



Chapter One

AWAKENING



Darkness. The dark where all things come from, the dark that hides all within, which remains the refuge for the scared and the vulnerable, by saving them, and dooming them at the same time. Within that darkness, within that ancient and unknowable evil that has plagued mankind since its birth, was a recklessly loose set of cardboard boxes, turning the interior of a weary transport truck into pure chaos.

Amidst that chaos, was a form, a small and peculiar person who slept soundly despite the ruckus, and somehow remained so, even throughout the wild turns of the vehicle that slammed his diminutive body into the metal walls. *Thwack*, one powerful hit laid out his body face down across the bed, but even as he was subsequently pelted with objects – like a heavy pair off welding goggles and an exploding box of nails – he still did not stir. An actual hammer clipped him across the face last, and it barely made him falter from his obnoxiously loud snoring.

This was Zed.

Triumphant in his victory, over Death.

Which then abruptly ended, when the vehicle around him shuddered into its final stop, tossing the boxes forward once more and bringing him with them, as they all eventually tumbled around

into burying him against the loading door.

The reckless drivers came there soon after to inspect their cargo for unloading, ironically chuckling to themselves as all people do when they think they've gotten away with shirking work and spiting their customers. However, as they threw the door up and began to lift away damaged boxes, they picked up one final empty package, and all their snickering immediately vanished, in the moment they revealed a small leg in shoddy jeans.

"What?! A..." one quickly looked around, then took into a desperate whisper. "*A... a child? How did a child get in our truck?! How could you let this happen?!*"

"Me?! I'm the apprentice here! There was no kid when we left! I've done everything you told me."

"You were the one driving! You probably... *you probably killed him!*"

"I did everything under *your* guidance. You said it wasn't worth the effort for this awful Dominion."

"Alright, alright. *Be quiet.* I need to think. We... we can't let anyone know this happened."

"Even I know we're supposed to report this to the local police department. I can't lose this job... *we* can't lose this job. I don't wanna go to a jail Dominion. Kells is just... awful."

"That's the *least* of our problems. Because, what you haven't learnt is... that there *are* no police out here. This is one of *those* places."

"Oh... *oh!* Where... where *the Heroes* work."

"You've heard the stories. We could end up with anything from a small fine..."

"...To being splattered across the sidewalk as a *fine* bloody paste."

The older driver looked at his apprentice unimpressed.

"Ain't my words. That's what the others all gossip about. It's happened to a lot of caravans. Hear about it happening to the caravans up on the northern continent all the time."

"Pah! Damn Heroes. Always lording it up over us regular guys. If you ask me, they're just as bad as those-*gyah!*"

The form in the van then suddenly jumped up from amidst the cardboard, and as it sent everything flying everywhere – creating a small explosion of numerous goods – the older man had hand weights fly into his gut. Promptly winding him, they forced him to the ground,

leaving the younger one and turning to looking up at the form in a state of aghast shock, at least until had to block his eyes from the harsh sun glaring in his face.

Still, there, stretching openly, was a small 5ft figure, in simple jeans, worn trainers, and a plain black shirt, clothing a clearly lean but compact form, of someone who would be more accurate to be called a young man rather than a child. The driver tried to look at the figure, but as the sun glared even stronger, the strikingly pale skin became almost radiant in its light, and the only thing that came into sharp relief was a crescent of veiny skin down the left side of the face. This shaped scar glowed red – the blood plainly near the surface, like layers had been purposefully cleaved away – as it trailed from his forehead to his chin in an arc and encompassed his eye to make it pop out slightly more than usual.

That face then yawned once more, and as it changed the path of light to bring his open mouth into focus, the apprentice flinched back, when they saw what could have only been an overly large maw of sharp and triangular spikey teeth. Though, they then promptly flinched back yet again, for the figure suddenly dropped down without a care, and half-heatedly acknowledged them with a piercing crimson stare.

Admittedly, it was more looking past with a disdainful tiredness, until shifting upwards, and noticing the pair of welding goggles had been caught in three messy hair spikes on his head. He took them down and unruffled his hair, showing it deeply black and down to his shoulders, but also with the ends tipped in red in a most remarkable way, because it was clearly too precise and wasn't faded enough to be the work of dye.

Still, Zed took the goggles in his somewhat larger-than-normal hands and brought them before himself, allowing him to inspect the dark singular lens with a child-like curiosity. After considering then for a moment, he quickly came to a decision, causing him to snap to the apprentice and gave him a particularly angry scowl.

They plainly sweated in response, for there was something about the intense expression and the baring of the creature, somehow making feel bold in the veil reality, while coupled with an ominous feeling that threatened to eat him whole. *Just stay still, and maybe this*

vampire won't hurt you as well.

"I'm taking these," came the voice simple confidence, sounding oddly eloquent with the surprisingly deep tones.

In the time it took the apprentice to go through his ridiculous thought – realising that this form couldn't be a vampire in *the sun* – the short and dark figure had already walked past, to begin down the path behind them. The young man soon noticed in alarm, but then he was quickly reminded of co-worker pinned to the floor, and rushed to help them up.

Meanwhile, Zed himself just kicked off in a casual stride, letting him pick his teeth idly with sharp nails, while he held the goggles up high and peered through to the sky above.

He never liked the sun; musing on it as he saw the bright orb become definable behind the black lens, while it also allowed him to notice the shade of red the sky had become so close to sunset, which he liked far more. He especially liked it when he saw the river to the side, it looking somewhat like blood as it reflected what was above, despite it glaring in his face with a harsh orange that just wouldn't leave his face no matter where he looked.

So, after having a brilliant idea, the man put on the welding goggles and continued down the riverside path, enjoying the faux night before him, until he abruptly walked into a lamppost and took them off with a chuckle.

"Mwehehe... maybe... maybe *he* can do something with these. I'll have to see where he is."

Zed rummaged in his jeans for a second, before finally realising he couldn't find his phone.

"Oh... yeah... had to leave that behind too. *Boy*, is he gonna be annoyed when he can't reach me."

He just sighed and looked out to the blood river, hearing the park behind him buzz with a few people, hearing their feet tread the stone paths and grassy fields without a care, hearing the people laugh and joke free in whatever they wanted to do.

"Blah. *He* can only complain if he didn't break his *own* things on the journey in, damn egghhead."

As his stomach let off a noticeable hungry growl – the sound loud

and violent as his gut visibly shuddered to the feeling – he began to twitch and look around like a suspicious cat, clearly sniffing for something.

“Hmmm... food... somewhere?”

Then, simply, and without forethought, he reached out his hand to effortlessly snatch an ice cream from a child passing behind him. The child quickly began to cry; Zed cared not. They pointed and whimpered passionately, but he only looked around to see if there was any of these so-called *parents* coming for him, for he always hated dealing with more *people*. No one was coming, so he opened his spike-tooth mouth and looked to down the ice cream in one, but in the moment before he could, a sudden smack struck his head from behind and sent his sharp teeth deep into his tongue.

“What are you man?! Some kind of monster?!” Roared a voice; one that clearly knew how to deal with idiots. “Here you go sweetie, run along. I’ll deal with whatever *this is*.”

A woman in a wine-red beret then ripped the ice cream from the man’s hand and gave it back; corking the small girl’s tears, before sending them running off with a head pat.

This person then snapped back to him, showing herself easily taller than him, but likely younger, despite the maturity that came through in her face of blatant fury. She had long yet ragged chestnut hair, a dark leather jacket giving her a clear showing of that attitude she was wielding, while her eyes were simply brown, if yet being ones that were clearly deep, soulful, and somewhat tired.

He gave her a casual look up in turn, but he immediately focused on that beret, always being like a magpie for those vibrant red colours, as it also allowed him to blatantly ignore the fearsome expression staring him in the face.

“Hey! Hey you! *Moron!*” She snapped her fingers before his sights demandingly. “What kind of major malfunction do you have to take candy from a kid like that?”

“Itzz woool nummah waaan,” he mumbled, with his sore tongue sticking out of his mouth.

“Um... sorry, what?”

“Penny,” spoke a second and very quiet girl, apparently tugging on her friend to get her attention. “He said ‘it’s rule number one’.”

Zed raised his head like a curious animal with no shame and just barely caught a sight of another girl, her again just barely taller than himself, while having heavy gothic boots, some sort of long fanciful dark clothing, and a face obscured by black bangs. She stood silent and motionless behind the beret girl, somehow staying remarkably undetectable.

“Okay... what the hell is that supposed to mean?! What the hell is that—?!”

Whatever it was, the girl didn’t get an answer, because by turning back to Zed with impatience and meeting his face again, she locked sight with his crimson eyes, everything went dark before her.

Penny – this beret girl – found herself abruptly lost in a black abyss, endlessly floating in a realm of shadow, the sight of those piercing eyes the last thing she remembered, for she was now truly alone on what felt like the most remote place on earth. She seemed to be falling down a well with no bottom, an eternal hole in the depths of star-less space, nothing but a wall of darkness on all sides of her, while the wind rushing past was the only sound that she could hear.

That was, until she heard a muttering, with something following her, surrounding her, falling with her but not alarmed by the situation, with it instead letting off an unmistakeable feeling of being interested in her. Oddly, this made the girl abruptly angry, her clearly frustrated by her own impatience at the hiding thing, as she flailed around in the space and lunged into the shadow wall to grab it.

She pulled out something; she couldn’t see it, but it was clearly a small creature of some kind, something like a spider with five legs, which she then threw to the side to let her reach into the dark again. She pulled out another creature, and another, and another; their unrelenting numbers just increasing the amount of frustration that she was feeling.

However, Penny then grabbed one she shouldn’t have, as it jumped out of her grip and latched around her neck, choking her brutally, gripping her unrelentingly, while she frantically struggled to pull it off. With it, came them, all the things she had pulled from before, revealing them as hands, hands that came up at her back and pushed her towards it, doing it with an almost loving reassurance. Penny just continued to panic and struggle, trying with every effort to

knock anything away, while knowing the one around her neck was killing her with its power.

Forward and forward she went, urged on and pulled by force, reaching the bordering walls of shadow ahead of her, as then, even more hands sprung out and began to grip onto each of her flailing limbs. She cried in their grip, struggling to her last breath, trying to scream out in some desperate plead for help, and then finally resigning to her unfortunate fate, when all the gripping hands began to pull her apart like rabid animals.

Then, she woke up, feeling the warm sun on her face again, finding nothing had changed and no time had passed, all except for a single tear down her own face, being oddly one of relief.

“Penny?! Penny?!” Asked the girl behind her frantically; making strong tugs of her jacket in worry.

“I’m... I’m fine,” she just sniffed and wiped her face. “I’m *fine*, Frankie. W... what was I talking about?”

The girl quickly noticed that Zed had slowly begun to tiptoe off in the moment that she had let her guard down, and she reached out to snatch him back by the collar.

“Hey, get back here! ...Look, if you want something to eat, we... we can buy you your own damn ice cream.”

“Oh, really? That’s the nicest thing anyone’s done for me,” he turned to them and grinned; coming off sarcastic, but with a genuine undertone of thanks.

Penny raised her eyebrow at that, but she let him go and brought him to a nearby service van, whereupon she gave a kind smile and a wink to the old serving man, acquiring an ice cream for each of them without apparently spending any money. Zed didn’t even say thanks, before he put the entire cone in his mouth and disappeared every inch of it with a mighty crunch. The act left Penny standing aghast, with her ice cream nearly falling out of its cone, while the goth girl Frankie just mutedly licked her own in mild amusement.

“So, uh, what’s Rule One?”

“‘Take candy from a baby’ of course,” Zed said simply, licking the ice cream off his face and looking satisfied.

Dusk had passed as quick as it ever did, turning the sky quickly through red to grey to dark blue, as it somehow acted as a beacon to

all the inhabitants and caused them to evacuate the local area, even down to the ice cream worker sealing off his stand like a fortress. No one was around in the spacious grassy park anymore; no one but our three, leaving it all looking oddly eerie in the silence, especially with the distant street lights coming on and colder winds breezing in.

“What kind of rule is—Oh shit!” Penny begun, but as she urgently noticed her watch, she threw her ice cream into the bin and looked ready to run, “Frankie, we gotta go, *now!*”

“Oh... oh no,” she also looked panicked, with her also noticing something to the side. “They’re already here!”

A different kind of people then came into view from around the corner, each one a shifty creature in either a ratty vest or a lazy hood, of a kind to rob you in a back alley but with their ripe smells acting as an early warning system.

The leader of the small group seemed to be a tall and dirty one in a ripped green sports jacket, him being no more remarkable than the last in his short cut of timid brown hair, his prominently pointed nose, and features of someone losing his struggle with greasy adolescence. He noticed our trio and seemingly extended a hungry smile, gesturing for his entourage to follow his lead, while he moved in with what was clearly overdone confidence.

Penny made an imperceptible glance around; one that took stock and knew she had nowhere clear to run. So, she just stood in place and braced herself, making sure that Frankie was well hidden behind her, while trying to suppress the tiny bead of sweat that appeared on her forehead. Zed noticed but he didn’t really seem to care, he just sat on the wall with his legs waving off the ground, while now casually licking the ice cream that he had caught Frankie throwing away.

“Hey Penny-sweet, you wanna party with us tonight?” Asked the sport jacket one, with a voice like oil dripping down a dirty window.

“Hello *Nevin*. I see you still haven’t taken my advice about showering before you get within three feet of me.”

“It’s *Needle* now!” He screamed in a shrill defiance. “You know that, the boss told you last time you spent... time together.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. It’s almost like I don’t care about you.”

“Oh, come on baby, don’t be like that,” the guy then sidled up to her wolfishly. “If you can spend time with the boss, I’m sure you can

spend time with me.”

“You have nothing I want *Nnn-ee*dle.” She told him firmly, spitting out the word.

Zed just watched innocently from the side-lines, somehow firmly remaining in the gang’s blind spot, despite just slowly licking his ice cream with a dumb and careless look on his face. He curiously eyed Frankie next to him, being oddly confused when he saw her nearly hyperventilating and on the cusp of vibrating apart in panic.

“I’m sure the experience will be a thrill all of its own,” came Nevin eagerly; his hand moving up to her chest and giving it a rough squeeze with a motion like a chittering insect.

“Get lost!” Penny cracked him with the back of her hand and leaving a vibrant red mark.

“F... fucking deal with it!” As immediately redoubled his efforts, almost going in for a tackle.

“I said, get lost!” She then pulled back her fist and bashed him in the nose, leaving her knuckles stinging and red while she tried to play it off as nothing.

“Grrr... You’ll pay for that, you whore! Get her boys! Get her! ...Boys?!”

Nevin looked around in confusion, to realise there was no sign of the ten other slimy individuals that he had brought with him. He turned completely around and almost begged the open space to return his gang; him being obviously the kind of guy that couldn’t do anything besides boss people around, as the slow acceptance of being alone started to make him go into a panic.

“You little bitch!” He rasped, almost becoming rabid, as he turned back to Penny and whipped out a pocket knife. “I’ll teach you to trick the King Pin Boys!”

This weaselly figure then marched over and forced her down with all the advantage his wiry body could use, finally getting her onto her front, before he pulled on her hair and held his knife under her neck. Penny closed her eyes and tried to remain calm, seemingly being familiar with these kinds of situations, as she clearly went through thought processes of slowly edging herself away from the blade, while also not triggering Nevin into doing something reckless.

Penny had always lived by one creed; if you wanted something,

own it. The gangs firmly controlled this town, their grimy hands had been around since she was a kid, their numbers great and their lusts unrelenting, just taking and taking regardless of what anyone tried to build. This had made her smart, this had made her cunning, she knew how to keep people safe, no matter the scars she had earned, or the scars she was probably going to gain for once again calling them out on their stupidity.

She knew there was no Heroes to save you, no forces to save the day, the World was angry, greedy, and full of sin, so the only plan was to work, work until your eyes bled, sacrifice all that could be sacrificed and obtain the thing you wanted most. That wouldn't make her a good person for sure, and if she wasn't explicitly good, that would make her...

"Perhaps you didn't hear," spoke a sudden voice; it cool and calm despite clearly possessing the utmost contempt. "She said '*get lost*'."

Panicked and pained noises quickly came from Nevin behind her, his grip unpleasantly getting stronger on her hair, but with a shake of desperation to it that also made his knife dangerously wobble.

"Ah! Hahaaa, come on, bro! I was just... just having some fun!"

Crack, unmistakable sounds of crunching bone started to come from her captor, leaving him immediately going into tormented whines, before he swiftly released Penny and allowing her to scamper back with the utmost urgency.

She immediately clambered across the grass and turned back when she got at least several paces away, coming to see large and masterful fingers encompassing Nevin's head, in order to unrelentingly grasp it, as if they were about to crush a simple orange. The skull was being held with just one hand at an arm's length away from the attacker, showing the nails dug firmly into the skin, before the entire body was lifted off the ground with impossibly inhuman strength.

The crimson eyes of the figure then finally pierced through the dark, allowing her to see Zed, who was in turn staring unimpressed into the back of his victim.

"I know, I know, I'll let you have her! Also some of our stash! I swear my boys have got some, I swear!"

Zed enclosed his hand on Nevin's head again without a word, as the cracking sounds prominently increased once more. The thug

changed tack at the speed of light.

“Hehe, you better not do this bro. I’m directly under Boon, you know who that is right? He’s the local gang leader. He’s huge, he’ll fuck you up.”

“I. Do not. *Care.*” Came the man’s vicious growl, giving another playful squeeze of the man’s skull, as Penny swore she saw a small sinister grin grace hiss scarred face. “A *minor* gang leader means nothing to me. *Nothing.*”

“Mi-minor gang leader?! Who... who are you?!”

Nevin’s head was then turned around at immediate speed, almost breaking it in the process, as he came to stare straight into a pair of manic eyes and his fanged teeth in a deranged smile.

“I AM YOUR OVERLORD!”

“...What... what does that mean?!” He feared away, trying to push against the man.

“It means... I like doing *this!*”

The voice then screamed in agony, for as Zed moved both of his hands to either side of the man’s head and squeezed vindictively, it quickened the cracks to the point where he might have begun to cave in the skull. Surprisingly, Penny got up at this time, as she came to stand behind the suffering man; her just standing there, standing there and watching, with her hand wavering by her side for a deeply concerning amount of time.

“W-why are you doing this?!” The boy begged, trying to pry off the vicious digits and finding them immovable.

“Because you *sicken* me. Now, how about I ‘give you a thrill?’”

Like playing around with a ragdoll, Zed took the guy’s head in one hand and moved around his limp body with simple ease, letting him pull the hooded form back in readiness, before finally pitching him high into the night sky above. The crimson eyes simply watched as the body rocketed up at unreasonable speed – the screaming becoming a distant sound and any sight of him blinking from view – while Penny came to stand by his side and curiously joined him in his looking.

“Oops, I think I broke his neck when I tossed him. Oh well.”

“You didn’t have to do that, you know.”

“I don’t care, I wanted to.” He shrugged off, before turning away

with a simple yawn, and beginning to scratch his chin in thought. “Hmm, I wonder if I can get the other ice cream out of the trash.”

“Hehe, well... I’m sure we can buy—”

“Wait-a-minute.”

The small, dark figure then effortlessly leapt 20ft to catch Nevin from the air, leaving him spinning around several times to dispel the momentum, before then swiftly landing to hold the unconscious body like a doll once more.

“Okay, I *didn’t* break his neck.”

Zed once again threw the form without a care, this time over his shoulder, as a distant splash was heard in the nearby river, and a muted ripple disturbed the reflection of the full moon. Penny just watched it all happen with her mouth agape in pure bewilderment, and she was only brought out of it when Frankie finally came running up to grab her hands in a fluster.

“Pen... he grabbed... and he... them... crack.”

The goth girl quickly gave up attempting to speak, and as she instead turned to point in a direction, Penny followed the finger, to a stocky and large tree lit by a street light at the edge of the park. It was now full of all those punks from earlier, each of them had been knocked out and left littered with a fair number of prominent bruises, if all still suffering a slightly less severe fate than the possibly drowning Nevin.

“So... more ice cream?” Zed suddenly intruded on the pair; him looking at them expectantly, while seeming completely ignorant of their shock.

Indeed, he just smiled at them in his brazen impish way, but this one was wide and innocent in its cheeriness, proudly showing off his spiky teeth. Penny saw this face and then just began to laugh, it starting as an immodest snicker, before it then grew and grew into an out-of-control manic giggle, as if something inside her broke while trying to comprehend a completely mad idea.



“So... who’s this guy you’re looking for?” Penny asked curiously, waving around an ice pop without care.

“Ish guy.” Zed held his own ice pop in his mouth, while he

reached into his pocket and handed them a picture.

This was several minutes later, as the dark sky had fully taken hold, allowing the street lights to come on and light the town in a warm yet buzzing yellow glow. In this time, they had crossed the park twice; once to buy Zed *another* treat at the nearby and always open convenience store, before then leaving through the park gate to enter the more residential area.

The block of streets they were passing by seemed more like an alley; having three-storey, flat-topped buildings built out of a vibrant yet worn red brick, that were noticeably packed close together. Each and every one of them had nothing besides their doors on their exteriors to differentiate them from their neighbours, or to make them a viable target. Then, if you checked out any other tight street leading past a house, it had a grey stone path that led into an intricate maze, where the houses continued on indefinitely and you could only find yours if you knew exactly where it was located.

“Rec’s the smiling idiot,” Zed told them simply, before taking the ice pop and removing everything from the stick in one mouthful.

The picture was of three kids, the man himself being obviously younger yet not at all shorter, as he was just a slightly thinner and more gangly thing, that was wearing something akin to a black and spiky knight’s helmet. To his right was the tallest person, them completely garbed in full metallic knight’s armour, despite it looking too big in the chest. While, to the left was a boy with royal blue hair, him smiling so wide that it closed his eyes, as he wore the garb of a blacksmith, wielded a clearly fake hammer in his right hand, and had large oil stains all over his face.

“Sorry, can’t say I’ve seen him, but I’ll keep an eye out.”

Zed let out a big snort of derision.

“What I say?”

“Nothing... I’ll tell Rec that you... ‘kept an *eye* out for him’.
Mwahahahahaaa!”

“Who’s the other one?” Asked Frankie; the gothic girl still mutedly walking the other side of Penny, while also enjoying her own ice pop.

“Someone who doesn’t like to listen when I talk,” the man noticeably rolled his eyes, before he took back the picture and slid it into the pocket of his jeans.

“You could stay at ours for a few days while you look for him? After what you did, I’m sure me or Frankie could put you up for a while.”

“Hmmm, nah. Thanks, but I’ve got that sorted,” Zed waved his hand dismissively, then turned to give her a wide grin of his spikey teeth. “All thanks to your dear friend Nevin in fact.”

Penny still couldn’t get a hold of this man. She had learnt to understand people from atom as a point of necessity, learning what they want and how they’d go about it, just so she could position herself at the right point at the right time and make sure what she cared about was out of the way when the cards were dealt.

However, something about Zed was truly disarming, because – despite him clearly noticing – he never seemed to care about her subtle machinations, like always keeping a wary eye on him, and leading him close to the very secure bank nearby. It was oddly terrifying, but in a somewhat calming way, if that made any sense.

Either he was just *that* strong to not care what they tried, in which case she had a plan for that, but it more likely seemed to be something in the fact that he was just, for a lack of a better word, understanding. He could almost read her mind, him purposefully cutting through the bullshit and the danger that he knew she was feeling, as he put her at ease with a goofy smile, to take away all that worry of what kind of people you’d often encounter on the dark streets around here.

If Penny let her guard down, she might have said the walk was enjoyable, in fact it might have been the best bit of fun in the last few years. She even saw Frankie come to stand a bit closer, see her friend speak with her seldom seen enthusiasm, as she realised it wasn’t seldom and that silence had seemingly grown between them throughout their struggles. Both could barely resist to join in anyway, as Zed jumped between them to tell outlandish stories, of where he and his apparent friends had gotten into all sorts of trouble. She felt an honest and guttural belly laugh rise from within, it coming out and making her feel the lightest she had in years. So yeah, they had a fun walk together.

“Hahahaha, okay, okay *stop!* We’re here, this is my place.”

“Oh, okay,” Zed abruptly turned away with his arms behind his head. “I guess I’ll just head off too.”

“Ohhh no,” Penny sternly grabbed him by the ear. “You’ve got to take Frankie home safely too, understand?”

“Argh! Unhand me! I don’t have to do *everything* you say.”

“Take her back, and I’ll make sure you’ll have plenty more ice cream next time.”

“Well... okay, *fine*. Come on then, remarkably timid one.”

“Penny...”

“It’s fine, Frankie. He’ll get you back.”

The goth girl looked to argue back, but she faltered before her friend, as she turned to jog after Zed in her big black boots and only caught up with him when he was already half way down the street.

“You two have fun,” Penny waved to them fondly, before opening the door. “Hey, Pop-pop, I’m—What the fuck?! How’d you get—?!”

There was a sudden thump and all went quiet, leaving only a couple of drippy footsteps to be heard in the opposite direction, as Zed continued to walk away and give a small malevolent smirk.

“So... vampire, right? A Daywalker?” Frankie near-on accused him, despite speaking at a near whisper and remaining completely unaware of anything that had gone on.

“Oh, what, me? No. Know a vampire or two though, I don’t recommend it.”

“Then, werewolf? Cyborg? Mutant? Demon?”

“Mwahahahahaha! You read too much. Just a guy, doing what he wants. Haven’t met a werewolf though, something to think about doing.”

“I know there’s a lot more out there than the books I can get my hands on. And your strength like that isn’t natural, and the title is something that the Heroes would have, but you don’t have their insignia. While Villains... Villains have... Oh, you’re a Villain.”

“Took you long enough,” he smiled deviously; showing those spikey teeth. “Gonna run?”

“Hmmm... nah. You don’t seem so bad... after you saved me and Penny...”

“Foolish,” he quickly lost that smirk. “Don’t make a habit of sticking around Villains, we’re not all we seem on the surface.”

“Then... then why help us?” The goth girl asked curiously, even as she turned to look at the wall away from him as they walked. “It

would be far more advantageous to join the gangs.”

“I have my reasons, and I believe... this is *your* place.”

“How... how did you know?” Frankie turned back to him in surprise.

“Your heartbeat slowed as we approached. Isn’t it good when you feel like that at home?”

“You... you *are* a vampire!”

“Nah, just got a good set of... tools. Something I *stole* from the Heroes.”

“You stole *Powers* from the Heroes?!”

“Yup. That’s what real Villainy is like kid, so get used to it, with me staying in this puny place.”

“Oh, okay...” Frankie said almost glibly, before moving to open the black door to her house. “Thanks again, Mr. Vampire. If you don’t die alone in a backstreet tonight, I’ll see you around.”

“I’m sure you will,” Zed grinned deviously and gave a wave of two fingers, as she shut the door before him without another word.

Then, with that, the man was alone; allowing him to close his eyes and take an almost relieved breath, as he took in the quietness of the empty street.

He calmed enough to finally feel the wind that blew threw the alley, sensing it moving across the high walls around him, before then feeling it cut into the streets that lay in-between the red-brick houses ahead and continue into the darkness that lay further beyond. Zed’s head then suddenly snapped up, his face aimed at the starry sky above and slowly moving around as if searching for something.

“Okay, there. Now...”

He tightened his fist and focused his will, using it to channel his powers with a purposeful and knowing command. He felt his blood pump faster and the electricity tingle in his extremities, somehow even affecting the density of the air around him, while he mostly seemed to focus on struggling with an internal war that was plain on his face.

Eventually though, he found his clarity and brought the world into a sharp focus, at least in terms of his hearing sense for now. He sensed the wind of the alley come through as loud as rumbling thunder, he noticed the night insects vibrantly alive in their tiny dens nearby –

while *there* – right there on the edge of Zed’s hearing, he heard the heartbeat of several frantic people. Their steps were like drums, the dripping of water like occasional cymbals, all like hearing the clatter of a one-man band at the far end of an arena, following them further and further, until one abrupt moment past... and they were gone.

“Dammit!” The man cursed, as he swung his fist wildly and bent the nearest lamppost in one hit, “gah! *Blast!*”

That stung, leaving Zed kissing the bruises and scrapes it left, while he felt his joints automatically pop back into place and a couple of his broken knuckles solidify back into normal. Luckily, it didn’t often take that long to heal, especially after he had eaten so many sweets.

Okay, so they were out of the range of his hearing, he could try to smell, but he wasn’t a dog, so that would be even more limited. That also meant he had already wasted his time by hanging around, as the only option now was to look for them, and he did at least have an idea for that.

So, once again, Zed focused his mind and took in a sharp inhale of breath, before he ran down the street like a shot and almost seemed to rematerialize back into existence before the red door of Penny’s house. Opening his eyes, he went into a fierce glare, his brow furrowed, his eyes almost darkened, as his red iris seemed to glow with a sinister and eerie aura.

Despite the look, he showed a grin, catching a glint of water that was imperceptibly evaporating on the warm summer night.

“Let’s see what could be mine, shall we?” He considered deviously, before hastily following the drips into the dark alleys ahead.