind being a healer here, but could someone please take care of that guy with the gun more permanently? It takes a LOT of throws for me to knock out an adjutant one level above me."

By the end of the fight, Dervish was feeling much better and declined Green healing. "I'd rather see how much beating our paladin needs to take to heal me completely."

"I am wondering if there is something in the sadist claim after all" I joked.

"Come on! It's for the science!"

"Would a big team of Paladins be able to heal each other if they took turns tanking?" wondered Azurefire.

"Only if they were high level or also took basic offensive Abilities from the same set. The healing does not come from the damage done to you, but from the damage done to the attacker" I explained. "The damage that is reflected to the attacker works as a life steal, but is distributed to all nearby heroes rather than just to the Paladin. Likewise White basic attacks like Hand of Light or Weapon of Light convert the damage done to the opponent into health for the hero and allies."

"So with a couple damage Abilities in addition to the defense, you could heal not only yourself but the whole team!"

"Heh, not likely. But if you had several Paladins in a team, especially high level, they would be practically invincible. Slow, but invincible. One time..." I suddenly realized that I was talking about the game. "One time I heard that a team of seven paladins had completed a ... high level series of tasks against a famous supervillain, without a single defeat. But it took them all night and well into the morning."

"Heh, tanks are not exactly the fastest damage dealers around."

"Tell me about it" I said. *But perhaps this tank could be an exception.*

* * *

We returned in triumph to the outside world after apprehending the Hooligan boss and his entire crowd. It was faster than last time, but still a lot of work, and we were mentally exhausted at the very least, and not a little sweaty. In my case, there were also plenty of blood stains, although the self-sealing costume mercifully hid those from the world. We decided - well, mostly Pine decided - to call it a day. "We've fought long, we've fought hard, and we've fought bravely. I think we deserve to spend some time with family and friends and wind down. Perhaps watch a movie or go out to eat or do something that does not require superpowers or make us think about fighting."

I didn't have family or friends - unless you count the team as my friends, and they would definitely make me think about fighting - but I had a sudden attack of tact and common sense so couldn't make myself tell them. And so we parted ways for the evening.

I went back to my apartment and took a long shower. I was still drying off when I heard the doorbell. I checked the security camera and it showed two girls and a boy outside. Well, younger than me anyway. From their costumes, they would be heroes too, and the security system identified them as residents of the building. I asked them to wait a moment, quickly got dressed and opened.

"Hi, sorry to disturb!" said a pale, redheaded girl. She did not look sorry at all. "We couldn't help notice that we got a new neighbor, so we wanted to introduce ourselves. We're three newbie heroes from the Rune Circle Alliance. We started around the same time and ended up teaming together, so we decided to get a larger apartment together. I'm Aurora Lightning, electric Ranged Damage. She is Rune Hammer Maiden, a boost-based Brawler. And the guy is Polar Night Door, a Summoner. His golems are our tanks."

A summoner? I had been warned that this required some kind of extra caution and knowledge, but I did not know exactly what. I decided to find out before I picked my next powers. If a low-level could be a summoner, I would be very interested in learning it too. It might be quite valuable for soloing. As a tank, I was going to depend a lot on teams to get enough damage done, but if I could summon some damage-dealing entity, that would make me a lot more independent. With my Tank Paladin archetype, which was something beyond my control, I would always develop my defensive strength more than my offense, no matter how many different offensive Abilities I might take. Having many attacks would make me more flexible, but beyond a fairly small number it would not make me do more damage overall. Well, different types of attack may deal more damage to specific enemies or under specific conditions, but this mattered less than the underlying balance. And you're born with that, it cannot be changed. Once a Paladin, always a Paladin. There was no chance to reroll in this world, of this I was sure.

"You're all Nordics?" I asked, deciding to not be too blunt. I showed them in, and they teemed inside. You know, like kids, giving you the impression somehow that there are more of them than there actually are.

"Kind of" said Aurora Lightning. "Not by birth, but by blood."

"I see. You kind of look the part."

"Haha, yes. Our League is kind of Nordic themed, although the Celtic one is actually larger."

"It's not like we have a problem with different skin tones" said the boy, strangely seeming to be more perceptive than the girls. "It's just, you know, different cultures have different traditions, and ours happen to be based on old European ones. Other alliances have other preferences, some of them related to geography and others not."

"You are heroes, not villains" I said and shrugged. "There is room for diversity as long as we're on the same side."

"Exactly!" said the boy, the summoner, seeming a bit relieved. This might be a good time.

"So, what does a summoner do? Is it true that it is dangerous?"

"I guess it can be, if you start experimenting on your own. That is why traditions are so important. That said, some of the most original Summoners were spontaneous. But there are a few stories of those who were not so lucky."

"I see. So the summoned entities might harm the summoner or get out of control somehow?"

"Worst case, that could happen. But if you use protective rituals or items, or just have a strong will, it is really no more dangerous than other archetypes. I would certainly prefer this to doing the tanking myself!"

"I'm actually a tank" I said. "A Paladin."

"That's got to hurt!" said the talkative girl, Aurora Lightning.

I lifted an eyebrow. "I certainly don't enjoy that part. Actually, I try to minimize the damage. I guess it is like with summoning: You have to know what you do and take precautions to minimize your problems. But yeah, some pain cannot be avoided. Luckily we have a healer on our team."

"Do your teammates also live here?"

"Nope, one of them is a native of the city and the two others are renting somewhere, I am not quite sure where." Pine's brother had dropped me off first, so I did not get to see where the other two lived, but clearly not in the same block.

"Oh" said Aurora. "It is fun to live with teammates though. We have a lot of fun together." I wasn't going to inquire whether this had anything to do with one of them being a boy, so I just nodded.

"So" said the boy, "since you moved in just now, does that mean you're new in town?"

"Came here just two days ago. I'm still level 1."

"Ah. We're level 4, but should be 5 after our next mission. That's going to be cool, having 5 Abilities! I'd love to take teleportation now, but I really should concentrate on the fighting Abilities."

"You really should" agreed the hammer girl, who otherwise did not say much.

"You're gonna catch up to us in no time!" said Aurora Lightning. "Each level takes longer than the last. It is quite noticeable in the beginning at least where we are. I guess when you go months between each level up, you kind of don't think about it that way, but when you're used to leveling up all the time, having to fight for a long time at the same level gets a bit frustrating."

"I am sure it does" I said. "Unfortunately, I'm not going to catch up with you anytime soon, but the rest of my team may eventually. Or at least some of them. You're all monochrome, right?"

"Uh, yes." She seemed oddly uncomfortable with the question. Come to think of it, she had not mentioned their Colors when she introduced them, even going so far as to say that the hammer girl was boost-based rather than Yellow. That was an odd way of saying it.

"Two on my team are monochrome" I said. "One dual, but taking alternate colored Abilities. But I have even more, and am taking them all."

"Oh. That's going to be a problem" said the boy.

"Well, yeah, in the sense that they are eventually going to leave me behind. They are already level 2 while I am level 1."

"One team in our League has two, uh, monochromes" he said, "and two with two different power sets each. They took two powers each at level 1, and at level 8 they still have to spend some time in the Training Room while the others are off duty. I can't imagine how hard it would be to catch up with three."

"It is impossible" I said flatly. "I'm not even going to try to actually keep up. But I **am** going to go to the Training Room later today, as a matter of fact, so not a bad guess.""

I could not imagine I had totally forgotten the Training Room! Admittedly things had been pretty busy, but I would have to make time for that. I would not be able to catch up with my team mates, let alone with this team that was almost level 5. But anything that could accelerate my progress would be valuable. At the very least, I should try to reduce the number of teams that would whoosh by me like express trains while I stood alone at the platform.

* * *

I knew the location of the Training Room, of course. It was not a super popular feature of the game, because while you could level up (at a moderately reduced speed), you got no Reputation Points and no Trophies. (While heroes don't loot, it was customary to find a Trophy or two after a successful mission task, some limited use weapon or gadget that might be useful in a pinch, or perhaps a box of booster pills from the Black Market. Now that Color City was a real world, Trophies were a little more random, but they were still around if you fought enemies appropriate for you.) Instead the Training Room gave you badges, which some people collected avidly. But mostly it was used to test out new tactics, preview enemies, or experience environments that did not occur naturally in a modern city: Tropical islands, arctic mountains, forests or jungles, ancient empires or even prehistoric wilderness. The technology was another Centaurian contribution, but the environments, opponents and simulated tasks were contributed by volunteers, and you could adjust the randomness setting to some degree. With a low randomness setting, different teams could experience nearly

identical tasks, or you could test out different tactics to see which worked best. So there were plenty of uses for the Training Room. It was just that the rest of the game was even more rewarding for most of us, most of the time.

Still, I was familiar enough with the Training Room. I found the place easily, and my Hero Card served as identity and let me walk right in. Obviously you don't want to let villains use it, although rumors have it that some villain groups had either stolen or reverse engineered the technology. Most likely stolen, as it was generally felt that this technology was beyond human abilities yet. The simulations were real to all senses, and you actually moved around in your actual body and used your actual Abilities. It was this realistic use of your Abilities that caused you to level up, although it was not a perfect enough simulation to level up at the same speed as a comparable real task.

I picked an easy, plain task from the database: A direct emulation of stopping an incursion and arresting a Cultist boss in an office building. In real game the Cultists had a fondness for caves, but they could certainly be found elsewhere, including the usual office buildings and warehouses. So to keep it easy and simple, I picked the office setting. Cultists are my best match, or should I say my ideal prey: The adjutants use darts imbued with Dark Energy, and their bosses rely heavily on Dark attacks. But these do half damage against Armor of Light, and reflected damage with lifetap effect is also stronger for them. So they were perfect for my first solo task, even if it was a simulated task. It was however based on real data from actual fights between Cultists and heroes. I checked the settings one more time, and went through the door to one of the rooms in the several layers of basements under the building. Without the simulation, you would just see a huge empty room, but with the Solid Hologram simulation, it was like walking right into an office building. And in this case, right into a fight.

* * *

A level 1 task for a single tanker was... underwhelming, after what I'd been through earlier in the day. There were two rookie cultists guarding the door, one with a knife and one with a staff, none of them even had dark magic that I could see. Well, that was what one would expect, I had just been meeting these crowds lately so my subconscious was expecting one again.

"This is an officially sanctioned hero operation. Please drop your weapons and ouch! I guess that means no." I sent the guy with the staff flying, and he landed on his backside some three yards away. That's got to hurt, but it wasn't going to end a fight. Gravity throw was more of a control Ability than an attack, really. It helped keep people away and kept them from using melee weapons. A gun or a Color attack could be used from a prone position if you had the presence of mind to do so, but not a staff. He was not a threat for now. I sidestepped the knife guy who was rushing me, and sent him flying in the opposite direction. "Guys, guys, save yourself the pain and just surrender."

"Never!" said the knife guy and clambered to his feet. Man, this simulation was incredibly realistic! They could even talk! In fact, I had just forgotten that it was a simulation for a few seconds in the heat of the fight. If it was this realistic, then maybe this would work...

"OK, come here and strike me with that little knife of yours and see what happens. Warning: This is going to hurt you more than it hurts me." In the long run, at least it would. In the short run, it only reflected something like 20% of the full damage potential. So yeah, that hurt, getting slashed with a hunting knife. Not going to lie about that. But I'd been beaten on for three days now, most lately by level 2 villains. This thing wasn't going to kill me, the less so when it was actually a simulation. "That hurt your hand, didn't it? Every time you slash or stab me, it hurts more. So how about me? I am a Paladin of the Light. I've fought crowds of people tougher than you. Just give up."

I guess the artificial intelligence did not allow for that. To be honest, I am not sure the *natural* intelligence of a Cultist mook would allow them to think for themselves. In any case, he just slashed me a third time, so I sent him flying. The staff guy had also come back and I had to block an attack with my arm. That actually hurt worse than the knife. "Fine, have it your way." I sent him sprawling again, but this time I followed him. When he got up, I sent him flying again. The corridor wasn't that wide, and I had placed myself to the side of him now, so my next throw slammed him into the wall. He got up one more time but not the next. I turned to the knife guy, who I had also needed to throw away a couple more times. Seeing that he was alone and bruised, he tried to run away, but it was too late for that now. Soon he too met the wall and crumpled.

So, that did not go too badly. But not having a real attack power sucked. I had to get that next level if I was planning to solo. For the duration, I would just have to find walls or objects to throw enemies into to take them down faster, or just keep throwing them until they were too beat up to get up again. With maps consisting mostly of corridors, it should not be too hard to slam them into a wall if I angled myself right, and with only two or three attackers that was trivially easy. I couldn't do that with crowds, usually, but I wasn't going to solo crowds for months or years at this pace.

I gingerly probed one of the wounds. It was healing, ridiculously fast by normal human standards, but it still took a couple minutes even for a shallow gash like this. I was still many levels too early to defeat a mob by simply standing there and letting them attack me. Maybe one day, but by then I would probably have enough real attack Abilities to not need to. But for now, I'd try to keep slamming people against walls or furniture, those seemed pretty effective. With

some good maneuvering maybe I could take down two in one attack. Worth a try. I continue into the building looking for more Cultists. My wounds would likely be healed by the end of the next fight anyway.

* * *

Soloing as a Tank archetype is generally safer but also slower than for a Brawler, let alone a Ranged Damage. The more so when my only attack Ability was a hybrid attack/control. Luckily it worked pretty well in an office setting, where I could throw people against walls or furniture, but it was still fairly late when I walked out of the Training Room. And I didn't even have a Trophy to show for it. Still, I had learned more about how to use my Abilities on my own, and I had probably increased my Color Affinity slightly. I would call up a graph later to see how much I had advanced toward my next level, but it was probably a pretty small stretch considering that I leveled at 1/5 the speed of a monochrome, and those typically needed two real mission tasks to get to level 2. So I would need something like ten, possibly nine or eleven, but somewhere in that ballpark. And a rule of thumb from the game was that four Training Room tasks were equal to three main game tasks when it came to power progression. If that was the same here, I would have needed something like twelve to fifteen of these mission tasks to gain one level. Or in other words, one evening like this netted me less than 1/12 of a level, or at best 8%. So maybe I would have been better off if I had spent my time hanging out with the Nordic Rune Association kids, after all. I really needed to build my contact network in this world. But there were so many things I needed, all at once. Right now I needed to get home and get some sleep before the next day of tanking.

The Training Room building was near the subway, and I was going there in my own thoughts when I heard a scream from inside the opening to the subway. Then a guy came barreling out of there clutching a glittery pink purse that did not at all fit his roguish style. I had a pretty good idea what was happening, and moved to bar his way. In the unlikely case he was innocent, he was unlikely to be in such a hurry that he could not stop to explain himself.

Suddenly there was a swirl of silver, and the world *tilted*. I was suddenly standing on a wall instead of the ground, and fell backward before I could brace myself. I landed hard on my back. That hurt! I might be tougher than I had been back on old Earth, but I did not have my aura on to absorb any of the impact, so I still felt that one. I was also a bit dazed and confused, until I realized that I had just been hit by a Gravity Throw. That was my own attack Ability, but I had not used it on myself. Someone else had the same Ability! I was, as they say, hoist on my own petard. Whatever a petard is, I was definitely hoist.

"Down, glory hound! And stay down!"

My attempt to get up was stopped by a huge pressure, like from a heavy weight all over me. It was as if gravity was much higher than usual. Gravity Chains! It was a rooting Ability available at level 2 in the Gravity Control pool. So this fellow was at least level 2, yet he was wearing plainclothes and evidently stealing purses. He did not wear any gang uniform or insignia. An unsanctioned Color user! And he had caught me by surprise.

"You know, I've always wanted to do this" he said as he came over and kicked me in the ribs. "Freaking glory hounds think you're so much better than us because you wear a clown costume! Take that, and that, and that too!" There is an expression "to kick someone when they're down", but this guy took it all too literally.

Chapter 5

I had been on my way home from a Training Room session when I ran into a purse snatcher who turned out to be a plainclothes supervillain, and higher level than me. Right now he was keeping me lying on the ground with Gravity Chains, while he was happily kicking my ribs. Luckily I could still use my Abilities, so I had activated Armor of Light after being thrown back by his Gravity Throw. Being a Tank Paladin as archetype, I was more resistant to harm than other absolute newbies, but I was still an absolute newbie and I did feel those kicks. He seemed to have a lot of pent-up aggression. I guess life is tough for a non-unionized villain. But that wasn't really my main concern right now. I had to get out of this trap.

Focusing on a point some distance behind him, I activated Combat Teleport. Unlike the travel power with its much longer distance, Combat Teleport is instant and can't be interrupted. So his foot hit air as I crawled to my feet behind him. As he tried to regain his balance, I used my own Gravity Throw. Like me, he was vulnerable to his own attack type, at least when not prepared. Heroes and villains tend to develop resistance within their own Colors, but this is weak and not always on from the start, developing gradually over the first 10-20 levels. My visor cam had belatedly recognized him as Simon W Gargell, level 2 Ranged Control, Primary Silver, unaffiliated. Pretty sure this "unaffiliated" feature was not in the game? But at least his level was low enough that he was vulnerable to my Gravity Throw. Hitting him from behind before he realized how I had disappeared, my throw made him fly forward and land on his face. That was going to hurt! Even though he was a level above me, he was not a Tank. While more resilient than civilians, all other things being equal, Ranged archetypes were the least sturdy of heroes and villains. Even with that, I had no illusion that a single throw

would put him out of commission. And I did not have any other attack powers. And my Combat Teleport had a 30 second recharge.

"I'mma kill you!" He had managed to turn around, and used Gravity Throw again. I had braced myself against the wall, but the throw still hit me like some giant hand had thrown an invisible hay bale at me, hitting my whole body at once and knocking the breath out of me. Then the gravity chains came down again, and I buckled. But I could still use my Abilities, and I sent him skidding a couple yards backward. He had been too smart to try to get up when facing another Silver, so this was going to give him some small scrapes at most.

"I'll break every bone in your body!"

"With gravity? Perhaps if you were much higher level. But you're not going to level up in The Dungeon."

"We'll see about that." Another Gravity Throw hit me. Not the most pleasant sensation when you're helpless, but my aura still protected me to some degree. And I could see even at this distance that the damage reflection also worked for Ability-based damage, like in the game. It was just 20% of what he dished out, and Gravity Throw is more control than direct damage anyway. I wasn't going to win by letting him attack me, that was clear enough. But between that and my own Gravity Throw, perhaps... I lashed out again, and he skidded another couple yards.

"Try again!" I shouted. "You may have more attacks than me, but you sure don't have more brains! Did you even learn about heroes in school?"

"Shut up! I'll kill you!"

"That's the kind of attitude that gets you in trouble" I said. "You - oof." He hit me with another throw. I had liked the very short recharge on Gravity Throw, but it was less fun being on the other end of it.

"You're not getting away from me!" he said as I gasped to get my breath back.

"No, YOU are getting away from ME!" I paid him back in kind, and he slid again. "How far can you maintain those Gravity Chains?"

"Plenty far" he assured me, and hit me again. "You're just a newb, that aura won't protect you forever."

"But my regeneration may" I said, hitting him again. "Did I mention Green is actually my secondary? Regenerate comes in handy during long fights."

"Dammit!" another Gravity Throw hit me. "Why would I have to run into someone like you?"

"Commit enough crimes, and sooner or latter it happens."

"You're NOT taking me to jail!"

"You're right, he's not" said a voice above him. "I am." A heavysset lady around the age of 40 landed on him, knocking him out instantly. Or at least the gravity field faded. "Don't worry, he's not dead, although he may not be too happy about that when he wakes up." She tagged him with one of the teleport thumbtacks we carry around, and he blinked away. "You OK, boy?"

"Yep, just fine." I dusted off my costume. "I may have missed my train though."

She laughed. "Is it far?"

"No, next stop northwest."

"I can take you there."

"In your loving arms? Thanks, but I've already tried that with a... friend. I think I'll take the subway."

"Share Flight" she said.

"Whoa! I hope I ever get to a level where I can take an Improvement like that!"

"Oh, I am a lady of many talents. Three different types of talents, actually."

"You're a tricolor?"

"That's what you kids call it now? Yes, I'm triple. Red, Green and Silver actually."

"I have White, but my secondary is Green and Silver is tertiary."

"Whoa, we have a lot in common! You want to come over to our place for a night bite and a chat?"

"It is getting pretty late..."

"I'm happily married!"

"No seriously, I did a task earlier today and then a full simulated task here in the evening. So I'm pretty beat."

"Ah, you're a daytime hero!"

"More like afternoon and evening."

"I'm called Lady Noctiluminous for a reason." She grinned. "OK if I add you to friends? I'd like to at least mail with you if nothing else. This is a rare occasion, running into another triple with the same secondary and primary Colors!"

She blinked three times and tapped in the air. My visor flashed a question: *Allow Lady Noctiluminous to add you as a friend?* I activated my own interface and accepted. *Add Lady Noctiluminous as a friend?* I sighed and verified. She grinned. "So, Share Flight?"

I nodded, and we both rose into the air. It was even more unnerving than being carried by Silver Star Girl, but less embarrassing. At least as long as I could keep my bladder in check. Luckily I managed that, although it took most of my concentration and I did not get to enjoy the view of Color City by night, from the air.

* * *

"I see. You went in the same trap as me. I took Fiery Hands, Regeneration and Gravity Throw, all at level 1."

I was home, but remote-chatting with Lady Noctiluminous before going to bed. Or more like she was remote-chatting with me.

"If I had Red, I would have taken Fiery Hands too" I admitted.

"Right? I was a Brawler so that one was actually my first to manifest. But I wanted them all. And it worked great, for a few days. But the gap between me and my teammates kept growing, until I heard the dreaded words: 'Maybe you should try to join a team that's closer to your level.' That hurt."

"I'm not there yet" I said. "They are still level 2 and they don't have another tank. But yeah, sooner or later, probably."

"I guess I had expected one of them to sidekick me, but of course that's not what sidekicking is meant for. And at that level, everyone is focused on their own progress, so they can get more exciting and better paid tasks."

"I guess."

"So I sulked a little bit, but then I joined another team. And I refused to change. I refused to pretend to be less than I was. If that meant I would always be left behind, so be it! Like I had been the best level 1 I could be, I continued to be my best level 2 and level 3. Eventually the Abilities became more situational and I no longer needed to take one from every pool for every level, but by then I was already so loaded with Abilities that everyone was passing me by. This continued for a long time. And then I met Trident."

"Who is that?"

"It is an alliance for triples, or tricolors as you call them. For people like me, who refuse to be picky about Abilities, who take all that can make them a better hero in their particular field. So I was thinking that you may want to meet up with us sometime, meet the gang and learn more, perhaps see us in action. It's way too early to invite you, but we might be able to set you up with a team that moves more at your speed, eventually. But I totally understand if you want to stick with your friends as long as they are willing, And who knows, maybe you can find a way. It's not like you **can't** sidekick in a context like that, it's just not common, especially not at low levels."

"I know. Sidekicking is a drag."

"Well, you get extra RP so there is an economic incentive, but the power drain is a serious concern, especially if you're used to be in a team where everyone is at the same level, give or take."

"If sidekicking had been without side effects, it would have been super popular." I actually knew this because this was a perennial complaint in the forums, claiming that Batman did not go down to a lower level when Robin became his sidekick. That is a dubious claim, I am sure Batman would have to look out for his protege quite often and take into consideration whether he could do this or that daring stunt when Robin was along. But people thought it should be free and kept arguing that the game would get more players and they were going to leave if it wasn't 'fixed' and so on.

"Eventually I got my own mentor, who turned out to later become my husband, but none of us knew that at the time. But that was after I had joined Trident and was surrounded by equals, more or less."

"So happy ending."

"Happily ever after ending, actually! We have two kids who are becoming heroes in their own right, although disappointingly they are both just duals. I guess genetics remains a mystery even to heroes!"

"I hope you don't hold it against them."

"You have no idea how it is to be a parent. I'd go barefoot through Hell for my kids at the drop of a hat. Kids are love. Kids are life. I'm far more worried about them than about myself, even though I am facing horrors compared to them. They are probably going to outlevel me before I retire, but in my heart they will always be my babies."

"You sound like a very good parent."

"I think it sounds normal. They did not ask to be born, we asked them. As long as we live, we live with that knowledge and that responsibility."

"That's what I mean by good parents" I said. My parents had invited me into the world because it was God's will, and the fact that I then didn't submit to God's will made their whole effort worthless and worse than worthless. Instead of improving the world with a new disciple, they had added a heathen to the already teeming masses of heathens out there. I was sure if they somehow could reach back in time and undo my life, they would have done it without a moment's hesitation. But maybe this was just how I felt and they really did love me as I was, but just couldn't express it. Well, now they would not need to. We were literally worlds apart, no matter how I had ended up here. So I guess my parents and I both got our wish. In case someone up there actually created me: Great sense of humor, big guy!

* * *

Two more tasks, I thought to myself as we gathered outside yet another warehouse. Hooligans loved warehouses almost as much as Cultists loved caves. If you got a task involving Hooligans, more likely than not they would be in a warehouse, although it was never certain. And if you wanted to go "interrogate" a few of them, the warehouse districts were the best places to go. They dabbled mostly in smuggling, drugs, drug smuggling, mugging and theft. They were almost comfortingly normal, certainly compared to the Cult, but also the fascists known as the Front. And evidently Pine Relief had some long string of tasks relating to them. I would be more effective against Cultists, but I was not the team leader here. And soon, I would not be here at all. Here, as on this team.

Two more tasks, if the game was anything to go by, and they would be level 3. Azurefire had been level 2 already when I met him, but I wasn't sure for how long. I seemed to remember that he had just leveled up by then, in which case it was possible that he would actually level up when they did, him reaching the requirements early in the task and they late. But this wasn't entirely certain. It was around that time, however. I knew that. If things went well - and there was no reason to think not - those two tasks would happen today, and tomorrow they would be level 3. I would not be able to tank that. Not only would the enemies be a level higher, but there would be even more of them. At level 2, their numbers was still slightly lower. And most importantly, even with at team of four, there wasn't a boss in every group. There would be that from level 3 onward. Best case, they would quietly dismiss me and look for some other tank, or join another team. Maybe Dervish would finally get her wish and become the main tank. She was not likely to enjoy that for long. Worst case, they would not understand until I got sent to the hospital. I had no wish to look death in the eyes ever again, but maybe they would feel obliged to give me a chance I did not want.

But for now, there were level 2 Hooligans to "arrest". I activated Armor of Light and marched into the building ahead of my team.

* * *

"We're steamrolling them!" said Dervish. "This is almost too easy."

"That's because your Affinity increases with each task" I pointed out. "If you check your power progression estimate, you will probably find that you are already halfway through level 2. So naturally it is easier than when you were just leveled up."

"It also helps that we have routine" said Pine. "We know what to expect and how to handle it. We surprise them, they don't surprise us."

"Yeah, that helps" I agreed. "But your higher Affinity helps as well. I know this because I am still level 1 and only gaining about 10% power progression for each task while you get around 25%. And it doesn't get much easier for me from one task to the next. A little, not a lot. Even though I get as much experience as you."

"You are better than during your first level 2 fight" said Pine. "You may not notice it yourself, but you have routine. You react practically before they act."

"Yeah, but that part doesn't keep improving."

I could not tell them that I had played this game for ten year, and that the hardest part for me was getting used to fighting with my whole body and mind directly, rather than through a screen and controller. I had mentioned this early on, but it had clearly unnerved them and made them unsure about my sanity. I wasn't going to try that again.

Again, after another couple fights: "I actually think I could tank these now!" That was Dervish again, of course.

"Oh no you don't! I am not dividing my healing just because you want to play!"

"You hardly ever go below half energy except in a boss fight!" protested Dervish. "Aren't you worried about your power progression? What if you remain level 2 when I level up, because you didn't heal enough?"

"I can live with that" said Pine, but she did sound a little uncertain.

"It is true that she can't tank these groups" I said, sensing an unexpected opportunity. "You got a task that was suitable for a team of four. But I have an idea. What if I sit out the next task, and you get a task for just the three of you. It would be much fewer goons, and only one adjutant as team leader. Dervish could probably handle that, and you would get more practice healing."

"You don't need to sulk!" said Dervish. "I am not trying to take your job, I just want to help."

"If you wanted to help, you could have taken a second attack Ability at level 2" said Pine.

"Let's not go there again" said Dervish. "I have already explained this. It would upset all my advisers and mess up my progress plan that I made good money to have mapped up by experts."

"You both went there again" I pointed out. "I am not sulking. I won't be able to tank for you when you reach level 3 anyway. Those hordes would flatten me no matter how good the healing. But if you are just 3, you will get tasks with much fewer enemies and not so many high-end ones. Dervish might be able to tank those. But she shouldn't have to test out her tanking skills for the first time against a superior opponent. If you tried the next task alone, she would get used to it while the enemy is still weaker than you."

"We can't do this without you!" said Pine. "You are practically carrying the whole team on your back!"

A shiver went down my spine. I had heard something like that before...

If they learned that you have five Abilities at level 1, they would expect you to carry most of the weight...

That was what Silver Star Girl had said when she warned me against revealing my five Colors on the first day. I was inexperienced, and if they stood by expecting me to be a superhero's superhero, I would fail. I had narrowly avoided that during our first task, but it was just a delay. They really did think of me as being superior to them, even though they were a level above me, soon two.

"Look, it is physically impossible for me to keep pace with you unless I do five times as many tasks. Unless you all are willing to work only one day a week, that just won't happen. So you'll have to do without me someday anyway. Perhaps it is easier to start now."

"You're totally sulking! It's just one more level than now. By the time we are level 4, you'll be level 2, so the difference will never be greater than two levels. You can handle that. Remember, I'll help you tank if needed."

"I'm not sure that will make things better" muttered Pine.

"Guys?" said Azurefire, joining in for the first time. "He has a point. Two levels difference may not be a big deal later, but for newbies it is a bit of a problem. They are, in a sense, going to be three times his level. I am not sure how we can deal with that, but it won't be as easy as you imagine, I think. We should plan a little ahead and not think that he is some kind of demigod."

"Thank you" I muttered.

"Well, he is the closest this world has to that" said Pine softly.

"OK, I'll stay with you if you promise me one thing. After you all are level 3 but before our first real task, I want us all to go to the Training Room and run the first couple battles of a simulation that is as close as possible to what we are going to go into. We will run the first couple battles once: One time with me, and one without me. After that we vote, one vote for each, and I will abide by the result no matter what it is."

"Sounds good" said Azurefire.

"OK" said Pine.

"Shouldn't take too long" said Dervish. "Now let's get moving, my mace is thirsting for skulls."

"It is a cudgel" I said, "and skulls are not liquid."

"Close enough!" said Dervish.

* * *

We continued to defeat the Hooligans and send them to prison hospital, group after group. Once we were finished, we took a couple hours break. Azurefire just barely managed to level up to 3, he was very active during the last couple tasks just for this reason. When we gathered again, he had (wisely, in my opinion) gained a hybrid control / attack, Blinding Fire. It requires line of sight and is limited to medium distance, so in practice indoors use, but it causes a limited burst of intensely bright fire at face height right in front of an enemy or a close group of enemies. The fire blinds them for a limited time and their eyesight only gradually returns. The attack also does a modest fire damage and can induce panic. So that's a very good Ability for a team that doesn't have a dedicated Ranged Control member or a tank. His cold attack also had a control component, so he now had pretty much a hybrid role himself, despite being the Ranged Damage archetype.

The team had rejected my proposal to try the next task without me, so we all went in together as usual. I allowed the others to test out their secondary roles since I could easily regain control at this point. Mace Dervish Girl got to tank 2-3 mooks at a time, which she usually did well enough. She did not really have a natural talent for tanking, and her situational awareness could need improvement, but a couple mooks she could deal with once she got into it. Toward the end, she could hold four of them, although it clearly stressed her. Azurefire used Blinding Fire to great effect to take the adjutants out of play quickly. Since they were the only Hooligans with ranged damage (except the boss), the rest of the bandits would have to run toward him to attack him. This was where Dervish peeled off her portion, and I sent the others crashing around with my ranged attack and taunted them into attacking me. If any got through us two, Azurefire would pull away while attacking them with ice and fire as fast as possible until they collapsed or fled. If either of the two got hurt, Pine Relief would make sure they didn't go critical, and I would heal them by tanking. If they were still not fully healed at the end of a fight, she would top them up before I used Energy Pulse and we moved on looking for the next group.

They were all in a good mood when we dispersed for the night. The two girls would get their new levels and we would meet at 11 next day at the Training Room.

* * *

"This can't be right!" Pine Relief stared at the crowd of Hooligans waiting for us: One boss, three adjutants, four batmen as we called them, and four knifemen. "There must be something wrong with the settings!"

"Looks normal to me" said Azurefire. "It was the two first levels that were not normal. Don't you remember this setup from Tactics class?"

"Don't remember" said Mace Dervish Girl. "We had a lot to learn. Lots of classes."

"I was homeschooled" said Pine. "My mom taught me everything I needed to know."

"Not sure if this thing existed when she started out" I admitted. "But basically, the first two levels are easier, like a tutorial. You do remember, I hope, that the number of enemies went up a little from first to second level? And now it has increased again."

"This is the normal level. From now on, they will just be harder, there won't be more of them" said Azurefire. "Except patrols. Not sure if those will start now or in another level or two. It was no later than five at least."

"That's a LOT of enemies" said Pine Relief. "Are you sure there is not a bug? Shouldn't we at least hear with the reception?"

"This is what we will have in every task from now on if we are four" said Azurefire. "Of this I have no doubt."

"I can also tell you what you will get if you are five or six or seven or eight" I said. "It is a pretty easy formula. There will be at least two basic goons for each party members, and an adjutant. As the number of party members increases, bosses start to appear in ordinary groups, first instead of adjutants and then in addition to them. Finally with six and seven party members, some of the groups will be one level higher than that of the task. With eight party members, all enemies will be one level higher. You can ask for easier tasks, but the reputation reward and trophies will be lowered correspondingly. Or you can ask for harder tasks, with higher rewards if you succeed. Luckily this is just a simulation, so we can test out various strategies and tactics. My recommended tactic is to run for our lives, but I'm leaving this to the leader."

"OK." She drew a deep breath. "Let's go with what we did last time. Azurefire, you blind them, starting with the boss. When they charge you, Dervish peels off, and Iridescent picks a fight with the rest. I'll heal those who need it, but preferentially the tank. The others only in emergency. OK? Let's go."

Luckily, Pine stood close to the door, and managed to get out with only moderate wounds when the rest of us were defeated. Luckily this was just a simulation, so we did not go to the hospital, just teleported to a small room outside the training room proper.

"OK, that did not go quite as expected. Next time we let the tanker tank. Iridescent, teleport to the side of the mob and do the bowling thing. I'll heal you and the rest will wait until you have aggro."

This time all three of them managed to run away after I was defeated. In all fairness, that did not take long with only one healer.

"OK, now set the team size to three, and I'll wait here" I said.

Unfortunately for my plan, a bit later Pine came tumbling out the door again, with the other two tumbling out of the "hospital" door. "We just can't do it without you!" said Pine.

"That doesn't sound right" I said. "Teams of three should be able to do this without a tanker. A lot of different combinations are viable if everyone is the proper level."

"Well, evidently we have the one combination that is not viable" she said.

"It went well enough until they chose to completely ignore Dervish. She just doesn't have your talent for peeling aggro."

"I'm a Brawler, not a Tank" Dervish realized belatedly.

"Maybe if Azurefire did less damage up front?" I proposed.

"We really need you in there" said Pine.

"No, but you could need a tank your level. Even level 2 would probably help. But we already tried with me, it just meant one more person to the hospital."

"Then what are we supposed to do?"

"Azurefire could try only using control Abilities at first to keep aggro lower, then Dervish intercepts. Heal her like crazy while you string them out in as long a line as possible. Then he assists her, targeting her enemies, to take down each of them as fast as possible. He must not shoot first except for control moves."

"OK, let's try that."

This time it took much longer, and then they all came out the front door. "That kind of worked" said Pine, panting. "But it would take all day! We're totally beat after just one group."

"I am sure it gets better with practice?" I said.

"Fumigate that" swore Pine. It was the first time I had seen or heard her that much out of balance. "I'll ask the Bureau to find us a task with lower reputation requirements."

"Be sure to explain that it's because I am level 1" I said. "Normal tasks expect everyone to pull their weight."

"And tonight, I am going to talk to my mom. She will know what to do."

"And I'll hear with Silver Star Girl if she can ask around in the Alliance."

Chapter 6

Pine Relief swallowed the humiliation and asked the Bureau for an easier task. Luckily there was one available on short notice, but it wasn't her favorite mobs, it was mine! We got sent to an underground catacomb that turned into a cave filled with Cultists. The number and type of baddies was right for level 3 and up, but they were actually only level 2. And level 2 cultists at that, which meant that their bosses with their Black attacks were pitifully inadequate against me. While it wasn't quite a walk in the park, we were never really at risk either.

"This was the kind of task we should have had all along!" said Pine.

"Eh" I said. "They were level 2, you are level 3. It is no surprise you managed to thin their numbers quickly. Plus I have a bonus against Black and all those who wield it."

"Right, I had forgotten that." Did she even know it? I must admit I had my doubts about the whole 'homeschooled' narrative by now. Sure, she had a lot of confidence, but there were some big holes in her knowledge. From the glances I exchanged with Azurefire, I knew he wondered about the same thing.

"I think we should do one more of these" said Pine, "but with Hooligans instead of Cultists. Then we can upgrade to normal reputation but with Cultists, and when we are comfortable with that, we can go back to Hooligans again. But I'll talk with my mom tonight, and then contact you tomorrow morning with the details."

I, as promised, talked to Silver Star Girl. She in turn promised to take it up with the alliance. "It sounds like they got dependent on your extra Abilities, just as I feared. Or at least are beginning to. With support, control and a balanced brawler, it should be possible to take on tasks your own level right from the start. While not all archetypes can solo well, a majority of duos can, and most trios that are not simply stacking the same type. Even some that are, like with support. A trio of support may be slow but usually can get through a task."

"Eh, after a little strategy advice they did survive in the simulator, but it was too slow for them."

"I see. Well, that is as expected then. I'll call up the people who need to know, and I'm not the boss of the alliance or even this division, but I think you should prepare yourself to say goodbye to your friends for now."

I did not actually get the chance to say goodbye. The next morning Silver Star Girl gave me the news that there had been an influx of new recruits and my existing team had agreed to an exchange of personnel so I could team up with two newcomers from out of town.

* * *

"OK" said Silver Star Girl. "As you have already been told, this is a secret that could endanger your lives and those of everyone you blabber to. So don't blabber. Not to your mom, not to your sweetheart. This isn't a big deal to us, but there are supervillains who would not hesitate to murder thousands to get to something like this, OK? Those thousands could and probably would include you and everyone you hold dear. So even if it doesn't seem like a big deal, don't blabber. Even if you die, don't blabber."

The brother and sister nodded, wide-eyed.

"This fellow newbie comes from a parallel dimension and has five colors. Also, being the stubborn mule he is, he decided to pick one Ability from each. So basically he hardly levels at all, but he is decent at what he does."

"Five? Is that even possible?" asked the boy.

"Shouldn't be, but he's not from around here. Iridescent, please introduce yourself."

"Hi, my name is Iridescent, and I have five Colors. My primary is White, defense and offense. My secondary is Green, defense and support. My tertiary is Silver, offense control and utility. My, uh, fourthiary is yellow, utility and support. And my fifthiary is Violet, utility and domination. That translates as teleportation and summoning. But I am still just level 1, and will remain so for a while, so I don't have all of these things, just one for each Color. My main is Armor of Light, a damage reduction aura that reflects some damage - about 20 percent at this level - and heals myself and nearby allies correspondingly. Notice that I still take most of the damage I don't reflect, so this alone would not make me a great tank at low levels. It gets better later. Luckily I also have Regeneration. It sucks for absorbing alpha strikes, but is good for long standoffs, and let me heal between fights without pills or a healer. My only attack is Gravity Throw, which does more control than damage. But it is really irritating, so it helps me keep aggro. My Yellow is Energy Pulse, which restores energy during a long fight or cuts down on downtime if nobody is wounded. Since we don't have a healer on this team, this is not likely to be useful. Finally I have Combat Teleport, which lets me get out of snares or quickly get to a place where I am needed, but has a 30 second cooldown. So basically I am a Paladin with some extras. I can heal others by being attacked, so don't hosp if you just get a scratch. Obviously if you are dying, go to the hospital, but not just because it hurts. It will get better once I take a beating."

"Ah, my hero name is Slinger Wall" said the boy. "I am a Brown Ranged Damage and Support. Right now my only Ability is Stone Throw. I have a sling with unlimited ammunition, as I can temporarily turn air into stone. It dissolves

pretty quickly, but not before hitting the enemy. Well, hopefully. I have practiced a lot with my sling but I'm not perfect. I hope to get Stone Armor when I level up, that should be a great help for you."

"I am called Flaming Arrow of Doom" said his sister. They looked really similar, so I did not even have to ask. "I am a Red Ranged Damage and Control. My first Ability is of course Fire Arrow. I can't really support you in any other way than by defeating your enemies yet, but I may take some control Ability next if you need it."

"Looks like the first level is going to be the roughest here" I mused. "I have a few Greens, but I may need to buy some more before we go in. Can't exactly tell the Hooligans to wait while I run off to resupply."

"Actually I thought of that" said Silver Star Girl and handed me a small green box. "Use them strategically, they are not candy. Also, it is not Hooligans, but your favorites, the Cult."

"Cultists? In a warehouse? Oh, and thank you."

"Yeah, suspicious, isn't it? They must definitely be up to something when they come out of their cave sweet cave."

The girl, Flaming Arrow of Doom, giggled audibly. Cultists could seem pretty comical at times, but they were actually a very disturbing group, known for kidnapping vulnerable people and turning them into suicide weapons. In a world where impossible things were possible, it seemed like they were actually able to infuse people with some kind of ghostlike entities that would control them like puppets and were released upon their death to take over new bodies. The color Black, while used for good by a number of heroes, was notably not very picky about who and what it lended its power to. It was one of the easiest to gain affinity for, and quite flexible.

"OK" said Silver Star Girl, "Iridescent has already fought, what, five or six battles, so let him take the lead and set the pace. If it is hopeless we can send someone else, but you should be able to do it. Probably."

* * *

"There are probably lookouts right inside, so I go in first" I told my two new teammates. "There will likely be one team leader with Black darts, one guy with an ordinary staff, and three with ordinary knives. Only the team leader will have a Black attack, so it is imperative that I tank him. The darts do life steal, sickening the target and draining the health to the attacker. But not with me. My particular strength as a Paladin of the Light means that Black attacks instead do double damage to the attacker, in this case forty percent of the damage will be reflected back to him. That's bound to hurt, since he doesn't have Regenerate like I have. Given enough time I could solo a guy like that just by him attacking me until he collapses. But the important part is that he doesn't attack you. You are free to get into scrapes with anyone else. If you get wounded but not defeated, you will regain health when I am attacked, especially when I am attacked by Black-wielders. Those forty percent of damage are distributed as healing to those of us who are wounded. I still take fifty percent damage - there is also a ten percent damage reduction element in my aura at level 1 - but fifty percent damage and forty percent healing is something I can live with for a while. Especially since I regenerate. So I would rather tank those guys than the other guys, since I only get twenty percent healing and damage reflection against attacks that are not Black. Did you get all this?"

"We are not to attack the team leader with the black darts?"

"Good enough."

"And you will heal us over time if we get wounded, as long as we don't go to the hospital."

"Very good. Here we go."

"Intruders!"

"This is a sanctioned hero operation. Please drop your weapons and surrender peacefully." As if anyone ever did that.

"Die unbeliever!"

"Eventually, probably." I sent the team leader tumbling with a Gravity Throw. "Hopefully at a ripe old age, in bed, surrounded by cute great-grandchildren." The *unbeliever* part hit a nerve, but I wasn't going to show it. I would like to think there was a difference in kind and not just in degree between these fanatics and the loving parents I had known in my childhood, but later events had shown me that the word *unbeliever* is itself very much like a Black dart, intended to strengthen the caster at the cost of the target. And it might be that I already had a sort of damage reflection even back then, hurting them all the more when they hurled that weapon at me.

Seeing their dear leader humiliated by an intruder, the rest of the group advanced on me menacingly. And then, without waiting for signal, my new companions fired at will. A flaming arrow streaked past me and caused one of the knifemen to scream in agony. A small stone whizzed past me on the other side, hitting another knifer. As they recovered, they changed direction and started running toward their attackers, only to be met with more projectiles. Meanwhile I sent the staff guy sprawling. The third knifeman stood uncertain as he suddenly found himself alone, his two companions attacking the two heroes behind me. Then he looked at his superior, who was clambering to his feet, and then he slashed at me. I was barely scratched before I threw him away too.

"Just surrender while you can" I said.

"Never!" Their team leader threw his signature Black dart at me.

"Ooh, that hurt" I said. It actually did, but it hurt him almost as much, and he was not a tank, so had less health to begin with. He hesitated, suddenly aware of his dilemma.

"Kill him! Kill the Paladin!" he commanded.

The two who were advancing on my teammates heard his order and stopped what they were doing. Questioning your superiors is probably not a path of promotion in a cult. But their problem was that they were under fire - literally so for one of them - and if they stopped now and tried to go back, they would get defeated from behind. Still, such was their loyalty, or brainwashing or whatever, that they still turned around. They did not make it to me, though, but collapsed after a few steps. Meanwhile I was walking toward the staff guy, who was getting up just in time to be thrown back one more time. I ignored the adjutant, turning toward the last knifeman, waiting for him to get up. But while he was trying to do that, both of my two comrades in arms decided to pick him as their next target, and he went down in a rain of stones and fire. Staff guy got up just in time to be slammed against the wall.

"No! You will not defeat us!" The leader cast another Black dart on me. I could see the despair on his face as he realized he was going to fall before I did. Then he ran. He did not come far before my Gravity Throw was ready and he fell on his face. I walked past him and made ready to hit him again as soon as he tried to get up. Meanwhile the other two were taking down staff guy, who was already in pretty bad shape from repeated throws. Soon he crumbled too.

"Curse you!" said their leader as he lifted his head and saw me blocking his path.

"Doesn't work. The Light protects me" I said. "You cannot even attack me without being defeated, what do you think would happen if you actually had a functioning curse?"

"You will never win! The future is ours!"

"The future of yours is in prison" I said. "OK gang, take him down." They were eager to help, and soon I could press a teleport thumbtack in his butt and see him blink away. His underlings followed him in short order.

"That wasn't too hard, now was it?" I asked.

"It was fun!" exclaimed Flaming Arrow of Doom.

"Total victory!" said her brother.

"Well, that's a bit early" I said, but I found myself grinning as I said it. "One group down, another dozen groups to go."

* * *

Things continued to be pretty easy for a long time. I was amazed by how much easier this was than my first task with the other team. Admittedly this was the first time with such a small team (not counting the solo simulation, which was super easy). Admittedly also, I had a bonus against this enemy type, although not against the common mooks that had no Color power. Admittedly, my power progression estimate showed that I was around halfway to level 2, and since the effect in this game (and now world) was gradual, that means my Abilities were also halfway to level 2. But it was also a matter of experience and attitude. Back then I had felt like a slightly traumatized normal person in a weird costume facing criminals who could and would hurt me. Now I had regained the basic instinct that made me say: "I'm a hero, this is what we do." It was my job to stop these people, without undue restraint or excess. I knew their strengths and limitations, and my own, and those of my teammates. I knew what we could and could not do. And I knew what to do when plan A failed.

Like the time when one of the knife thugs managed to zigzag and dodge the stones as he rushed Slinger Wall. I instantly realized something was wrong when I saw his health bar change, that was not something that should happen without me knowing. And for good measure, the goon was standing right between me and my teammate. I left my own opponents, staff guy and a knife guy, right there. I blinked to a spot to the side and slightly behind Slinger, and blew his opponent away from him to land some distance in front of his sister. Flaming Arrow of Doom had finished off her own opponent and immediately turned to her brother's, and he would probably have preferred the stones if he had a choice. He still got one of those too before collapsing. At that point I was already running forward to take care of my own mobs. I managed to trick the adjutant into hitting me again with his Black dart, which went a long way toward healing Slinger's stab wound. I also let the staff guy hit me a couple times, although I blocked with my arms so he hit those instead of my head. Slinger's accuracy was a bit off for the duration of the fight, so it took a bit longer to take everyone down, but that actually came in handy so I got him fully healed. Of course, that meant I took some damage myself, but I regenerated and he didn't. A few days of fighting had taught me that not all pain is a sign of serious trouble. You can take more beating than you think and still keep ticking. You don't like it, but you don't need to. You're a tank, this is what you do.

"You OK Slinger?" I asked after the Cultists blinked off to prison hospital.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks for the save."

I shrugged. "I am the tank. Ideally you guys shouldn't need to take damage at all, but we don't have that luxury since we are so few. The least I could do was pull that smartypants off you and try to heal you."

"Even if it meant taking a beating yourself?" asked his sister with the cringeworthy middle school hero name.

"I regenerate, you don't. Well, you are Colorful, so of course you heal much faster than normals. But Regeneration is on another level. You could beat me to within an inch of my life, and in the time it takes you to fetch a cup of coffee and

sip it, I'd be back to full health. The more damage, the faster I regenerate."

"But it still hurts, right?" she asked.

"Yes, it does. But you get used to it. It hurts just as much when you get used to it, but you don't panic anymore. You know roughly how much of a beating you can take and still keep fighting. So that helps. But I don't enjoy it. I'm not a masochist or anything. If I could heal myself and others by beating up goons instead, I would. And starting next level, that's what I'll do. But I can't do that from the hospital, so that's why I took Armor of Light first. Hand of Light is available at level 1 as well, but I already have a ranged attack so I concentrated on defense. I can get Weapon of Light at level 2 so I think that's worth the wait."

"I see. I don't really know a lot about the White power pool. We had a class about heroism at school, but we grew up in a small town - it was really more like a big village, I guess, but we hadn't seen a city except on TV so it felt like a town to us - so there was nothing like the Color City Hero Academy."

I decided not to tell her about **my** Hero Academy. Instead I stood up and stretched. "Almost healed! I should be back to full before the next goons know what hit them. Are you two ready?"

"You bet!" said Slinger. I was not sure if he really had gotten over it already or just pretended, but he would get over it. It would happen again. The boss fight was going to be hard and it was quite possible that we would all take damage. We might even be defeated. But we had a fighting chance, and that was all we needed to go on. We were heroes, after all. And now, this teen was one of us.

* * *

The boss fight was not a walk in the park, but it was not a disaster either. It would have been if I had no greens at all, I think. I mean, I might have been able to kite them for long enough to take advantage of my regeneration, but probably not while protecting the two glass cannons. Maybe if I could have relied on them hiding in a side room while I led the mob on a merry chase around the building. I decided to discuss this option with them for future use. But while the Reputation payment at level 1 is fairly modest, running around for minutes to save a couple green pills seems a bit excessive. I still could have gotten away with it, if not for those meddling kids...

The problem was that while the Cult bosses rely even more on Black magic than their adjutants, they have more health than I. Adjutants have more than mooks, but less than a same-level tank like me. Bosses are superior in virtually any way, so they also have pretty good health despite belonging in the Ranged Control and Damage archetype. A rule of thumb is that an adjutant your own level is equal to a normal henchman one level above you in a plain fight, before considering any special Abilities they might have. But bosses are equal to a henchman two levels above you, and that is quite a gap at level 1. So he could afford to keep attacking me despite the 40% damage reflection. But between damage reflection, damage reduction, Regeneration and a couple green pills, I managed to outlast him and his two adjutants, while my teammates picked off the smaller fry one each at a time.

"That was a boss fight worthy of its name!" said Slinger Wall as the last of the Cultists blinked away. I could not help smiling at his excitement.

"It was a good one" I said. "We won."

"Seeing you tanking those massive Black attacks, that was really something!"

"I'm just a level 1 like yourself. If not for the little green pills, I would have been in big trouble."

"I'll get Stone Armor as soon as I can" he promised. I did not mention that Stone Armor had minimal effect on Black attacks. It would still be useful.

"If I did not have pills or a healer, I would have had to run away for a while to regenerate. I'll try to warn you in advance if I need to do that, so you can wait in a side room or gallery while I kite them around and heal. It is cheaper than pills, but takes a lot more time."

"Right, you could have soloed this if you didn't have to consider us."

"Sure, if I had a couple days to do it" I grinned. "You know you have a much higher number of villain defeats than I have. I'm just a tank. We are solid but slow. Even if I was lucky enough to survive alone against a crowd like that, it would take so much time and effort that it would not be worth it."

"I guess we all have our own strengths" he said. "But we make a pretty good team."

As long as it lasts I thought. One more task like this and they would be level 2. Four more and they would be level 3, and move on to do their own thing. In fact, they might do so already at level 2, as I would have serious trouble tanking without a healer at that point. So chances were our time together was going to be quite short.

* * *

Silver Star Girl called me. "So, how did the task go?"

"We survived."

"That well, huh? Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"Don't forget to buzz your teammates with the time and place for the next task as soon as possible."

"Huh? Am I supposed to get the next task?"

"Well, this one was yours. I just acted as a middlewoman, as it were."

"You what?"

"Got them to find great task for a team of three level 1, with a Paladin leader. It was a pretty good match, right? Even if it was a bit out of the way."

"So I am the team leader now?"

"They are brand new, from country bumpkin land, never went to the Academy, discovered their powers around the time they graduated from high school. Yes, they are twins. Anyway, they probably can't tell a Hooligan from a Cultist without checking with the AI. So you better be the team leader, and you better teach them what little you know while you're still together."

"About that... They will be level 2 tomorrow, and I will still be level 1."

"I wonder who warned who that this was going to happen before he decided to be a mule and go ahead becoming The Eternal Newbie? Can you refresh my memory?"

"But without a healer, I can't tank level 2, and they are not going to be happy with level 1."

"Isn't one of them part support?"

"Slinger Wall thinks he will have Stone Armor at level 2, so that might help, but it is not very effective against Black attacks."

"Not without an Improvement, no."

"So this team is even less viable than the last."

"The last team was very viable indeed, and would still be viable if the Mean Green Witch had not decided that her daughter must necessarily level up as fast as possible, no compromises allowed, no matter what the girl wants."

"Pine's mom?"

"Her mom is a pain, yes. The girl was planning to switch to lower-reputation Hooligan tasks in order to keep you, until she got to level 4, and then sidekick you. I think she has a crush or something."

"Let's hope not. But seriously, sidekicking at level 4?"

"Yeah, I can kind of understand her mother. But in the long run, a sidekicked you would be an incredible asset. This is exactly the ideal situation which the sidekick ritual was developed for. Just not at that level, I think."

"So that's what happened."

"It also helped that we suddenly got in two newbies."

"Is Dervish really tanking for my old team now?"

"The rest of the team was merged with a level 5 team. The damage dealers are unlikely to pull their weight for a while, but they will at least get plenty of opportunity to use their Abilities. And the healer will be in high demand, I can guarantee that, when the team size suddenly goes up from 4 to 7. They are going to take a metric brickton of damage."

"Ouch. That's really early to have a team size like that."

"Tell me about it in great detail, why don't you. Nobody could possibly have thought this would be a heavy price to pay to keep a certain high-ranking alliance member happy."

"Ah, so politics."

"Politics."

"Some things are the same in all worlds, I guess."

* * *

The twins had no problems with me being the boss. I found this baffling and hilarious, but tried not to show it. If they had been able to imagine just a few days ahead, they would know that they would leave me in the dust very, very soon. But at noon, as we gathered near the entrance to one of the many caves that lie between Color City, we were all level 1. Or level 1.5, I suppose you could say.

"Do Cultist get some kind of bonus from the caves?" asked Slinger. "I've heard they live there." So they had done at least some research! Maybe they could after all tell a Cultist from a Hooligan...

"Familiar. They can use the layout for defense or ambush, they know their way around and are likely more confident. But they don't get a bonus to health or attack or defense or some such, no."

That was what I sincerely believed, and for most of the task it certainly seemed to play out. We did better than the day before, perhaps in part because the twins' affinity increased rapidly at that level, or perhaps because we were getting more used to fighting the Cult. So it was with some confidence we approached the boss room. And I skidded to a halt, warning my teammates to back away.

Inside the large cave, suspended from the ceiling, hung a glowing green crystal. I had seen those before. It was a healing device. Standing near it would give a rapid healing - not instant, but faster than my regeneration. Fighting them

while they were clustered under that thing was hopeless.

"They have a healing crystal" I explained. "We must try to pull them out of there, or it will take too much time. Enough time for them to defeat us all easily."

"Want me to snipe?" asked Arrow.

I shook my head. "They have three ranged, boss and two adjutants. If you can hit them, at least the boss can hit you, and quote possibly the others as well. No, you two take position in the corner back there. I pull. If we get them all, all fire on the boss to take him out as fast as possible. Otherwise, adjutants. If we only get mooks, fire at will. I'll try to keep them off you."

"OK boss."

I grinned and tiptoed closer to the room. I quickly identified the boss, they kind of stand out in a crowd. Naturally they had something going on, and were not just sitting there staring at the cave opening - there were numerous groups of henchmen between them and the outer world, after all. So I got a clean shot at the boss. And as luck would have it, I managed to throw him. That is not a certain thing with a boss your own level, although you have a decent chance. Everyone else jumped into action. The adjutants hit me with their Black darts, but with my bonus resistance they could not do that much damage with just one throw. I pulled back before the boss could get up, and watched to see if anyone followed. And yes, they did. All the henchmen, although to my disappointment the adjutants and the boss both stayed behind, under the green lamp.

"Mooks incoming!" I called to my team, and led the enraged group past them so they could attack from behind. Then I turned around and used Gravity Throw at the nearest Cultist, just as the twins started firing. Chaos ensued. I had to back away, as there were too many to throw everyone that came close, and I did take a few gashes, but the onslaught thinned their number fairly quickly. Soon we could send them all off to jail.

"Let's sit down and rest a bit. I still have some healing to do before I confront the last three."

"Guess they were too smart to fall for your ruse" said Arrow.

"Or they prefer to let others do the work for them?" said Slinger.

"They probably plan to make the most of that healing crystal" I said. "But it does not make them invulnerable. It just heals them fast. If we can damage them faster, we can take them down. But then we need to concentrate fire. I want you to take the leftmost adjutant first. Not the boss this time, not while they are there. I'll attack the boss and take the alpha strikes. Then you blast that adjutant with all you've got. I'll join in as soon as I recharge. Ignore everything else until he is down, then run for your lives. I will too. Hopefully that will be enough. If the boss follows us, don't attack him, I'll try to lead him away. He does not know I can teleport, so if he corners me I can get out of his sights that way."

"OK. Left adjutant, fire all chambers, run."

"OK! Oh, and that's OUR left, not theirs, OK? I really don't want us divided and conquered."

"This left!" said Slinger and held up his left hand.

"Yeah, that one" I said and stood up.

This time I did not manage to throw the boss, and took a Black Blast as well as the two darts. Ouch! I definitely felt that. But the important thing was that they had unloaded their wrath on me and only me. Moments later, a Fire Dart flew through the air side by side with a slingstone. Then another, and another. I sent the poor guy flying away from the lamp, and the attacks continued. He never got the chance to strike back, as I sent him flying each time he tried to get up. I might not be able to throw a boss every time, but an adjutant my level was another matter.

The other adjutant hit me again, and the boss fired his second attack. This was a different one: Black Blast is a powerful alpha strike, but it has a fairly long cooldown for an attack. I know this because heroes also can take his power pool, and I had been one of them. I don't much like Black, ironically, perhaps because of my religious upbringing. Although in all fairness the lore in-game also makes Black seem associated with evil and the netherworld, not to mention the very cultists we were fighting. But once upon a time a bunch of my gaming friends created a League, *Guardians of the Night*, with only pure Black-powered characters. Black offense, Black defense, Black support and Black control. I joined in, and it was surprisingly viable. Black is a very flexible Color with a lot of different aspects, so there was not really any ordinary content we could not do as a pure Black team. And one nice side effect of this was that I knew these Abilities like my own, because they had once been my own.

The second boss attack was a debuff, and it failed miserably because of my White defense. Before he could bring out another, we had defeated the adjutant and retreated in due haste. I checked but we were not followed. One down, two left.

Rather than eat more green pills, I decided to wait off the damage, or at least most of it. So I regaled my team with stories about my friends in the all Black league, without mentioning that I had been one of them. The whole thing about having numerous alts was not going to make sense to them. But they were relieved to hear about the cooldown on the Black Blast. I am not sure how much else they understood, though.

When I was more or less healed, we went back for the next adjutant. This time I managed to topple the boss, and do it again when he tried to get up, so we escaped with minimal damage after flattening the adjutant.

"OK, now for the grand finale!" I said. "That boss is not going to leave his healing crystal no matter what, and he has a lot of health. So we've got to give him everything we have and then some. Here's a little something he won't expect." I fished up a strange sphere from my belt pouch. It had a ring embedded in one side. "This, my friends, is a trophy I found at a Hooligan raid. It is a telescopic baseball bat. Grab the ring and pull, and voila! A fully functional baseball bat! Looks and feels like the real thing, but is less solid. It only lasts for five strikes, so I better make those count." I quickly outlined the rest of my plan, and went to the cave opening. Before the boss could see me clearly enough to attack, I teleported to the spot right behind him, swiveled around and brought the baseball bat down on his head hard. The next moment I fired off a Gravity Throw. Unfortunately it failed, I had hoped to send him on his face. Instead he swung around and fired off his Black Blast alpha strike. I felt that one! But I was not going to let that stop me. I gave the baseball bat my best effort. 2! 3! 4! 5! The weapons shattered to dust, and my Gravity throw sent the boss flailing backward. Stones and fire arrows kept hitting him as my teammates did their best. As he tried to get up, I succeeded in another Gravity Throw, pushing him further from his precious crystal. Now it was I who had his cherished spot, and I could feel the healing rays of the crystal add to my own regeneration, washing away the pain. His debuff failed again, as it would do every time without a bigger level gap, and he did not get another chance. There are limits to how much damage you can take at level 1, even as a boss. He twitched and fell quiet, and we sent him off.

"Speaking of useful trophies, I suspect this crystal still has a bit of use left in it. Let's take it with us and get it analyzed at the Bureau."

Chapter 7

"OK folks" I said as we gathered outside yet another cave entrance. It was in a public park, camouflaged so you wouldn't notice it if you didn't have the exact position on your map. But of course we had that, thanks to the Bureau's careful planning. The Bureau is nothing if not meticulous. My two teammates, the small town twins Slinger Wall and Flaming Arrow of Doom, were early, almost bouncing to get inside and fight against the forces of darkness. Had I been like that when I was 18? Probably not, mostly because I did not have superpowers and there weren't any clearly defined forces of darkness to fight against. I vaguely seemed to remember that some of my fellow seniors in high school, close in age to this, saw the Conservatives roughly in that light. Luckily for all involved, they did not have superpowers. But then again, no one in my world had. And here I had tons of them. How quickly things can change.

"Today you are level 2" I continued, "but it is important to remember that your fighting ability now is the same as it was when you left our last task yesterday. Well, unless you've spent the night in the Training Room?" I grinned to make sure they knew this was a joke, and they grinned back, cautiously, and shook their head. "Actually I hope you celebrated your advancement, as is good and proper." Now they nodded eagerly. So eagerly in fact that I decided not to follow up on that topic. But they seemed to be in good shape now, at least. Then again, we were heroes. The indwelling energies of the Colors tended to boost our health in various ways.

"So, did you get your new abilities? Slinger?"

"As promised, I got Stone Armor. That should help you with your tanking."

"Indeed it should. At level 2, it should provide an average of 21 percent protection against physical damage and fire, and some protection against most other attacks." I tactfully refrained from mentioning that it actually gives a small penalty to gravity attacks. It was not like we were going to meet any of those in our brief time together. When I added, "I look forward to trying it on", he looked so much like a puppy wagging its tail that it was almost painful to watch.

"I got Ring of Fire!" said his sister before he could answer. "It lets me cast a circle of fire around an ally or enemy, or a group of them if close together. I can control the fire so a hero can just step over it, but enemies will get burned."

"You should probably not use it on them before I have their attention" I said. "They are likely to get pretty ticked off if you make the first move. Instead, I recommend you wait until I make my first attack, then cast a ring of fire around me, as wide as you can for one person. Any enemies that attack me will have to go through there, and then my Gravity Throw will throw them through the flames out again, and they'll have to do it over again. Fun for the whole family."

She grinned. "You got it boss! I can't wait to see their faces!"

"I think you may just have a little bit of a sadistic streak..."

"Well, they are villains. They're going to the hospital anyway, so I may as well enjoy it."

"Looks like you're both eager to get started, so let's do this. Slinger, if you would kindly cast Stone Armor on me before we enter?"

* * *

I hadn't been sure I could tank level 2 groups without a healer, so rather than ask for the mission to be a level higher, I had simply asked if they could find a mission suitable for a level 1 team of four. This was acceptable even in the game:

You could ask for higher or lower levels, higher or lower team size, or a combination of both. For instance a team with mostly area damage attacks might want a sea of lower-level enemies, and there was always some kind of criminal activity going on in or around the city that would fit your need. Imagine that. This seemed to continue after the game became a real world, or whatever happened.

It did not take long to realize that I had underestimated us. Even with extra mook, the enemy groups were simply bowled over. The Ring of Fire had two effects: It made the enemy hesitate before closing in for melee, and when they did, they took damage and became briefly more vulnerable. Then, of course, I threw them back out of the circle, forcing them to do it all over again. So even with a slightly larger group size, it was actually easier than last time. The only challenge was the boss fight, but they did not have a healing crystal this time. The Stone Armor did very little to protect me from the Black blast, but on the other hand I already had 40% damage reflection and 10% damage reduction, so I still took only half damage, much like with the physical attacks now. I then led the villains on a merry chase through the dungeon, with the twins following them and picking off the last in the line. By the time they caught on, there was just the boss and the adjutants left. Before they could turn on the twins, I teleported behind the boss and did a successful Gravity Throw, causing him to faceplant on the stone floor. Then all three of us hit him with all we had, and he went still before he could use his alpha strike again. I took some hits from the adjutants, but I still had some health to spare when the last of them hit the floor and stayed there. So that was a success.

"That was almost too easy" said Arrow.

"To you it was" I agreed, "because you are level 2 now. But I am still level 1 for a long time to come. So for me the boss fight was just right. The other fights were easy, no denying that. Next time we try our teeth on level 2, but with fewer enemies. My main worry is the boss. I have a bonus against their attacks, but half of the damage still gets through, and this is the one situation where the extra armor has very little effect. So I expect at level 2 I will have to munch some pills again."

"Even at level 1, you are more powerful than we are at level 2!" protested Slinger. "You can do it!" Easy enough for him to say, he was not the one hurting in places he did not even know he had. It was all I could do to not remind him of that, but I decided instead to be sure to take care of myself in future tasks, even if it meant a bit of a scare for my overconfident teammate.

* * *

In the afternoon we gathered our little team again, this time to stop a Cultist incursion in an office building. There were fewer of them, but they were all level 2. In terms of the game difficulty slider, that meant a difficulty level of +1 level and -1 team member. I decided to not think too deeply about just how much crime there must be for there always to be some task available at the difficulty of your choice...

Once again, the normal groups were embarrassingly easy to defeat. Once again, it was only the boss fight that presented a challenge, but it definitely did. Even with my bonus against Black, I could not have pulled through the boss fight without green pills. I still had a good number of those left from the box I got when I was asked to tank for this team, but once those ran out, the cost would come out of my Reputation Points. So that wasn't very motivational. I mean, paying to get beaten on for the sake of other people, seriously? Well, at level 2 I would still run a surplus, probably even with full sized enemy groups. At level 3... If I even survived and stayed out of hospital, which was doubtful even with my favorite enemies, I would have to eat green pills like candy. And I did not have the heart to ask the two teens to share the cost, let alone pay all of it as would be fair and just. They were such cute and innocent newbies, I just couldn't break it to them. They were like incarnations of the very idea of newbies.

Of course everyone here was a newbie, now that I thought about it. I mean, nobody here had played before, nobody here had an alt - an alternate character that we played when we were not playing our main - let alone ten or twenty which was more normal in Colorful Heroes. Some of us would even pay for a second account so we could have even more heroes, because who wants to kill off their beloved hero just because they come up with another super interesting concept, or because they saw someone else with a great combo of powers, or because the devs launched some new Abilities or effects that did not really fit our existing heroes. But here? Progression was slower, obviously. Doing three same-level tasks in one day was possible, but you wouldn't do it again for a while. And it seemed that at least after the first few levels, the leveling slowed down more here. Eventually, you start seeing it as a job. The pay gets good enough that you can live well with the occasional gig, so unless you're really driven, you don't just keep forging ahead. Not everyone wants to be on international news, after all. Maybe you have kids to consider. And anyway, it's not like you can finish the endgame content and start over. The only finish is the one we all reach eventually, whether we are heroes or villains or civilians. Although it seems the Colors preserve their servants beyond the usual years, there is still no other exit. So everyone is on their first character, everyone is a newbie. Even those who have fought this good fight for many years have never before reached the next level, never before been at this point in their career. But even among a thousand newbies, nothing is more newbie than a teen on his or her first mission task. And these two had bonus newbie points for being from Lesser Hickstown and not having other heroes in their family.

So I just shrugged and told the twins to wind down and get some sleep, for tomorrow would surely need heroes just like today.

* * *

"Hi handsome, how's life treating you?" Silver Star Girl was calling me after I came home.

"Life is beating me up twice a day, how about you?"

"Still alive! Obviously since I'm calling you, I have a favor to ask."

"Makes sense. It's not like I could say no to you, after all. So who are you actually interceding for?"

"Life is tough for a tank, right?"

"It would have been better with a healer, hint hint."

"Then someone is in luck, but unfortunately for you, that someone is not you."

"Figures."

"We got a brand new baby tank to train. He is not part of the alliance, but then again neither are you. So naturally I thought about you. He's a Red and Brown tank. Will be nice to work with a dual for a change, don't you think?"

"I hope Brown is the defense."

"Defense and control. Red is defense and offense."

"Brown control, huh? That should be interesting. There's a couple good snares there."

"There are indeed, but right now he has only Clay Armor and Radiant Flame."

"Radiant Flame at level 1. I guess he is as stubborn as I am, then."

"Maybe. Not as crazy though."

"That's good to hear. He is going to set everything on fire, attract the whole crowd of enemies, and I am somehow going to heal him, right? How am I supposed to grab aggro from someone with Radiant Flame?"

"Beats me. Try to reason with him to turn it off?"

"Yeah, that will go down well."

"After a couple hospital trips, it should."

"I love how completely free from cynicism you are."

"And I love how completely free from sarcasm you are."

"That makes two of us, doesn't it?"

"Birds of a feather fly together. Oh, and on that note, please don't take Flight at level 2, OK?"

"I still have some some time before I need to decide that. Oh, and it is flock together."

"Well, we did fly together."

"And you sexually harassed my posterior."

"It wasn't THAT sexy. And it's not like you wouldn't have done the same for me."

"In your dreams!"

"Well, yeah. You better not do anything weird outside of dreams though, or I'll stop being your best friend."

"Does that mean you'll stop throwing ignorant newbies at me?"

"Worst case, yes."

"Well, we can't have that. Bring them, I say. Endless lines of ever new newbies, to use my head as their stepping stone toward greatness."

"I'm glad we share the same vision."

"I'll contact you with details of tomorrow's task then, unless you want to pick it for us again."

"No, I leave that to you. Now good night, try not to lie awake worrying about your responsibilities."

"What, me worry? With friends like you?"

* * *

I was five minutes early, and the newcomer was already there along with the twins. When did teenagers show up before noon for anything unless they were forced to? I was pretty sure I hadn't, when I was that age. The newcomer noticed me and stared like he had never seen a guy in mother-of-pearl colored flak jacket before. I looked back. The stylized red chess piece on a light brown background did not leave much doubt. "Crimson Rook, I presume?"

"That's me" he said and drew himself up.

"I'm called Iridescent. I'm level 1 like you, but thanks to these two rascals, we will be fighting level 2 villains, Cultists in this case. I have a bonus against Black attacks, since I am a Paladin-type Tank. Even so, their bosses are quite a bother. And with you here, there will be even more Cultists than before. The idea behind today's outing is that you will get to practice tanking, in moderation. And by moderation I mean, don't set yourself on fire and run into the crowd. There's like half a dozen of them, and they are level 2, and we don't have a healer. At level 1, my only White Ability is Armor of Light,

so I only radiate healing when others beat on me. Not being a masochist, I have generally tried to minimize that. I do have Regenerate, a Green self-heal over time, so I can take a licking and keep ticking, but I can't take a lot at a time."

"But boss!" said the newcomer. Good job making me cringe right there. "I only have this one attack!"

"Not saying you can't use it, but don't use it until you're alone with one or two enemies. If you can handle more, we'll find out later, but for now let's start with something realistic."

"But how am I supposed to pull them without my fire?"

"Walk up to them and kick their shins, or insult their matrilinear heritage or something? But for the first fight, you'll also have this." I fished out a pistol from my belt pouch. "It's a trophy from back when I fought Hooligans. Yes, I've been level 1 for a long time already. There are five shots left, so use it wisely. Only fire it to pull, and use your fire once I have pulled the rest off you. There will be one or two guys with a staff, that's the best match for you. Unless I misremember, Clay Armor has a 20 percent bonus against blunt attacks, in addition to the standard 30 percent tank armor effect, and 21 percent from Slinger's Stone Armor. That should make more than 70% protection, which is pretty insane at level 1. But then you're a tank, tanking is what we do. Or in your case, tanking and setting bullies on fire. Just wait with that until there are one or two of them, OK?"

"OK."

"Great then, let's suit up and go inside. Tanks first!"

* * *

We went inside. The twins already had a solid understanding of how team size should be balanced with the difficulty of the task, so they were not surprised to see more enemies now that we had another tank. I directed Crimson Rook forward to the left, while I took a few steps straight forward to get the attention of the group and offer them the option to surrender. Once they refused, I used Gravity Throw on the adjutant - the one with the Black darts in this case - and the rest of them rushed me. Arrow cast Ring of Fire around me, causing the criminals to pause briefly. Rook aimed at a staff guy - and missed. I sighed inwardly. Shooting someone is not easy, not even an enemy, not even in the leg, not even when they are rushing your team. Or perhaps he just had bad aim. Four bullets left. But he tried again, and this time he hit the leg as intended. These guys were just ordinary criminals, they did not have any Color, so hitting any vital organs could kill them pretty quickly. They could usually still be kept alive if you got them teleported to the hospital quickly, as the brain cells take four minutes to die; but still, trying to not kill them outright is the best. Good job, baby tank!

I watched Rook pull away from the crowd, followed by one staff guy and one knife guy. Once he was apart from the crowd, he lit up. Radiant Flame indeed! Fire seemed to radiate from every part of his body, yet it did not burn him, just encased him in a large cocoon of wild, dancing flame. Anyone who got too close got burned. And "too close" meant melee distance, close enough to strike him with a weapon. Even the staff, which normally had decent reach, was not safe: The dancing flames would leap hungrily at anyone who got close. It was kind of tragicomic to see the bandits rush in, deliver their blow, and then desperately try to put out the fire clinging to their clothes. Because of their hurry, and because it is hard to see through the radiant flame, their accuracy was pretty bad. They would miss completely, and still take damage, or just scratch or glance him. This was in fact a decent defensive Ability as well as an attack of sorts. No wonder it was a starting Ability for Red tanks! And to make things worse, he had another defensive Ability at level 1, the Clay Armor, plus now an added Stone Armor from Slinger. The guy was already a better tank than me! Well, in all fairness I had Regenerate, so perhaps we were about equal. But there was no need to babysit this guy.

Well, he did take a little damage now and then, but that's life for a tank. I did take a few hits myself now and then, despite throwing away the closest when I could. But right now, that was actually a good thing: While only 20% of each attack was converted to healing, and that healing was divided between those who were wounded, it still helped heal Rook a bit. But eventually, for better and for worse, the first group was defeated. This was mostly a good thing, but it meant no more healing for Rook. Luckily he was not much hurt.

"OK" he said, "I see what you mean about not having a healer."

"Funny, I was about to say that perhaps you should be the main tank from now on. You actually take less damage than me, even though this is supposedly your first fight and I've been at this for days."

"Nah, I'm so very, very fine with being secondary tank for now."

"I may have gone overboard telling you to keep your fire off until after you pulled. How about we do it like this instead: I go up and rile them up, Arrow throws Circle of Fire, and when they start to mill around me, you move up with your flame on and approach a couple of them. Once they switch to you, you can back away and let your fire consume them at your leisure, then repeat as needed. If you feel like you're getting low on health, let me tank for a while until you get better. And inbetween that, you can try to sneak up and do some damage before moving away, and see how much you can do before you pull them off me. It takes some practice to know exactly how these guys react, so try to do that when you're not in critical condition. And here, take a couple green pills. If things get desperate, get out of danger with these. But they are not cheap for newbies like us, so we can't eat them like candy. That's true for me too - I don't earn any more RP than you do from these tasks."

During the fight, it had genuinely looked like Rook was the better tank: With the added defense against blunt attacks, and an automatic melee attack that seriously reduced the attacker's accuracy, he seemed perfect for low-level tasks like this, where mundane melee weapons dominated. Even though my only attack was helpful in keeping my opponent from attacking, it was not automatic and it was not continuous. Even though the cooldown was short, barely the duration of a single breath, it was still too slow to handle crowds. While I threw one away, two others would run up to me. It was great for tanking for a small team of two or three, but now with a team of four I had to depend on footwork to not get overwhelmed during the early phase where most of the villains were still on their feet. Even in a simple fight without a boss, I still took damage. But all that damage was gone a couple minutes later when we stood up and moved on to the next encounter.

All the Colors boost the healing of their host bodies to ridiculously superhuman levels, but there was still an order of magnitude difference between that and Regeneration. While I would heal from half to full health in about two minutes, a hero without Green would take twenty minutes for the same. It made for quite a bit of downtime if you did not quickly learn to bring pills or other devices; or better yet, a healer. The game had been somewhat infamous for this, but in truth it was intentional. The logic was that you could choose to reduce incoming damage by having other support or control heroes around. If you didn't, well, bring a healer instead. Or rely on pills or gadgets. The problem was the semi-realistic economy: Low-level heroes did not earn a lot of reputation points, simply because we were little more than souped-up law enforcement recruits. The RP you received depended loosely on how useful and valuable your service was for society, as one would expect in a mixed state/market economy. There was a flattening of the curve on both ends: At the high end, there simply was no realistic way to reward someone who saved millions of lives, so you had to tone it down a bit. At the low end, you basically were the equivalent of a police officer at level 1, so there was no level where you fulfilled a role like fast food worker or floor sweeper. So food and rent was not going to be a problem. But depending on expensive healing tech because you could not be bothered to bring a healer or enough damage reduction or control? Blame yourself and learn your lesson.

There were simply so many ways you could save your hide, if you knew how the game (and now the world) worked. You could bring control heroes that locked down the enemy so they could not attack. You could bring support heroes that gave you armor or other defenses, or who affected the enemies to weaken their attacks. And you could fight enemies at a lower level, if all else failed. The rewards were correspondingly lower, of course, but so was the risk. But if you wanted to take risks and did not prepare? Tough luck, tough guy.

We were stretching our luck just a little by fighting level 2 heroes with a mixed team of half level 1 and half level 2, but I had asked for a task with a little fewer enemies, and we had a support hero with Stone Armor and a control hero with Ring of Fire, not to mention that my attack Ability also did even more control than damage. So we should be able to get through at least the non-boss fights handily. And we did.

When we came to the second group of guards, Rook waited in the wings a bit until he began to heal up from my Paladin healing, then he moved in and began harassing the mooks until a couple of them peeled off me. By the time he was down to about 80% health, the fight was over and the good guys had won. We sat down and chatted a couple minutes till I had regenerated, and then we did it all over again.

The boss fight was a bit different. I went alone into the boss room and used Gravity Throw on a mook at the edge of the group, then ran away. I did take the full ranged damage from the boss and the adjutants, but they took damage as well from the reflection, and I healed up Rook to full health in the process. Meanwhile I retreated with half the group after me, mostly henchmen but one adjutant as well. The boss stayed and some others stayed where they were. The gang that followed me never returned, naturally, since the rest of the team waited in ambush. We took a break while I healed back up, then I went in front of the team and led the invasion against those that remained. Rook tanked the remaining henchmen, while I tanked the ones that used Black attacks. I had to use a couple greens, but we won in the end, and the reflected Black attacks kept Rook healthy. So all in all it was a quite successful task, as long as you didn't mind a bit of downtime between every fight. I don't think the boss fight would have gone so well if we had faced a full-sized level 2 task for a party of four, but that was part of how I used to win in the game: By always thinking a couple steps ahead. Strategy is more important than tactics, and tactics is more important than heroics.

Normally we would have time for another task that day, but it was Rook's first fight and he was pretty high-strung at the moment. It is generally recommended to give rookies the rest of the day off to recover their wits. Plus, I was finally ready to level up to level 2, and I had someone I needed to talk to first.

Chapter 8

"Summoning is the least understood of the Ability pools" said Lady Bluestar. I had come to seek out her advice before considering whether to try summoning at level 2 or wait until later. I could take Teleport Foe, which would attempt to teleport one enemy across a moderately short distance. It was a good way to pull a single enemy from the battlefield, if you faced a superior force, which I was likely to do all too often. It was not risk free, sometimes the rest of the gang would go searching for their comrade, but at least you had a brief time. So that was the other alternative. But if I could summon someone or something that would help me tank better, that might be even better. The words of the leading mystic was not quite what I had hoped for. I waited for her to continue.

"We believe that the soul of the Summoner plays a pivotal role in what is summoned and in which order. There are certain archetypes among the summoned, such as weapons, protectors, tanks, damage dealers and healers. But the order in which they appear, and the form they take, varies greatly. The most common category is probably beings that resemble the human imaginations of demons, usually wielding fire and darkness. But we have had, much rarer, someone summoning creatures that resemble the angels of old stories, beautiful winged creatures wielding powers of healing and judgment. We have seen a few different types of robots and golems, and even elves of sorts. One summoned dragons, although not monstrosly large they were still imposing, especially on higher levels. So there is no telling what kind of tools or beings you might bring into the world. By and large they tend to obey the Summoner or even cooperate with him or her, but at times they will rebel or more likely subvert the commands. We believe this is due to internal conflict within the Summoner, but it is hard to prove since such things are often subconscious."

"So basically I can't know what will happen until I try. That is a bit like... gambling, isn't it?"

"If you simply decide to summon something, then yes, things will be quite random and may go wrong, although there are certain rituals and tools that may protect. What I personally recommend, since you have been conscientious enough to seek out my advice, is that you spend some time in meditation. I do not mean at the battle site, although I won't discourage this. But what I mean is, I believe you should spend some time each day in meditation, letting your mind fall quiet, and listen to the choir within. For what dwells within your soul will decide, maybe more than your surface self, what appears from your summons."

"Ah, I do not know much about meditation. I grew up in a religious home where meditation was considered a competing religion, I guess. Or something like that."

"Well then I would recommend that you approach meditation much like prayer. But when you step into the presence of the Holy, do not bear forth your requests or anything of your own. Just sit down and listen. In that great stillness, voices from within you will begin to whisper. Do not fear at that time, for the voices are within us all, we just live our lives drowning them out and talking over them. But you need to know them, the good with the bad. I believe that eventually, given time, these will give you clues about what to expect if you bring something from beyond into this world."

"I will try. Anything more you can tell, I would greatly appreciate as well."

"Very well. Understand first that stillness does not come easily. Your mind is like a flock of sheep unfamiliar with a new shepherd. If you go after your thoughts, they will run forever. But if you sit down and wait, they will come to you, one or a few at a time. Just observe them, do not try to hold them fast, just watch them come and then go, like clouds on a windy sky, one following another. Plant your shepherd's staff firmly at the top of the hill, and whenever you find yourself having run off chasing the sheep of your mind, immediately return to that point. One way to do this is to use a mantra or simply counting slowly to ten. The point is to count as slowly as possible. You may even breathe with every count, and do not be surprised if you find that both your breathing and your counting slows down. But this is just a tool, a symbol, an anchor that lets you teleport back to your starting point and start over. When the stillness comes, do not attempt to count. When the thoughts come, just watch them. If you hear voices, see lights, even if you feel like you are floating or strange energies are running across your body, it is all of no concern. Seek the stillness, and if it avoids you, return to your starting point. Do this for some time, at least ten minutes at a time but preferably twice or thrice that, each day. In time, you will know better who you are and what to expect from your inner nature. Then you will also know whether it is safe for you to bring an unknown entity into this world."

"Right. I guess I won't take Summoning at level 2, then."

"I will not stop you, but it might be wise to not actually use it until you know yourself better. You have already come from afar, you may summon something unknown to anyone in this world."

"Could I possibly summon something or someone from my own world?"

"That seems doubtful, but who knows? You are a mystery even among mysteries."

* * *

I had actually leveled up the day before, but I had felt the need for that private talk with Lady Bluestar before I chose my final Ability. At the current speed, it would probably take me another ten days or a bit more to reach level 3, if I took five new Abilities at level 2. But it seemed I would need that time to familiarize myself with my subconscious and gain a steadier soul, or whatever you call that core of your personal being. So Teleport Foe it was, then.

If it were up to me, Teleport Foe would be the one called Combat Teleport, while Combat Teleport would be called Blink like we usually did in chat and forums back when this was a game. Teleporting your opponent was a lot more combative, after all. It was what we'd call a "sniper power", an Ability that could be performed from a range where most opponents could not target you, maybe not even detect you. Not exactly a fair fight, but villains were villains. The iron rule: Do unto others what they would do unto you, and do it first.

Speaking of unfair Abilities, I had personally experienced the Silver attack Gravity Chains. It did not stop a superhero or supervillain from using their ranged Color attacks, something that had saved my day back then but also meant Dark Blast, for instance, would be just as much of a problem. On the other hand, it effectively stopped weapon use - even aiming a shotgun would be almost impossible in the crushing gravity, let alone throwing darts. It was single-target and had both longer recharge time than Gravity Throw, but also longer duration, so it was likely to replace my first attack if I was not being swamped. Or that was the plan, but there is a saying that no plan survives the first encounter with the enemy. Still, there is also a saying that no troop survives the first encounter with an enemy without a plan, and at the moment it was my responsibility to bring them.

From White, I had been itching to get my hands on Weapon of Light. Unlike Hand of Light, which simply added judgment damage to your fists, this created a virtual weapon from light. It felt real to the touch and even had some heft, but it was not truly material, and instead of physical damage like blunt, cutting or stabbing, it would do judgment damage no matter the shape of the weapon. The reach and speed would differ much like for physical weapons, but the damage and the speed would be inversely related so the "DPS" (damage per second) was independent of the form. A staff would have long reach and high damage per hit, but be fairly slow. A dagger would be fast with short reach and less damage. In theory, long reach would usually be preferable, but speed might be of essence when you were surrounded. And there was also the psychological impact, on both sides. So I settled for an ornate mace about half a yard long, as long as from my fingertips to a hand's breadth above my elbow. Long enough to have decent reach and virtual heft, but short enough to allow decent speed and redirection during the swing. It had the appearance of matte glass filled with shining white liquid or gas, but it was not slippery to the touch and felt almost like an extension of my body and mind when wielded.

The crucial thing about judgment damage was of course that it was converted to healing, for myself and nearby allies. It also only worked on villains, so I could swing my mace "with gay abandon" as my middle school English teacher would sometimes say. It took some years before I realized that a couple of those words meant entirely different things back when classic literature was written, but the phrase stuck with me.

My Regeneration had been ... not so much a lifesaver as a timesaver, I guess. It did come in handy during long fights, and it was more effective the more hurt I was. But it had definitely not replaced a healer. Restoration would to some degree do that. It restored a fixed proportion of maximum health, but the energy cost and especially the cooldown meant that I could not simply wade into a fight against overwhelming odds and rely on pumping this Ability over and over to keep me afloat. It should be enough for a normal tank situation though, replacing green pills to get out of a pinch. A typical case would be to bounce back from an "alpha strike" as we used to say, the strongest attack of an enemy (typically a boss) that he would normally fire off at the very start of the confrontation, and then again after a long cooldown. Higher-level bosses might also have special attacks that were triggered when they had lost a certain amount of health, but that was not something I was likely to run into for quite a while. The Black Blast from my current arch-enemies, on the other hand, were obvious occasions for a quick Restoration.

Taking another "self-help" Green Ability meant that I could not play the role of a healer directly, for instance if Rook was about to be defeated, and I felt a bit bad about that. But Rook would be gone in a few days, moving on by several levels while I were still at level 2. So I could not let that stop me. But I still wanted to take one team-oriented Ability, beyond the fact that tanking was my real contribution to the team. So from the Yellow pool, I selected Quicken Other. It sped up an ally's movement speed, combat reflexes, cooldown speed, and metabolism. So you would be able to attack or evade faster without losing more energy. A pretty nifty thing, decent duration and decent energy cost for me; but it only affected others, and I would need to cast it once for each teammate I wanted to boost. In a long fight I might need to cast it again, so that was one more thing to keep track of.

And there you have it: Five new Abilities, because who wants to level up within a reasonable time and earn more Reputation anyway. I had what I needed, a bed and pizza. Not necessarily at the same time, but not necessarily not either.

* * *

The next day, we met up to fight a full-sized level 2 task. That is not a huge difference from the day before, and rightly so. In CH, leveling up was never the big deal it was in most MMORPGs, and this carried over into the new world I found myself in. You did not get any stat increases or power increases by leveling up. These things happened gradually, imperceptibly over time. Well, at level 1 and perhaps level 2 the change from task to task was dramatic enough to notice, but eventually it became too gradual to notice. My health, strength, speed and resilience were the same as they had

been when we left yesterday. My old Abilities were no stronger now than they had been then. The only difference was my new Abilities. But unlike most heroes, who had one or two, I had a whole heap of them. So my hope was that this would make us able to handle larger groups. Actually, I was sure of it: The self-heal alone would be a big deal in the boss fight, I knew this by comparing the time when I had a healer on board and later when I did not. How much difference the other abilities would make, I was less certain. That was why I started with a modest increase in difficulty.

"Congrats on level up!" said Slinger.

"Took you long enough!" said his sister, grinning.

"You are level 2 now?" said Rook. "Now I am the only newbie on the team!"

"You'll be level 2 soon" I assured him. "If all goes well, we get two tasks today, so you should level up tomorrow."

"I can't wait!"

"You must!"

"What Abilities did you get?" asked Slinger.

"Ah, too many to count" I grinned. "But the one I got for you is Quicken Other." He did not recognize it by name, guess that made sense when he had not known he was Colorful until around the end of high school. "It increases your speed somewhat and increases the energy production at the same rate. So you can fire off more attacks per minute without getting more tired."

"Woohoo! How much more?"

"Just above 50 percent at this level."

"Is that a lot?"

"TOMMY!" said his sister.

"Don't call me that! I am Slinger Wall, hero of stones!"

"Sorry. But seriously, don't you know what a percent is?"

"I know that more percent is better. For instance, beer with more percent is stronger."

"This means that in the time you could fire off 100 stones, you can now fire off 150."

"151 actually. If it had been available at level 1, that would have been 50%. It increases by 1 percentage point per level without limit. Well, obviously my level will not rise without limit, but you know what I mean."

"Wait" said Rook. "Is this a Green thing?"

"Yellow" said Arrow.

"Yellow? I thought he was White, Green and Silver?"

"And Yellow and Violet" said Arrow.

"The non-shrinking sort" I added.

"You actually really have five colors?"

"Don't tell anyone, OK? They might torture you and everyone you love to find out more about it. Also me, but more importantly to you, also you. So don't even tell your mom, if any, because anyone who knows is in danger."

"Oh. Well, in that case I don't know."

"That's best for all. So before we go inside, Slinger will suit us up, I will speed you up - it doesn't work on myself unfortunately - and then we go marching in, tanks first."

"What happened to women and children first?" asked Slinger.

"Sorry, you two can be first out" I said.

* * *

Imagine you're a run of the mill Cultist. You were just some guy once, but you had a grudge or two or ten. Maybe your girlfriend cheated on you. Maybe you didn't get a girlfriend at all. Maybe you were bullied as school. Maybe your mom never really loved you. Maybe all of the above. But then you met the Cult. They did not call themselves that, at the time. You came to one of their meetings. Their leaders promised you that in time, you could become like one of them. You would get the ability to summon Entities, powerful beings that could give you superhuman powers or enact revenge at your bidding. You would destroy your enemies and rule with the Chosen Ones forever, immortal and immensely powerful, and you would be rewarded with whatever you wanted from the world you ruled. So you joined, naturally. Of course you would not instantly be trusted with such power. You would have to prove yourself. Little did you know that proving yourself meant guarding some dank cave for hours each day, seeing the outside so rarely that you had no idea what time of day or night it was out there. Today you were ordered to guard the cave opening, which is so well hidden that none but your Brethren have come or gone for months. You are thinking to yourself that if you stay in this cave much longer, you'll grow moss. But you are careful not to tell anyone. You must prove yourself worthy. The reward, remember the reward. They will regret then, all those who scorned you, they will regret when you step on their necks.

And then suddenly the door flies open, and two guys in weird clothes walk straight in. Weirder clothes than yours, even. Heroes! That was what they were called when you saw their sort on TV. But you have learned not to trust so-called heroes. You must only trust the leaders. Right now the most adult-looking of the guys is saying something about how you

should drop your weapons and surrender. As if! You were promised the world! The world! You pull you long knife and rush forward.

Suddenly a wall of fire rises in front of you. You try to stop, but it is too late, and you stop INSIDE the fire and it burns, it burns! You tumble back, trying to put out the fire in your clothes and your hair. Your team leader shouts something but stops halfway through as if he was hit by something. That can't be good. Wait, there's another fire to your right, and it is moving, it is coming closer! There is someone inside the walking fire, and it is coming for you! You want to run away, but the team leader will report you and you will lose your place in the world to come. You hold on tight to your knife and rush through the thinner wall of fire. But on the other side of the fire stands the first guy, only now he is holding a blunt weapon of some sort, a shining white blunt weapon. "Welcome to prison hospital" he says, and hits you in the face. It hurts! It really hurts! It kind of ... burns? It does not feel like being hit in the face with a club, more like having a branding iron thrust in your face. So you scream, you try stab the crazy guy in shiny clothes who hits people in the face with branding irons, but suddenly the world just tilts and you fall backward, through the flame again, you are definitely on fire, and then a stone hits you in the head and the world goes dark.

World domination is hard. World domination is really, really hard.

* * *

"Well, that was easy" said Rook. I had to agree with him. Admittedly these normal fights were pretty easy before too, but adding a couple more enemies, including another adjutant, did not seem to slow us down, quite the opposite.

"When Iridescent levels up, everyone levels up!" said Slinger.

"The same goes for you" I pointed out. "When you got Stone Shield at level 2, tanking became a lot easier! Like 50 percent easier against common mooks."

"Not 67 percent?" asked his smart sister.

"The healing part was unaffected" I pointed out. "When receiving incoming damage with only Armor of Light, there was 20 percent damage reflection and 10 percent damage absorption, but of that damage reflection half again was available as healing. So 20 percent reflection plus 10 percent absorption plus 10 percent healing equals 40 percent damage mitigation. Stone Armor adds 20 percent to that."

"Right. I had forgotten the healing. It is a pretty big deal."

"Ideally it is. But it is added after the attack, so if an attack brings my health to zero, I won't be able to absorb it and my patch will urgently teleport me to the hospital."

"Right. I vaguely recall hearing something like that at the Academy, but I already knew back then that I did not have White, so I did not learn it like my life depended on it."

"Your life depends on your tank, young friend. Don't forget that."

"Amen bro" said Rook. "Now, can we round up the rest of these freaks?"

* * *

We marched from group to group, cleaning up without too much resistance. The ranged attacks in particular were a lot more effective with Quicken Other. Not only did this speed up the overall progress, but it also meant less damage to the tanks, since after a short time there were fewer enemies left to attack us. Also I believe the speed with which we suppressed them had a demoralizing effect on the Cultists. For all that they were crazed fanatics, they were also human, and watching the hero troops just roll over their comrades like a wave of fire and stone must have been scary. I caught a runner here and there. Gravity Chains is very effective, it lasts long enough that you can just fire and forget it, by the time it wears off everyone else was mopped up. To a non-powered human, Gravity Chains seemed to be like having someone gently but firmly place a car on top of you, just without wheels to keep it off the ground. Not drop it on you, which would kill you on the spot, but forget even crawling under all that weight. You're just glad you can breathe.

But I expected all this. The ordinary fights were never the bottleneck. Rather, the boss fight was where I would see whether I could have picked a tougher task, in which case I would do so next time. And in short order, we came to the boss room. I held up my hand and whispered. "Wait here. I want to try something. I will try to summon one of the adjutants and see whether the rest come running, or only some of them, or none of them."

"Summon?" asked Slinger.

"Teleport Foe."

"Oh." I was not sure if he recognized it, but if you know about teleportation at all, the rest gives itself. So everyone stood back, while I targeted one of the adjutants, then backed away a bit but still within the range I remembered from the game. I did not use it much myself as I found it a bit unfair and certainly would not like others doing it to me, but in this world the fight was real and I needed any advantage I could get. I also seemed to remember that teleporting enemy bosses or tanks would usually fail: Not every time, but often enough that it was generally a bad idea. Same-level

adjutants, on the other hand, usually succeeded, and henchmen were pretty much automatic. So one of the adjutants was my target this time.

There was a side room - or side cave rather - on the right just before getting to the boss room, and with a fairly narrow opening, kind of like a doorway. We went back there and I briefly explained. Teleport Foe is short range, but not line of sight except in the targeting phase. So I could teleport the adjutant into this room, where it would be him against all of us. The essence of "not fair", but we'd do it for science. We wanted to know whether nobody came to his rescue, or all, or just some.

Nobody came. In seconds, the poor guy was flat on the floor and ready for sending to prison hospital, and we waited on both sides of the door, but nothing happened. So I went back, targeted the second of the three adjutants, and repeated the experiment. The first part was much the same, embarrassingly quick and easy. He literally did not know what hit him. But then we heard shouts from the other room, and then from the cave outside as the Cultists fanned out looking for enemies. One poked his head in through the doorway and saw us. I grabbed him and pulled him inside, but he shouted before we could silence him, and our gig was up.

I had prepared for this, just in case. This was why we picked this room, besides it being close enough to do a teleport. The narrow doorway meant they could not all get through at once. For good measure, Arrow cast a Ring of Fire such that part of it blocked the doorway. Rook stood on the left side, his own Radiant Flame now blazing. I stood on the right, and the twins in the left and right back corner. The Cultists would not be able to target any of us until they passed through the burning doorway.

The first guy came through the curtain of fire, and I used Gravity Throw to throw him on top of the two that came just behind him, then put Gravity Chains on the one on top of the heap of arms and legs, in the middle of the fire. Not only did they take damage over time, but they slowed down others that tried to get through. You really don't want to step in Gravity Chains. The cluster of screaming, burning Cultists was rapidly increasing. But then the boss barged through.

Arrow impulsively shot a Fire Arrow at the first figure to make it through, which would not have been a bad idea if we all did it at once like we did when I teleported that dart guy. But as it was, she was first, and he whirled around towards her. No! I managed to fire off my Gravity Throw before he got to unleash his Black Blast at her. I was not sure if he could one-shot her, but it was not impossible. My throw did not topple him - bosses can be tough that way even at level 2 - but it distracted him, and I piled on with Gravity Chains. This one worked. Maybe there is a random chance, or maybe there is a limit to how many status attacks you can resist in a row, or some combination of both. But he buckled under the pressure. As expected, that did not stop him from using his alpha strike, but at least he used it on me. It hurt, and I felt my body grow weaker and the room seemed to darken briefly as if from smoke. But the damage of my weapon did not depend on strength, as long as I had enough left to swing it. And I had plenty to spare for that. With my bonus, I had only taken half damage, and that damage faded a bit for each time I brought my mace down on him, a flash of light blossoming on every impact. The others joined in, and he did not get to attack a second time.

The rest of the Cultists that were still not defeated came tumbling through the flames just in time to see us beat down their boss. As Rook and I stood nearest, we got their attention first. But these were much easier to defeat. Rook got most of the attention thanks to his fire searing them as they came through, but their accuracy was terrible after just passing through one fire and now facing another. What occasional damage he took was largely healed by my repeated swings of the brilliantly shining mace. This got me some attacks as well, but they went down so fast that they rarely got to hit me twice. Finally, nothing moved, and Arrow dropped her fire.

"I guess that could have gone worse?" I said.

"We stomped them!" said Slinger, jumping up and down in a burst of excess energy. "We totally curbstomped them! Stomp stomp!"

"Halfway to level 2" said Rook. "More than half actually. These level 2 mission tasks give me a lot of chance to challenge my Abilities."

"I know what you mean" I said. "I actually made it to level 2 in just over nine tasks." And then for some reason everyone else laughed.

* * *

Since the day was still young, I got us another task of the same type, since it had been such a success. We plowed through this as well. The boss room did not have a convenient nearby room with a narrow opening, but I managed successfully to teleport not just one but two adjutants into the corridor without getting noticed. The third did draw out the whole group though, but I kited them into a narrower side corridor, teleported out and asked Arrow to block the opening with a Ring of Fire that size, so they would have to run through the flames twice to get out. At the mouth of the side cave, Rook and I took up position to catch them as soon as they came out. So yeah, we "curbstomped" them again.

And then the twins turned level 3. Normally it takes two tasks your level to rise from level 1 to 2, four from level 2 to 3, and eight from level 3 to 4. After that the curve flattens a bit so it doesn't take quite twice as many for each level, or it would spiral completely out of control pretty fast. But it still takes more and more. In this case, it actually took them five

tasks, because I had to run easier tasks when I was level 1 and we had no healer. But by the end of this one, they were decisively into level 3 territory, and eager to get their new Abilities.

"Tomorrow let's do a level 3 task!" said Slinger. "These were too easy for us even at level 2!"

"Let's see" I said. "Level 1 plus level 2 equals 3, plus 2 times 3 which equals 6, for a total of 9. Divided by 4 people. 8 divided by 4 is 2, and 1 divided by 4 is 0.25. So our average level is 2.25. Nope, not level 3, sorry." Actually, Rook was almost 2 and I was two tasks past 2, so the average was really more like 2.5, but none of them saw through my bluff. Instead Slinger tried to confuse me with facts.

"Look, we could have taken harder tasks even today! This was no challenge at all!"

"We are not here to go to the hospital. We are here to send villains to the hospital" I pointed out.

(Technically, we were here to arrest them, but I had never heard of gangsters in Color City surrendering peacefully. I suspected it was less a matter of honor among thieves and more a matter of terror among thieves. I was not sure what would happen to a member of organized crime if he surrendered peacefully, but I strongly suspected that when he met his gang again, it would be a lot more painful than anything we could inflict. He would probably need plastic surgery, a new identity, and moving out of state. More likely moving to another continent. And I did not see the government being gracious enough to help with any of that. So I might as well skip that opening speech. I doubted they would notice.)

"Yes, but this was just embarrassing..."

"You guys don't know how hard level 3 is. It is not just the opponents that are higher level. No, there are more of them, and every fight is a boss fight. Yes, there is literally a boss in every group. A boss and three adjutants and four edged and four blunt weapon henchmen. Like our current boss fights, but a dozen of them. And then the boss fight is of course even worse, with one more of everything including an extra boss. Do you seriously think we could tank that? I could probably tank one level 3 boss, yes, with a little luck. But you think Rook could do that at level 1? He has no bonus defense against those blasts. Actually, he has almost no defense against them at all. One of those blasts even from a level 2 boss would blow away most of his health. You guys are intoxicated by our victory, but let me explain. All we have done up to now has been **training exercises**. Think of it like the tutorial of a video game. The Bureau has set us up with easy tasks so we don't panic and run away, put our costume in the garbage bin and never look back. We have had smaller teams and fewer bosses all the way through these two levels. Real fights begin at level 3. From then on up, teams with four or more heroes will have boss fights every time. It just gets worse with larger teams."

"Uh, I did not know that" said Slinger. "You sure?"

"Yes. If you don't believe me, we can go to the Training Room and test it. But I have already been there and done that with my previous team, before they outleveled me completely and left me behind. As will you, eventually, but probably it will take longer now that I am level 2."

"How about a compromise?" said Arrow. "You did something at the beginning when we were teaming up, getting tasks that were slightly easier. You can do that again, getting something that is slightly harder."

"That was the plan, yes."

"Well, that is great. I was just worried it would get even easier" said Slinger.

"I'll be level 2 tomorrow" said Rook. "We can turn up the heat after that."

"I'll do my best to find something we can all live with" I promised. The twins had not noticed yet, but their process of outgrowing me had already begun. And even Rook would follow in due course. I felt like a parent suddenly. "How quickly they grow up!"

Chapter 9

It was already evening when I made my way to the Training Room, the ultra-realistic simulator invented by a friendly alien AI. Hopefully I would not be attacked by a rogue criminal upon leaving this time! I was not going to stay that long: Rather than completing tasks to level up my Abilities, I was simply testing different configurations of difficulty levels to find one that was acceptable to my whole team. If I picked a level 3-sized task with level 2 enemies, we would have a lot of fairly easy opponents except for the boss in every team, giving a nice workout... until the final boss fight, where there would be two bosses. Even at level 2, that meant two alpha strikes, likely at the same time or very nearly so, close enough that I might not have the time to us Restoration between them. Or one of them would target Rook and most likely knock him out. Perhaps if I picked another enemy faction that he was more resistant to? Hooligan bosses had a penchant for flaming weapons, which was a good match for him. On the other hand, a level 2-sized task with level 3 opponents would allow us to use our normal strategies, there would be only one boss fight and only one boss in it, but everything would be one level above me and two levels above Rook. The twins would probably love it though, since they were now level 3 and found it beneath their dignity to fight lower-level opponents.

As I was fiddling with the controls at the console for one last configuration, this time with Hooligans, I heard a female voice behind me. "Hello? Excuse me... Mr Iridescent?"

I turned around and saw a woman a little younger than me, but older than the new kids I had teamed with. Maybe 21 or 22, I guessed? She wore a costume in an unusual combination of colors: Red, white and a cloudy turquoise.

"My name tag precedes me, I see." I checked hers on the visor screen. "Fiery Angelique?" She did have longish red hair as well, although I was not sure whether it was her natural color. Well, none of my concern, although it kind of fit her, despite her skin being more tan than usual for that color.

"Basic literacy test: Passed!" She grinned, as if it was a joke and I was the kind of person she would joke with.

"Good for you" I said. I had already decided that she was the kind of woman who wanted attention and took it for granted. She had above average looks and a highly unusual combination of Colors, if her costume even told the truth. In my past life, I would have walked a mile barefoot to talk to someone like her, even though I knew it was stupid. But now my time was not only my own. I had to make sure I had a task tomorrow that my team could both survive and be proud of. I turned back to the console.

"Dammit" I heard Angelique say behind me. So I had been right, she was that kind of entitled chica. Probably from 'good family', whatever that was around here. Superhero parents probably? I congratulated myself on being right on a snap judgment for once, it was not exactly my greatest strength usually.

"Dammit, that didn't come out right" said Angelique.

"Good job" said another woman nearby. "This is why you have terrible luck with guys."

"I don't have terrible luck!" said Angelique. "I don't have luck at all. Terrible luck is when you get a boyfriend and he's crazy, violent, a cheater or otherwise worse than nothing."

"Mr Iridescent? I'm sorry for my friend here. She's not good with people. We were actually hoping to ask you about something."

Against my better judgment, I turned around. The other woman was actually older than me, closer to 30 I would guess. She was paler, the classic east or north European type, with short blonde hair, tall and skinny. Her uniform was similar to her friend's, but in more common colors: Red, yellow and light blue. Still three colors though. That was unusual. In the game it had not been all that uncommon, but the heroes I actually met seemed to be mostly single-Color, then dual, and very rarely triple. My guesstimate so far was about 20:5:1. Since people here presumably did not choose their affinities (although they might choose not to use them) there was probably some genetic basis for this or something. That said, this was the second and third triple I had met up close, and all of them in the same area.

"Is this about Trident?" I asked.

"Whoa, are you a psychic?" asked Angelique.

"I met a member of that alliance outside here recently. Actually, she saved my butt from a plainclothes villain."

"I'd say that butt was well worth saving" said Angelique.

"Shut up, this is why you can't get a boyfriend!"

"It's not like guys don't comment on **my** rear end!"

"Don't say that like it's a good thing!"

"I've worked hard for that rear! Every morning and night I stretch and do squats."

"Who doesn't?" I didn't, but this wasn't my conversation.

"Anyway, Angelique here saw your costume and became curious. When she realized you were a triple-Color like us, she became even more curious."

"I know we are slow levelers" said Angelique, "but you look like you're closer to 25."

"If you must know, I did not know I was Colorful until some guy decided to stick his knife between my ribs. They did a scan at the hospital, and found that I had a bunch of Colors. So the last few days I have been kind of busy adjust to this new world. Of supers" I added belatedly.

"That makes sense" said the pale one, Heartburn Girl. (Heartburn Girl, seriously? Does that mean there were older heroes called something Heartburn something?)

"That's terrible!" said Angelique. "People just shouldn't stab civilians! That's just unfair."

"In all fairness" I admitted, "I kind of said I was a hero."

"Oh. That's terrible in its own way."

"Tell me about it" I said. "Actually, don't. I guess the irony is pretty much perfect as is."

"Guy who is not a hero pretends to be a hero, becomes a hero" said Angelique.

"Something like that. And now, to top it all off, because I level slower than lice in tar, I ended up being dropped from my first team which had outleveled me, and was put in charge of a couple fellow newbies. Three fellow newbies as of now. Here's hoping it stops at that. So that's why I am kind of busy here."

"So, have you considered joining Trident?"

"Ask me again in a year or two when I am high enough level to actually join a League."

"We could hold off a space for you."

"That's nice, but I level slowly even by your standards. Uh, I am kind of cautious. Also, I owe someone else my life. Before the time with your Trident friend."

"Oh. Could we at least stay in touch?" She sent me a friend request. I sighed and accepted. She seemed genuinely happy. Seriously?

"No booty calls this time" said her friend. Right.

"That was a friend request! Not a boyfriend request!"

"No booty calls when you are drunk either."

"I don't drink that much anymore! I'm a grown woman now!"

"Don't I wish." They were retreating, and I returned to my final test before next day's tasks.

* * *

"So, did you get your new Abilities?" I asked when we gathered for a new task the next day.

"Me first! I got Stone Pilum, a stronger single-target attack. A pilum is like in the middle between a dart and a short spear. It does more damage than my sling throw, and with impaling instead of blunt damage. It should let me more than two-shot a same-level mook... henchman."

"More than two-shot, like in three-shot?" asked his sister.

"You know what I mean! It takes off more than half their health."

"Mine is Rapidfire. Like, literally rapidly fire fire arrows." She fired off these words so rapidly that I knew she had been practicing the phrase for some time. Oh, to be young again. "I shoot three fire arrows in quick succession. If I keep my aim, they will hit the same spot, more or less. If I move my hand, they will spread out. Each arrow does the same damage as normal, and the cooldown time is three times as long as well, but it is a different timer. So I can cast a Fire Arrow, Rapidfire, and Fire Arrow again, pretty much in one series. That should be enough to take down a same-level **mook**." They had probably picked up that word from me.

"Good job, both of you! You will get to use all your Abilities today as we face a bunch of level 3 cultists. Rook, this is two levels above you, so it is best if you stick to the... henchmen this time, and not too many of them. You should level up with this task, so next time we'll be back to your usual terrific, terrifying tanking."

"Got it boss! Mooks, and not too many!"

"Well then. To battle we will go! FOR GREAT JUSTICE!"

(I had recently discovered that the "All your base" meme and several others did not exist in this world, so I was milking it for all it was worth, planting the seeds of future hilarity in the soft and fertile minds of my fellow newbies.)

* * *

We walked into yet another cave. Caves are the best when you have a team with plenty of fire wielders anyway, although I am sure the soot and bubbles in the paint are covered by the usual supervillain insurance for office buildings. Also, you should probably not write your passwords on flammable stickers. But this was a cave again, so no worry about that.

"How are you gentlemen! This is a legally sanctioned hero operation. All your base are belong to us."

I could probably have spoken Spanish for all they cared. They were all like "Intruders!" "Unbelievers!" and so on. You get used to it pretty quick. Although I still kind of enjoy the expression on the face of the dart-throwing guys when their attack hits me and they yelp in pain. Of course, it doesn't feel good for me either. Still not a masochist! But you kind of get used to it. We're heroes, this is what we do. The Cult adjutants, on the other hand, are clearly not used to be on the receiving end of the ouchie. Well, they better get used to it quick then, because here it comes. I sent the guy flying and he hit the uneven stone floor backsides first, before my Gravity Chains came down upon him like a ton of bricks, pinning him to the floor. Being level 3 was clearly not enough to resist.

I couldn't say for sure whether the dart-throwing Cult adjutants actually had some measure of Black Color in themselves that they used to imbue the darts with, or whether they just threw darts that were imbued by their bosses. My guess is that they had some small measure of Color and this was why they were tougher than the staff and knife goons. Also, they were clearly burned from my White damage reflection. If someone else had imbued the darts with Black damage, wouldn't the double damage reflection hit that person instead? Perhaps not, I find it hard to imagine the ammunition factory workers suddenly yelping in pain when I reflect 20% of the damage from a bullet. I guess whoever makes the decision to attack me is held responsible by the semi-sentient White energy. 'Principled Energies' is what they were called in the game lore. Did the White energy even know or care who had imbued the dart? I would likely never know.

The henchmen, meanwhile, tried to rush us - and specifically me - since they did not have ranged attacks. Of course, it wasn't quite that easy for them. For good measure, our friendly Flaming Arrow of Doom cast one ring around the mooks and another around me, making them burn twice. And then, when the first of them leaped through the fire to attack me, he was hit squarely in the face with a mace of solid light, which burns in its own way. Well, for him it did. For me, it delivered a small but noticeable healing. I'd do it again, but another one was coming up behind the first, so I had to grab

the chance to do the falling dominoes thing with my Gravity Throw. They both fell into a burning Ring of Fire, they went down, down, down and the flames went higher, as a better writer than me once said with amazing foreknowledge. I mean, who would know back then that such an Ability as Ring of Fire would exist and be named just that? There are many mysteries in the world! ...and it burned, burned, burned, the Ring of Fire. Good job, Flaming Arrow of Doom!

Maybe I am a slightly bad person for making light of their suffering, but this was an organization that kidnapped homeless people to ritually kill them and give their bodies to demon-like Entities to wear. The mooks played only a minor role each in this, but the bloody well knew what's going on, they just thought it is worth it. So no, I was not really sorry. Of course, I was raised by a man who seemed to sincerely believe that burning for billions of years was the default condition for sinful humans who disrespected their parents and hid underwear catalogs among their school books, so my starting point may not have been the best. I like to think I have a more nuanced view on crime and punishment than my old man, though. That said, I liked Google's old slogan "Don't be evil". Also I kind of like the principle of "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you", but this is a bit complicated by the fact that these people would do some really nasty thing unto me if they got the chance. In any case, I would like to think that if I was in full possession of my brain, I would prefer others to put me through half a minute of horrible pain rather than leave me to go down a path of ever increasing insanity, depravity and moral corruption. After all, I went through being stabbed to death - or so it seemed - to become a superhero, and I would not undo that for the world.

Mind you, I am not a theologian. I don't know whether the uncontested Ruler of the Universe actually burns people for billions of years, I'm just saying that would be really sad if he did. I wouldn't do that. Not even Hitler or Nero. Certainly not kids that take an unhealthy interest in underwear catalogs. I would probably burn the catalogs instead, like my mom did. She did have her issues, but I think she would make a better ruler of the universe than my dad. She kind of was that when I was little, ruler of my universe, and I think that worked out pretty well.

While I was reflecting on Divine Judgment and the ethics of my career choice, and bashing people with a brightly shining mace, Crimson Rook was adding fuel to the fire, so to speak, with his own Radiant Flame. This did attract the attention of a couple of the goons, but a rain of flaming arrows cut their suffering short right quick, if they weren't skewered by a stone pilum and hit by sling stones. In either case, they didn't stay on their feet long. Rook was as busy putting teleport thumbtacks on fallen cultists as he was fighting, seriously. Which is to say, he wasn't fighting very much, as I had told him not to fight very much, and besides there was no need to.

As for the thumbtacks, in the game this function had been automatic and invisible. It was part of the game lore that there existed a "teleport tag" that sent villains to prison hospital when they were defeated, but we did not actually see that happen, they just faded away a short time after they went down. It was only when I came to this world that I was given a box of these little things that looked like oddly shaped thumbtacks. For young people, that's short, sharp pins with an oversized head that was typically flat in the oldest models and more grippable in newer ones, before they disappeared when message boards became electronic or, for the more nostalgic office people, magnetic. But they still existed in my early childhood, like the first years of grade school, and that's where I learned their other use, besides pinning papers to cork boards. And so, having never undergone any formal schooling in the use of teleport tags, I simply made a habit of sticking the sharp end in the buttocks of the unconscious or nearly unconscious villains. It worked, they did blink away and I never got any questions about where they had ended up, so I just kept doing it, and now so did all my teammates when given the chance. It makes sense: Those butts must be good for something, and you never see them sitting. It must be against the Criminal Code or something. So down with your head, up with your butt, a firm press on the thumbtack, and off you go to a new and better life behind bars. And not the drinking type of bars either.

At least I have made my mark on this world in some small way, I thought as I watched my trainee touch the butts of our fallen enemies. Now I kind of regretted not making them believe the tacks had to be slapped to activate properly.

But one thing that was clear was that our team was able to handle level 3 enemies now, as long as there were not too many bosses. That was good to know. It took longer, of course, but not much longer since most of the damage was done by the ranged twins, and they had gotten some serious upgrade to their attack powers. It looked like we had all made some pretty good choices so far.

* * *

Our first level 3 task was surprisingly easy for a long time. The extra firepower really cut down on the time we tanks needed to face off against opponents, so we took less damage. Rook made sure to not pull more than one or at most two at the time, and I could handle the rest since there were so few, even if they were a level above me. If things got too crowded, I would use Gravity Throw to get some distance, or retreat slowly, making sure there were only a couple enemies in front of me that I could hit with my mace, healing myself back to full health most of the time simply from Weapon of Light. It does not really substitute for a healer, but with the reduced group size of the enemies, it did the trick. So we were pretty optimistic as we gathered outside the boss room. I targeted an adjutant as usual, and retreated to a quiet corner to teleport him.

The first hint of problem was that the victim did not show up. Then we heard shouts from the boss room, and I realized they were going to come for us. "Retreat!" I told the others. "I will try to kite them and you can wait in a side cave and come out to snipe at the end of the train."

"Nah, we can do this" said Slinger.

"I'll help tank" said Rook. "I am already level 2, I just haven't trained up yet."

Arrow did not say anything, but she stood her ground with the rest.

Well, that was touching and all, but I had not really meant to put it up for a vote. They could not tank a level 3 boss, three adjutants and eight henchmen. Now I had to. I targeted the boss as soon as I saw his funny hat. I fired off a Gravity Throw, but he stood his ground. Bosses are something else again: While not a match for a same-level hero, I was a level lower, and I realized we were pretty evenly matched when I cast Gravity Chains and he still stood. Then his Black Blast hit me, and moments later the three Black darts. That hurt. Oh yes. I am a tank and I was still down to something like 10% according to my heads-up display. It felt worse. I could barely stand. I activated my Restoration and my health recovered, supposedly by 21% of full health, but I still felt pretty shabby. Still, they had unloaded for now, our turn! "I have the boss, fire on him!" Then: "NOT YOU ROOK!" But either he did not hear, or he did not care, or he had some sudden attack of excess heroism. He plowed right through the remaining crowd to latch on to the boss. My second Gravity Throw finally got the boss off his feet, but meanwhile Rook was getting the attention of the three adjutants, who had remained with the boss to fight at range. Most of the henchmen were running toward me, but three of them too decided to turn around when they saw a flaming guy stand over their boss.

"Rook! Run away! Ranged, peel off him!"

But Rook did not run away. And then of course the three adjutants were ready to throw their darts again, and Rook had no particular defense against the Black attacks. He had roughly 50% defense against the piercing damage, but that was just a minor part of the attack. I could see his health dropping like crazy. I blew one of the adjutants away and Gravity Chains got another to his knees. Arrow cast a tight Ring of Fire around Rook, making it even harder for the henchmen to reach him, but that would not help against ranged attacks. The five mooks had reached me now, and I was grateful for it. I hit them again and again with my mace, milking them for all the healing they were worth. It did not matter that some of them hit me too. This fight was drawing out, and my regeneration had kicked into overdrive when I lost that much health at the beginning. I was recovering as fast as they could hurt me, and I was healing Rook with every impact of my Weapon of Light. But only a bit for each time. I needed to hit faster, but I couldn't. I only had the Ability to speed up others, not myself. I managed to throw the third adjutant off his feet, and used Gravity Chains on the first who was clambering to his feet. But the boss was also back up, and he could not help notice the flaming guy standing right there.

"RUN, ROOK!" I shouted again. Perhaps he was too disoriented from the dark attacks to know what way to run now, they have the ability to cloud your mind if you don't have the White power to protect you. I had to use my ranged attacks on the boss now to keep his attention. The twins seemed to be firing randomly on the people surrounding Rook, and indeed one of the henchmen fell down and stayed there, so there was some progress. And then the adjutant that was still standing, hit Rook with another dart. He had only a sliver of health left in my display. I had to keep my ranged attack on the boss to distract him from the fire next to him.

"Give me your life force, bastards!" I snarled at the mooks in front of me as I swing my mace in a wide arc, holding on for dear life. "You don't deserve it!" I was not convinced Rook did either, but he was my teammate and it was my job to protect him. We are heroes, this is what we do!

Another Black Blast. Somehow I was still alive, but not more than that. I stumbled backward, grabbing for the green pills in my left belt pouch. The mooks were following me. Maybe I should have concentrated on one at a time after all. There, got it. The pill dissolved in my mouth and I could feel the warm glow spread through my body. And in the heartbeats I was distracted and did not hit enough mooks, some idiot got in a lucky hit, despite the double firewall. Rook crumpled, fell and blinked out.

So that went really well. The twins just stood there, staring, as if something impossible had happened. Just looking at the spot where their comrade had been.

"The boss" I said, my voice sounding much more calm than I expected, more calm than I wanted even. "Fire at the boss." The remaining enemies were all coming for me now, but I locked down the third adjutant before returning to the boss. Just as I was getting surrounded, I teleported to behind the boss and sent him faceplanting with a surprise Gravity Throw. "And stay down!" I added. This time, he did. With three stone spears lodged in his body and burning all over from fire arrows, he had no strength left to fight. I turned to the adjutants. One of them was getting to his feet, but another Gravity Chain got him down. I hit him with my mace while he was down, again and again. "You bastards have no idea how tempted I am to just leave you here to die slowly from your burns. We are human too, you know. But we are heroes. We'll save your lives if we can." The twins were backing me up, and soon the adjutants were down as well. The remaining henchmen had caught up with me by now, but they were already wounded, and between my gleaming mace and the projectiles they could not last. One of them even had the good sense to run, but too late, and a well-placed

slingstone knocked him out. We went around and sent the fallen cultists off to prison hospital. This world had some amazing healing technology, the bastards were probably going to suffer less than they deserved.

I called up Rook. "Are you OK?" I asked.

"OK may be too strong" he said in my ear plug, "but I am alive. And..." he lowered his voice so I could barely hear him, "there's a really hot nurse here. I just have to get her number."

"He's totally fine" I said out loud. "Plus, he is level 2 now."

* * *

Whatever else you may say about Color City and the world it inhabits, they got better health care than back home. The healing technology, let alone the magic, seemed nothing short of miraculous. There were even Healers there with Green Abilities similar to the Heroes out there healing teams in battle. Not everyone wants to confront evil face to face. So I was not surprised that Scarlet Rook was back to full health and released from the hospital before I was home. He called me and begged me to not boot him off the team. As if that thought had even occurred to me!

"I am not booting you from my team until you are so far ahead of me that I can't survive the enemies that are too easy for you. But you are free to leave earlier. The twins will be level 4 in about four days if all goes well, and you should be 3 either at the same time or the next task. Quite likely at the same time, since the lowest level heroes in a team tend to get more Affinity Points out of each fight. So at that point, you may be able to tank for them at level 4, but I won't. Two levels is too much of a difference."

"Not for you. You have all kinds of Abilities!"

"But my stats are no higher than someone else my level. And only less than half of my Abilities are directly related to tanking."

"Yeah, about that, I am a bit surprised you took Quicken Other instead of a defensive speed boost for yourself."

"That is not an option, I'm afraid. As you know, each color usually has two power pools. Some colors may have more than one defensive or offensive pool, but in my case I don't have Yellow as defense or offense, only utility and support. So I can give myself Travel Speed, Carry Capacity or even Travel Jump, but no combat Abilities for myself. I can grant them to others to a more limited degree, though. It was just not useful for you since your attack was automatic anyway."

"It still is. I did not take any other attacks, just defenses. Since I was so easily knocked out. It won't happen again."

"Defenses, plural?"

"Caltrops Circle and Crystal Armor."

"Whoa, you got Crystal Armor at level 2?"

"I wasn't supposed to?"

"I guess it makes sense when facing the kind of opponents we do." Crystal Armor was a relatively light and thin armor that provided some protection against edged and impaling weapons and cold and heat, and good protection against energy and negative energies as well as mental attacks. Caltrops Circle for Brown tankers were tiny stone spikes that grew up from the floor in a circle around them, making it hard for attackers to reach them, slowing them down and doing moderate damage. It was a genius combination with Radiant Flame, since it increased the time attackers spent within burning distance and broke their momentum even further away.

"You really are becoming a tanker's tanker" I said after considering the Abilities he now had. "I shall be glad to leave the team in your hands."

"Not for a long time yet!" said Rook, but I was not so sure about that. My best bet was 4 days. And then I would be alone, or perhaps in charge of yet another mini newbie team.

Chapter 10

It was the next day before I saw my team again. We would have taken the late shift off anyway, because of the level-up. In the game we used to do tasks back to back or nearly so, and whoever leveled up would just run by the trainer to level up and then meet up with the rest. But it was a lot tougher in real life, or whatever this life was. The tasks took longer and were quite exhausting to body and mind. Even though you could go out there and do it again, you really didn't want to. Plus it was good form to reflect on the past mission and what you had learned from it. Or perhaps that was just me, which would explain how things had gotten the way they did last time.

The team certainly seemed to have reflected on our previous mission though, they were all looking rather tame as we gathered outside a warehouse.

"It is not impossible to run into Cultists in a warehouse, but it is the favorite hangout for Hooligans, the number one low-tier gang in this city. And when I say number one, I mean they are both the lowest of the low in the villain pecking order, but also probably the most numerous, employing normies exclusively. Even the bosses only have magical weapons

or other artifacts rather than innate Abilities like we. And starting today, these are going to be our bread and butter enemies, since Rook here is taking on the role of main tank."

"What? I can't do that!"

"He has shown that he has an inordinate amount of courage, and with two new Abilities he also has the power to back it up. Crystal Armor will further boost his defense against edged attack, so there is no longer any ... henchman attacks that can do serious harm to him even if they get close enough. And thanks to Stone Caltraps, if they come close enough, they are going to suffer for it. Oh yes, they are definitely going to suffer. The caltraps will not only harm them directly, but break the force of their approach so they get burned even more both on their way in and out. Some will even give up and withdraw without getting close enough to do damage, while taking damage themselves. It is a quite effective Tank ability that I don't have. My role as a secondary tanker will be to distract and lock down the ranged baddies, which retain their damage capability in this scenario, and to heal the main tank with a more brawler-like attack pattern. But for this to function properly, Rook as the main tank will have to wade in first. Yes, that means he will take the first round of ranged damage, but I should be able to heal that up later in the fight as I will now go melee on the adjutants and eventually assist with the henchmen. Ranged will assist me as usual, so there will be little difference for you at first."

"Are you sure this will work?" asked Rook.

"We are the same level now. We have roughly the same stats but you have much higher defense. You don't yet have self-heal like I do, but I can radiate healing so we should be OK. Let's do this! FOR GREAT JUSTICE!"

* * *

The first group of Hooligans showed that my strategy worked as expected. Crimson Rook walked up toward the group that watched the door, all his shields up, and recited the formula I had taught him: "This is an officially sanctioned hero operation. All your base are belong to us. You are on your way to destruction. Make your time."

He did not even get time to finish before the whole bunch attacked him. The Hooligan adjutants have handguns and know how to use them, but they did rather paltry damage because of his Clay Armor and Crystal Armor as well as Slinger Wall's Stone Armor. It can seem a bit cheat-like for a tank to get this huge defense at level 2, but that is how the game used to work as well: Healers were pretty much optional, but you needed to have at least some team members with support or control powers in that case. We had Slinger and me, which was plenty for non-boss fights. I locked down the gun guys using my two gravity Abilities, and the twins used their ranged attacks to take these out while the knife and baseball guys were still trying to swarm Rook. To be honest, I could probably have left it at that, because it took so long for the mooks to reach him and their accuracy was so low, he did not have time to get seriously wounded before we took down the attackers. But since he did not have any heals at all except for expensive green pills, I walked up to the knife mooks and bashed them with my glowing mace, draining their health to heal our new main tank.

The damage stats for Weapon of Light are pretty unimpressive compared to other weapon attacks, but this is compensated by its side effect of distributing the drained health to wounded team members. This makes the Ability better than normal weapons for a team that lacks a healer, or for soloers without a self-heal. For everyone else it is frankly a bit underwhelming. I did not have access to my bookmarked websites with stats comparisons, but I seemed to recall that raw damage was 60% of a normal weapon. This was obviously great if there was always some wounded person on the team, but terrible if there never was.

However, Weapon of Light was actually much better than this number might lead you to think, and there was another reason why anyone who could take the Ability would want to do so, regardless of whether they also had aptitude for normal weapons: Weapon of Light ignored armor, or in practice any resistance to blunt, edged and impaling weapons. So no matter what form your weapon took, it would hit for full damage unless it was evaded or resisted by energy resistance. But the overwhelming majority of villains would take full damage, and in addition this damage would then be used to heal the team as needed. In the game I had never seen anyone who could take Weapon of Light and didn't. But yeah, it was definitely geared primarily toward teams without sufficient Green support. Paladin-type tanks and brawlers were the first to get invited if there were no healers around, and the second to last if there were. (More healers were the last, obviously, unless you had a team too large for one healer to cover.)

I could probably have done more damage by circling the enemies and using Gravity Throw to throw them from the outskirts of the Stone Caltraps to land full length on the caltraps patch. If walking on those things caused damage to your feet, landing flat on them would do horrific damage to your whole body. Probably not killing you outright, as the spikes were pretty small, but you would have dozens of bleeding puncture wounds all over and probably be put out of the fight instantly. But doing so would not heal my comrade, so instead I hit them repeatedly with my glowing mace. Even so, I did not have much time to do so, because the twins were firing rapidly (accelerated by my Quicken Other) and the already bleeding and burned henchmen went down like grass before the scythe, to exaggerate slightly. It was over in less time than it takes me to describe it.

* * *

I stopped outside the boss room. "OK, this is going to be much easier than yesterday. Today we have a tank that is a near perfect match for the enemies we face. Yesterday, he had less defenses and an enemy that was a terrible match. That is why I said to pull back, because I was the only person on the team who was strong against that boss and his adjutants. Remember for the rest of your life: You are never just strong or weak, you are strong against or weak against someone and something. I am strong against Black attacks, but not a very strong tank overall. Rook is strong against all kinds of mundane attacks now, but he can't heal others and never will. Today we face an enemy that does mundane damage and, in the case of the boss, fiery weapon damage. With a Brown and Red tanker and a Brown support, we could take them on in a direct fight. But I want to make this even easier for us, so easy that we can't fail without divine intervention or something on that scale."

I pointed back the way we had come. "See that gallery up there? Ranged go there. Rook, you will guard the stairs and not let anyone through. I will try to teleport adjutants until the crowds come running. Then you fire on them from the gallery and fade back out of sight. They will run for the stairs, where they will be stopped by the caltrops and fire. I will lock down the adjutants and tell you so you can come back and fire at the mob downstairs. I will fall back and assist the main tank. The enemy should be bunched up like fish in a barrel. Does everyone agree?"

"Yes!"

"Absolutely!"

"On it, boss!"

Once again I failed at teleporting the first adjutant, but this time nothing more happened. I waited a little bit, but there was no uproar in the other room. I peeked in and they may have been restless, but no more. I went back and tried again, failed again, and this time the whole room came running. So I fell back, and the twins unleashed fire and hailstone from above as ordered, then fell back just as the adjutants raised their weapons. I ran ahead of the crowd back to the stairs, taking up position just outside Rook's caltrops field. The mooks, being all melee, all tried to get to the stairs at once, crowding onto the caltrops and within reach of Rook's leaping Radiant Flame. The boss, wielding a flaming sword for the occasion - their magical items vary somewhat randomly, although with a preference for fire - also went into melee range. I started using Gravity Throw and Gravity Chains to lock down the only ranged enemies this time, the three adjutants. I took a couple bullets before they were securely locked down and I could call on the twins to come forward and finish them off. I started circling the mooks, hitting each of them a couple times quickly with the mace as I passed by them, healing myself and Rook, who had taken some scratches from the mooks, but not much more than that. The boss was made of sterner stuff than the rest, though. He waded through the caltrops and swung his flaming sword at Rook. But of course the flames had no effect at all on someone who lived in the middle of a raging fire. The sword did some damage, but the three layers of armor broke most of the impact. I healed him back up as fast as the boss could hurt him, and now the twins had finished the adjutants and leaned over the railing to send a barrage of fire and stone at the boss. He did not get to use that sword more than twice before the four of us had taken care of him.

"And that was the story of the Hooligans in the warehouse" I said. "Do you want to hear it again this afternoon, or what?"

* * *

In the afternoon and a little bit into the evening, we plowed through another Hooligan task. The team was getting the hang on this now, including the differences from the previous enemy type and the shift to a new main tank. This time we beat the boss and his friends in their own room, just walking up to them like any other group. Rook took a bit of damage, but I don't think he was ever under half health, and he handled it well under pressure. I also got to heal most of it back up as I asked the twins to save a couple henchmen for me to bash on. Otherwise they would have taken them down too fast, with their new triple-damage Abilities they can really thin out a group of same-level enemies. Of course, these groups are level 2 size, even if the individuals are level 3.

"Next task, if nobody protests, we'll fight larger groups, and there will be a boss in every group. It will be tougher and take longer time, obviously, but you will get more Affinity and more Reputation Points. The boss fight will be tougher with more than one boss, but I will help tank as needed, and we will see if there is any way to use tactics against them. You are all growing stronger by the day, so I think we can do it."

"If you think we can do it, then we can definitely do it" said Arrow. "You're like the most cautious hero on the planet. You have, what, ten Abilities and you still try to find some sneaky way to corner the enemies or give us the drop on them."

"Well, some of those Abilities are kind of situational, but yeah, I am probably among the more cautious team leaders out there. Take comfort in knowing that you will outgrow me in a couple more days."

"That is not a comfort. I am starting to like going into every battle knowing that we are going to win, and steamroll the opposition, as long as everyone shuts up and does what you say."

"Shutting up is optional" I said, baring my teeth in what I hoped was a friendly smile. I've been told that it scares kids though, so I am not 100% sure.

And then I came home, and Silver Star Girl had news for me. Again.

* * *

I did not literally lie and say I had planned this all the time. On the other hand, I **had** told my team that we would fight larger groups from now on, and we would.

"Everyone, please welcome our newest team member: Mashiro Neko from Zutto Yume Mamotteru. She is a single-color brawler, using White. As a brawler, she has access to Weapon of Light already at level 1, unlike us tanks. Will you show us, Mashiro Neko?"

"Just call me kitten, meow! These are my claws, meow!" Long, shimmering claws made out of solid white light sprang out from her hands. They looked realistic enough to scare anyone, but of course being made from the Color of Judgment, they would only seriously harm people with evil alignment.

Without her claws Mashiro Neko would not scare anyone: She was the smallest on our party, although she was probably around the same age as the twins, and she was wearing a skintight white fluffy fleece-like costume with fake cat ears, cat tail and cat paw gloves. She looked cute and cuddly, until those long shiny claws appeared. This was no doubt intentional.

"OK then, every fight will be a boss fight now. Crimson Rook, you go first and provoke them. I then try to lock down the boss and later the adjutants. Once I have their attention, Slinger Wall and Flaming Arrow of Doom assist me in taking them down as fast as possible, before moving on to the lower-grade henchmen. Mashiro Neko, you assist Rook with the henchmen, but don't attack them until they are busy fighting him. Try to divide your attacks between several of them so you don't do too much attack to each while still doing plenty of damage in total. Doing too much damage to an enemy that is not fully committed to fighting the tank can cause them to turn on you, and there is a two level difference in power between you and them, and you have no defense except the Stone Armor from Slinger, which is weaker than native armor. Shout if you get attacks on you, and I'll try to lock them down, OK?"

"Got it, meow!"

And with that, we marched into the warehouse.

* * *

To be honest, I had expected Mashiro Neko to be ditzy, impulsive, selfish and unreliable. I guess even I have my prejudices... But she waited patiently behind me as Crimson Rook walked up to the group of Hooligans and had them attack him. I then started locking down the ranged villains, the adjutants. As soon as one of them was locked down, the twins were on them and made sure they did not get up this side of the prison hospital.

"Your turn Mashiro... Kitten. Help the tank. Only strike each each enemy once or twice. Shout out if attacked."

"Got it, meow!" Now she took off like a white streak, dancing around the periphery of the cluster of mooks that surrounded Rook. She wisely avoided the boss, who could probably one-shot her with his flaming spear, or at least two-shot her for sure. Instead she ran back and forth around the other side of the living bonfire, slashing at the henchmen. She did not do a lot of damage at level 1, but what damage she did was converted into healing for Rook, which he could need since I did not get into healing him as long as I was busy locking down the adjutants and then the boss. By the time I was trying to either throw the boss or crush him with Gravity Chains, I actually moved into melee range and started using my hard-light mace to add to the healing. Both of the twins also fired at the boss now, so he actually turned away from Rook to focus on the new threats. But it was too late for that. Once the boss was down, I joined Mashiro whittling down the mooks who were trapped in the Stone Caltrops. Our Weapons of Light were healing Rook faster than the enemies could hurt him, but then we ran out of enemies.

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