

## CHAPTER 7: SUITS

**K**ate Miller sat incredibly still at the giant chrome table Doc asked them all to meet around. So far, she was both terrified and completely unimpressed by the collection of fruitcakes and small gods Doc Silence had been bringing back to the ivory tower his former team of heroes had inhabited. This table was that team's as well, with a giant emblem of a comet circling the Earth emblazoned on it. It supposedly stood for something. Kate pretended not to care. She exercised a blanket policy of pretending not to care about the past.

The first girl, Doc's little prodigy, was okay, Kate thought, looking at Jane with her from-another-planet red-yellow hair. Jane was polite, and humble, and made forays into friendliness which even Kate had to admit hadn't worked only because Kate herself was trying not to like anyone here. She regretted that a little bit. Jane acted a little too nice, a little too perfect, but the one thing she was the just the right amount of was genuine.

But Kate had no time for friends, even if they could fly and melt steel with their bare hands.

The human laser show was another story. Sitting at the head of the table with his feet up on the chrome, hands behind his head, Billy was neither nice, nor perfect — and certainly not genuine. Except for his powers. Kate already watched him in action in the training room. She wondered, not without a little jealousy, why an idiot like him got to walk around with the kind of trippy powers he possessed. He was

also enjoying the whole experience entirely too much.

People shouldn't want to be heroes.

But speaking of people who didn't want to be heroes, Titus, coiled up in his chair like an animal, never looked comfortable. His eyes were always scanning for exits, watching body language, staring at you when you weren't paying attention . . . If he didn't seem so damned frightened all the time, she'd swear he was sizing her up to figure out how to tear her apart.

And then the new girl showed up. Younger than anyone else in the room, with more energy than a Chihuahua on a caffeine high, chewing gum and popping bubbles larger than her head in those rare moments when she wasn't talking about something inane, Kate had begun plotting to throw her off the tower roof just to see if she could fly, and hoping she couldn't.

It was Emily who broke the silence.

"So what do you think he's got in store for us? Field trip? We should go on a field trip," Emily said. "Disney. Disney would be rad, wouldn't it? Maybe not. I mean Space Mountain isn't as exciting when you can fly. Right? No offense Katie."

Kate steepled her fingers in front of her and stared.

Emily didn't take the bait.

"No field trip yet," Doc said, entering from the armored elevator that led to street level.

Billy claimed the elevator didn't exist entirely in this world. Everyone else thought he was full of crap, but Emily started floating away on her first trip in the elevator, saying she felt like she "weren't where I'm s'posed to be," and Billy smirked, saying "told you so," and it made Kate wonder all the more what the smiling little arrogant nitwit had inside him whispering in his ear. There was something in there, she knew — she saw him talking to himself all the time, and there was definitely someone answering him back.

"This is where we vote someone off the tower, isn't it?" said Titus.

Kate almost caught herself smiling, even if the joke wasn't anything to evoke a real laugh. The kid was so quiet, so inside himself, that to hear an attempt at humor from him gave the joke more

Matthew Phillion

weight than it actually deserved.

"Nope. Technically, this is related to leaving the tower, though," Doc said. "If you're going out in the field, you need to be better equipped. Jeans and Chuck Taylors aren't going to do much for you in a fight. C'mon."

Doc led them to another chamber, a big, airy laboratory dominated by a machine the size of a small car. A strangely normal-looking computer terminal stood at one end, and a tube large enough to hold a person in it stood at the other.

"We're being carbon-frozen," said Billy.

Doc ignored him.

"My friend Annie built this years ago," he said, gesturing to the machine. "Annie had . . . access to technology that nobody else could get their hands on. We called this thing the tailor."

Jane smiled.

"This made your costumes," she said.

"You got it," he said. "I want all of you to spend some time with it. Think about your powers, think about what you need to help keep yourself safe."

He pointed at Kate.

"The fabrics this thing uses haven't been invented yet. Light, durable, but if you add some extra layers they're stronger than Kevlar. Consider using that to your advantage, Kate."

She nodded. Kate had been wondering about what she could do to get herself on more equal footing with the bulletproof girl and the werewolf. A bit of body armor might be a good starting point.

Doc walked out of the room. "Day off from practice. Play with the tailor. We'll have show and tell before dinner."

They all stared at each other.

"I have no use for this," said Titus. "I destroy everything when I change."

Jane was already at the keyboard, looking things over. "Says here the material has a lot of wiggle room to expand with changing masses," she said.

"Sure. Werewolf in a body stocking," said Titus. "It'll be awesome."

"Suit yourself," Billy said, nudging in beside Jane. She swatted him and he backed off, before immediately trying to push his way in front of the keyboard again. "If you want to end every battle buckarse naked, that's your prerogative."

Titus paused, eyes narrowing at Billy. Then, his eyes darted in Kate's direction, and she saw his skin flush.

"I'll try to make some shorts I can wear under my street clothes," he said. "For, y'know. Decorum."

Kate hung back as the others entered the conference room one at a time. Suspended up in the rafters, aware Doc knew she was there. But he ignored her, letting Kate play her game. He hung out in his college tee shirt and jeans, eyes still hidden behind those red glasses he'd never take off. Titus walked in first, still wearing the same baggy jeans and checkered shirt he wore in the tailoring room.

"No luck?" Doc said.

In response, Titus tugged on the waistband of his pants, showing the top of a pair of black pants not unlike yoga shorts.

Doc laughed.

"Figured this was better than a werewolf in a tutu," the kid said.

"Good plan," he said.

Titus nodded, taking up his usual anxious perch at the table.

Jane sauntered in next.

Kate rolled her eyes. Of course she'd do this, Kate thought, looking at the streamlined confection of gold and red Jane created. The girl who could fly had turned herself into an emblem, with a long-sleeved, form-fitting top, the sleeves just a little too long. High red boots, perfectly functional yet somehow looking like something out of a rocket design schematic, on her feet. A cape, a goddamned cape, Kate thought, but diaphanous, red at her shoulders and fading into blue at the hem, slashed through like daylight. She'd added a skirt to the costume as well, which made Kate want to punch her in the mouth. Completely illogical, completely ridiculous, a cheerleader

Matthew Phillion

move . . .

"Normally I'd say it's better to put function over form, Jane," Doc said. "But — you grew up around all those photos on the farm, didn't you?"

"Sure did."

"You look like one of the heroes when I was a kid, you know. They all knew the skirts were ridiculous, but they — "

" — knew they were symbols," Jane said. "They wanted to look like something. The form mattered."

"Well, give it a try for a bit. You can always have the tailor make you something different later," Doc said.

Jane nodded and sat down near the head of the table — always near, never at, Kate noted — crossing her legs demurely.

Then Emily entered the room.

Titus covered his eyes.

Jane blanched.

Doc laughed.

"What happened to you? Break the machine?" Jane asked.

"Bite me, twinkle-toes," Emily said. "I like it."

Emily wore a neon green top emblazoned, appropriately, with the nuclear hazard symbol in black and white. She had black pants contrasting almost appropriately with the green of her shirt, but the nuclear symbols, repeating down her legs in neon blue to match her hair, destroyed all subtlety. Massive, knee-high combat boots with too-thick soles that echoed back to bad fashion choices of the late 1990's covered her feet. Fingerless gloves — also black — with her apparent choice of personal symbol on the palms, gripped her hands. And, inexplicably, a scarf wrapped her neck, the most hideous scarf Kate had ever seen, striped in a barrage of bland, washed out colors. It was at least ten feet long.

Nobody said anything until Billy rambled in. And, he spoke for everyone.

"Holy crap, you look like a girl comic books threw up on," Billy said. "Is Eyesore going to be your hero name?"

"I can crush your heart with my brain, Billy Case. Watch your mouth."

"What's with the Gryffindor scarf? Hogwarts called, it wants its neck-ware back."

"You're kidding," Emily said.

"I kid not, Harriet Potter. You look like you're being strangled by ugly."

"This is the Doctor's scarf! How do you not know that?"

"A what?" Jane asked.

"The Doctor!"

"Who?" Again, Jane, the walking irony-free zone.

"I have a black hole where my heart should be! I am, in fact, bigger on the inside! Does nobody here watch — oh, forget it," Emily said, playing with a pair of steampunk style goggles resting on her forehead. "Can we make fun of what Billy's wearing instead?"

They all turned to look at Billy's costume and, strangely, there really was very little to make fun of. He created a streamlined suit of white and blue, with a half mask to hide his identity. The white piping was slightly reflective and would catch the light of his glowing blasts perfectly. He truly, bizarrely, looked like an actual comic book personality.

"I thought you were going to walk out here looking like a video-game character," Titus said.

"I've read comic books my entire life and though uniquely unqualified as a hero, I sure know what one looks like," Billy said. He flopped down in his usual chair and threw his feet up on the table again. The lack of comedy in his appearance took the fire out of the room.

No time like the present, Kate thought. She dropped from her hiding spot up in the rafters to the floor below.

"OMG," Billy said.

Kate felt a strange sense of pride that he said nothing else.

"You look like you could murder someone with your pinky," Emily said.

Kate's suit was all clean lines, taking on a slightly sci-fi look where extra padding was added over vital organs and soft tissue. The entire ensemble was made up of blacks and a very dark purple that looked gray in certain lights. Tungsten caps glinted on each knuckle

Matthew Phillion

and protected her toes, heels, knees, and elbows — all her striking points. The entire time she'd been playing vigilante she needed to be careful during fights not to chip an elbow or break toes or fingers. It felt good to be able to build in protection for all those breakable bones. She even added a paper-thin metal plate across her forehead under her own half-mask — she'd always liked throwing a good head butt, but it's a move with limited benefits if you knock yourself silly at the same time. Kate also built in a tactical belt and thin gauntlets on her wrists. The rest of the gang didn't need to know what she'd added there, though. She wasn't about to reveal all her tricks yet.

Kate didn't trust any of them enough for that.

"Doesn't look like she'd murder someone," Titus said, quietly. He looked at Kate with something that made her distinctly uncomfortable. Instead of his usual predator's glare, she could have sworn he was gazing at her admiringly — like she was someone to emulate. Kate broke away from his gaze so she wouldn't have to spend much time thinking about that.

"If we're all done staring at the angel of death over there," Billy said, sparing an extra glance at Kate's armored suit again, "Does this mean we're ready for our trip to Disneyland?"

Doc shook his head.

"If you're going to go up against your first supervillain, you should look the part, right?" he asked.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Emily said.