

Chapter 1 – They Are Survived By...

“This place kinda sucks.”

Mike’s comment elicited a flat look from Adam, sitting across the table from him. They were by the window but it looked at the street and offered a view of little else. The booths around them were big but dated. Not retro, just dated. He could see that the only likely difference between how the diner looked in the seventies and how it looked now was the lack of cigarette smoke hanging in the air. He could almost still smell it. Adam had a simple response to his observation.

“Yeah.”

“How are you holding up?” Mike asked.

Adam was quiet for a few moments. “Ok, I guess. It’s just weird. I didn’t expect any of that shit to happen that way.” Mike nodded. “I mean, we’ve worked some tough cases. We knew the kind of stuff they were up against. They always seemed to come out the other side okay. Cloak did, anyway. I’m sure Asphalt was the same.”

Mike snorted. “Nothing fazed that guy.”

“Right? And now they’re just... gone. Is it weird to you? Do you miss it?”

“Honestly? Not as much as I feel like I should.” Mike stirred his coffee, not taking a sip. Maybe he was afraid to, given the look of the rest of the diner. They hadn’t ordered any food – the menus had Christ-knew-what stained onto the plastic. “I feel like we’re taking a break,” he said. “I mean, it’s done, I know it’s done. I don’t know. Maybe it hasn’t sunk in yet. It’s been, what, six days?”

“Seven,” Adam told him.

“Seven days. Shit. You’d think we would know what day it happened.”

“One of us does.”

Mike grunted at his comment. “Maybe it just doesn’t sting the way I thought it would. Asphalt and I didn’t have the same relationship you and Cloak did.”

“He was a good guy. A little strange, but good.”

“Asphalt wasn’t. He was a dick to me most of the time.”

“Why did you work for him for so long, then?”

Mike gave up stirring the coffee and shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe I felt bad for him, being like that. We did some good out there, I guess. Not that it mattered for much in the long run.”

“And?”

“And what?”

Mike could hear Adam was preparing him for something, but he didn’t expect what Adam said next.

“Maybe it’s a lifestyle you wanted to pursue, too.”

“My skin isn’t made of blackened rock.”

“I know, but maybe you wanted to be part of something that nobody else could be a part of.”

"I wasn't. Asphalt gave me shit all the damn time. I wasn't a partner, I was his employee." He looked down at the table. "Not a very good one, I guess."

"Do we have to go through the whole 'it's not your fault or anybody else's fault' thing, or are you good?"

"I know that. But if you're asking me if I worked for him because I wanted to be out there too, maybe that's how it started. How many people run backup for a superhero?"

"You, me, and a few others, obviously."

"Yeah, but five or six of us in a city of millions? Maybe when I was younger and dumber I wanted to be out there doing it, but I was fine running the show behind the scenes. He just made it a fucking grind."

"They probably weren't all like that, though."

"The other heroes? Probably not. But he definitely was." Mike took another long breath. "Why couldn't I get paired up with Force or someone?"

"I thought you know her?" Mike looked at him. "Sorry. Knew her."

"Kinda. I dated her sister a year ago."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. Force and Asphalt kept us too busy, though. You know how it is."

"There's always something."

“Always.”

They sat in silence for a little while. Their waiter strolled by, eyeing them before moving on. It had become pretty clear this was going to be a coffee-only visit.

“Did he leave you anything?” Mike asked.

“Cloak?”

“Yeah. If you don’t mind me asking.”

“A little money. We were taking that cop subsidy, you know?”

“Us too.” Mike always thought it was a good setup. Being a superhero didn’t pay anything, so the city and the police force set up a sort of funding program to keep operations like theirs going. It was all under the table, of course – the police couldn’t be known to be supporting heroes who were technically vigilantes, but funding those vigilantes so that they could handle problems that were out of their scope of practice was good business.

“Besides the money, the lab was already something I had set up at my house when we got started.” Adam looked like he was about to say more but stopped himself.

Mike and Adam talked a few more minutes about nothing before getting up to leave. They each left a few bucks on the table for the coffee and the lack of service. Sometimes being left alone deserved a good tip.

Outside they started walking towards the next subway station a couple of blocks up. The neighborhood wasn’t the best, but it wasn’t terrible.

“Have you decided what you’re going to do now?” Adam asked him.

“Probably sell the equipment. I don’t know how – I can’t craigslist it as ‘Asphalt’s Secret Lair’, but I should be able to get something for most of it. That and a little bit left of that subsidy... I think I’m just going to move out of town. Work legit.”

“Like, slacks and show up early in the morning at the office, legit?”

“What else am I going to do, Adam? They’re gone. There’s nothing for me to do here anym-“

Mike and Adam both stopped as a man stepped out of the alley a few feet in front of them. Light glinted off of metal held at his side. A knife. Behind them, they heard a heavy footfall. A second man. In the dim light, they couldn’t tell if he had anything, but he hardly needed it. He was twice the size of either of them.

“All right, ladies,” Knife-Guy said. “Wallets.”

“Oh, fuck me,” Mike said, fishing out his wallet. “Seriously? It’s been a week, and you guys are already out doing this?”

“That’s right,” Big-Guy growled behind them. “Heroes aren’t coming anymore. Just you and us, little guy.”

Mike tossed his wallet to Knife-Guy, who caught it and tucked it away. He pointed his knife at Adam. “Your turn, sweetheart.”

“Or what?” Adam asked. Mike looked at him with sheer panic. This wasn’t something they did. This was something their friends did. Or used to.

“Or I make you and your boyfriend ugly,” said Big-Guy, cracking his knuckles.

Adam laughed. “Did you seriously just crack your knuckles?”

There was no warning. Both Big-Guy and Knife-Guy lunged for him, completely ignoring Mike for the moment. Adam was ready.

In an instant, something whipped out from behind his neck and waist, lashing out to push the two attackers off-balance. Mike saw that it was fabric, reaching away from Adam like tentacles from a squid. One tendril pushed Mike out of the way. Not hard, but firmly. Now Adam was between Mike and the other two. Mike recognized what was happening and could barely believe it. Adam was using the cloak. THAT cloak.

“You two should have laid low a little while longer.”

Knife-Guy lashed out with a wide slash of the knife but missed him completely. Adam’s cloak reached for the man’s wrist, grabbed and broke it. The knife clattered to the sidewalk as the man screamed and pulled backwards. Big-Guy rushed in to bear-hug him but Adam was faster. The cloak grabbed the man by the throat and lifted him off the ground, choking him. The man’s hands went to pull it away but the cloak was too strong. Just before he passed out, Adam pushed him into his friend with the broken wrist. The two darted down the alley they came from.

Adam looked back at Mike, who was standing there in complete shock. Adam smiled.

“Jack might have left me with something more than a little money.”

Adam let Mike pull him into his apartment. Neither had really said anything since the attack – Mike just made a beeline for his place, almost dragging Adam with him.

“Ok, what the fuck was that?” Mike started. “Is that his Cloak? THE Cloak?”

“Ok, first, it was never his. It’s a living thing...”

“You know what the fuck I mean!”

Adam sighed. “Yes, it’s the Cloak.”

Mike still looked stunned. “How?”

“It survived. Don’t ask me how,” Adam said to Mike’s inevitable question. “Somehow it did. It was almost dead, and it barely made it back to our place. It came into the lab, definitely wounded. There wasn’t anything I could do for it. Except that I knew how it worked before, when it had been hurt with Jack. Sometimes it would need Jack, and it would sort of siphon some strength from him to heal itself. So I let it do the same to me.”

“You... let it bond with you?”

“It was going to die, otherwise.”

“Is that safe?”

“It was safe for Jack.”

“Yeah, but you’re not him. And I thought you said the Cloak was affecting him somehow...?”

“I think he was. I don’t know why, I can’t explain it. But there weren’t any other options. I’ve helped study the Cloak for years, and there wasn’t any other way to heal it. So I let it attach itself to me. It worked. It took about two days...”

“That’s why I couldn’t reach you a few days ago, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. It kept me under for two straight days while it tried to heal itself. I think it’s mostly ok now, though.”

“Mostly? It didn’t seem to have any trouble back there...”

Adam smirked. “We’ve been working together a little for the past couple of days. This was a good test run.”

“Oh yeah, great test run. We almost get stabbed and I lose my wallet to some dick we’re never going to see again.”

A tendril of the cloak slipped out from under Adam’s shirt holding Mike’s wallet. “I pulled this off the guy before he took off.”

Mike grabbed it and put it back in his pocket. “Show-off.” Adam just kept smiling and shrugged. The Cloak receded back under his shirt. “So what now?” Mike asked.

“What now is maybe you shouldn’t sell everything and move away.”

Mike just looked at him. “Work with you and the Cloak?”

“Why not?”

Mike sighed. “I don’t know, man. You know it’s not easy living like this.”

“Yeah, I know. But I also know I’m not Asphalt. I’m not going to be like that. I’m talking about being partners. Real partners. You handle the home base, I’ll hit the streets, but we are equals.”

Adam could see Mike considering it. He knew Mike had a rough time with Asphalt, always being berated and belittled. It really could be better. And Adam had a little more to offer.

“Before you say yes or no,” Adam said, stalling, “we should maybe talk to the others.”

Mike looked confused. “Others? You mean, some of the others survived? Not just the Cloak?”

Adam looked down. “No. They’re dead. Jack is dead, too; only the Cloak survived. All of the heroes we knew died that day. But there are a couple of more people like us, the support people. I think we should get together.”

“For what? How many? And who?”

“Just a couple. You could reach out to Force’s sister. I know another person like us. We might be able to find everyone that worked with the heroes before the accident.”

“But for what?”

Adam looked at Mike as seriously as he could manage.

“So that we can continue what they started. What they died for.”

Mike had barely slept the night Adam posed the idea of picking up where the heroes left off. Over and over again, he considered what Adam seemed to be suggesting.

It seemed crazy.

The heroes all did their own thing for the most part. Sure, sometimes two would show up to the same call but they mostly stayed out of each other's way. They weren't a team, they were six very distinct people that all had their own agendas. Even the accident, all of them working on the same villain, it didn't go as smoothly as it could have. For the thousandth time, Mike felt guilty for not reaching out to some of the others sooner. If he had, if those people HAD fought as a team, maybe they would have survived what happened.

It was in the past, now. He couldn't undo it. That's why he was here, outside Nicole's house with Adam. His idea sounded crazy, but Mike knew that it was something that should have happened before now. Maybe he could help them from making the same mistake twice.

He turned to Adam. "Ok, man. I got us here. I'm going to let you do the talking. This is your show."

Adam nodded. He didn't seem as confident as he did with Mike. Maybe pitching this idea to a stranger wasn't going to be as easy as it was for him to pitch to a friend.

Mike knocked on the door and it opened almost immediately. There was Nicole, still prettier than her sister, in his opinion. It really was a shame that they didn't have more of a relationship, but there was so much with Force and Asphalt... They kept in touch but he had been hesitant to reach out to her after the accident. Force was her *sister*, not her employer, and...

Mike's thoughts were cut short as Nicole pushed herself into him, hugging him harder than he remembered her being capable of.

"I wish you had come a week ago."

Mike didn't know what to say. Instead he just stroked her hair a little. "I know. I'm here now." It was the best he could come up with.

It seemed to be enough. Nicole pulled back and looked at him. Mike thought she would have been crying or at least had the puffy eyes of someone who had been crying. She looked good. Sad, maybe a little restrained, but accepting. She had probably cried everything out days ago.

Adam cleared his throat, and Mike made a hasty introduction. Nicole invited them inside, and Nicole made an introduction of her own.

“Mike, Adam, this is Dr. Aster. She and I have been friends for a while. She helped me work on the Force Chamber for Robyn.”

Dr. Aster was a slender woman who seemed only a few years older than they were. Her eyes were a little red around the edges, as if she had been crying recently. Maybe Nicole had been holding herself together to console this woman. Mike’s mind started racing, wondering who Dr. Aster knew or had worked for before the accident.

“Bullet.” Mike said. “You worked with Bullet, didn’t you Dr. Aster?”

She nodded and gave him a tight-lipped smile. Her eyes seemed to well up again, but she didn’t start sobbing, thankfully. “I did. Vincent was... an extraordinary man.” The four of them sat in Nicole’s living room, taking places where they could.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Doctor,” Adam said, “and for yours as well,” accepting a beer from Nicole. Mike gave her a questioning look; it wasn’t quite noon yet. Nicole gave him a little shrug and nodded toward Dr. Aster. She appeared to be on a second glass of wine. Mike accepted a beer also.

“Please, call me Laura,” Dr. Aster said. “And to you, Mike, I’m sorry about Asphalt.”

Mike looked at the floor. “Yeah, well...” He didn’t want to speak ill of the dead, but it was tough to come up with good things to say about Asphalt. He really had been an asshole.

“I know,” Dr. Aster – Laura – said. “I know he was a difficult person to be around. I’m sure working with him must have been difficult as well.” Nicole nodded unconsciously.

“Did you know him?” Mike asked.

“Only a little,” Laura explained. “Vincent ran across him a couple of times, as you know. He always said that he was a very distant person. Curt and gruff seem to be the most polite adjectives. I only met him once. I thought those words were complimentary.” She smiled at him, and it seemed to be her way of saying that she understood what he had been through. She wasn’t trying to insult someone who may or may not have been his friend, but she knew how Asphalt could be, too.

“He was... difficult. You’re right.” Mike took a drink. Maybe it wasn’t too early after all. He tried to change the subject. “Vincent? He was Bullet?”

“Vincent Kyle. Yes, he was.” She smiled, and Mike could see genuine pride in her face. “He was a doctor, too. We’re both scientists.”

“I always wondered about how Bullet did the things he did,” Adam asked. Mike had heard worse segues.

Instead of explaining, Laura reached into her purse and came out wearing a single glove. She put on a pair of glasses, and Mike noticed that the two pieces matched. Both were a deep red color and appeared to have a subtle network of wiring components.

Laura gestured with the gloved hand and her glass of wine lifted off the table. It hung there, floating in mid-air. Mike looked at Adam, who sat there with his mouth open. He was sure his own expression wasn’t any more composed.

“This is how Bullet did what he did,” Laura said calmly. “We developed this technology ourselves, but kept it secret. We knew the horrible things it could be used for. So when our company asked us to develop something like this, we told them we failed. We didn’t.”

Adam finally got control of himself. “The glove and glasses. They survived the accident?”

Laura shook her head. The glass wiggled in the air for a moment before Laura concentrated and it remained motionless again. “The accident. We’ve been calling it ‘the event’. But to answer your question, no, they didn’t survive. We had made three sets. Vincent was wearing one when he... was killed..” Her face crumpled into sadness again but she quickly controlled it. “That set was broken beyond repair. I have the two spares we kept on hand.”

“What will you do with them?” Adam asked.

“I honestly don’t know yet,” Laura said, gesturing the glass back down to the table and removing the glove and glasses. “I won’t give them to anyone else, if that’s what you’re asking. What Bullet did, what we developed, is something special. I won’t see it trivialized into some gadget. Vincent didn’t want that, either.”

“Have you thought about using them?” Adam asked. “Picking up where Bullet and the others left off?”

Laura looked at Nicole before turning back to them.

“Nicole and I had been discussing just that.”

Mike looked at Nicole, who gave him a look and stood up. The air suddenly hummed with energy and Nicole rose a foot off the ground, floating there before the hum went away and she dropped back down.

Mike stared at her. “The chamber? You used it?” Nicole nodded. “But... it will kill you!”

“The chamber will not kill me, Mike. I wouldn’t use it if it would.”

“But... Robyn did. It was killing her.”

A flash of emotion crossed Nicole’s face too quickly for Mike to follow, thinking about her sister. Laura put a hand on Nicole’s shoulder.

“Nicole has fixed the chamber. The side effects are no longer as pronounced as they had been. In fact, they’re mostly gone.”

“Mostly?” Mike asked. “The chamber was giving Robyn cancer.” Adam gave him a sharp look. He hadn’t told his friend about Force and her situation; he didn’t feel like it was his story to tell.

Nicole looked up. “I was able to reduce those effects by 98 percent. The chamber was giving her cancer, but that was after five years of use under its original design. This design is much safer because...” That flash of emotion was back and gone again just as quickly. Was it sadness? Was it shame similar to what Mike felt in not being able to do more?

Laura stepped in again. “Because the chamber doesn’t have to focus on healing someone like when Robyn used it.”

“I’m a little lost here,” Adam said. Mike knew what she meant, but let them explain it. He was still looking at Nicole, worried that she might be putting herself at risk and denying it.

Nicole looked at Adam. “My sister had a very rare degenerative muscle disease. While I was in med school, I developed a special chamber for her to use that would infuse her cells with energy that was missing. Without it, she would have eventually lost all motor function.”

“Nicole’s chamber gave Robyn energy for a period of time,” Laura added, “but the energy was an abundance of what the cells needed to remain functioning. The excess energy could be used at will, which is how she became Force.” Adam nodded, starting to understand.

“As Force, she could expend that energy around her, using it to fly or push objects, as everyone knows. Eventually, though, she would expend all of that energy and need a ‘recharge’ in the chamber.”

“I thought the chamber was tuned to her specific biochemistry and couldn’t be used by anyone else,” Mike asked.

“I re-tuned the chamber to me.” Nicole said quietly.

“For what?” Mike asked angrily. “And at what cost? Won’t it kill you?”

“No, it won’t. I changed the way energy reaches the cells, because my cells didn’t need the same type of energy that Robyn did. I don’t have the muscle disease she had. So it gave her cancer – it won’t give me cancer.”

“Not any more than any of the rest of us will get cancer through normal life, anyway,” Laura put in. She was obviously trying to lighten things up. Mike was in no mood for it. Nicole shot her a look but then looked back at Mike.

Mike nodded. He wasn’t going to make her say it in front of Adam and Laura. He understood. He didn’t agree with it and he thought Nicole adopting her sister’s role was a mistake, but he understood it.

Adam stood up and let the Cloak seep out from under his jacket and shirt. It was time for the girls to look shocked. A tendril picked up the wine glass Laura had made levitate earlier.

“So we all have power inherited from people. The question is, what now?”

Mike was helping Nicole clean up a little in the kitchen. Adam and Laura were still in the front room talking. Adam had gone through his pitch, suggesting that they team up and start

pushing back against the crime element that was inevitably going to rise now that the heroes the city had relied on were gone. Dr. Aster and Nicole both seemed very amenable to the idea. At least, Dr. Aster understood and saw the need for it. Nicole seemed eager to the point of giddiness. He could only imagine what the two of them would have gotten into without him and Adam to slow them down and organize a little.

“Listen,” Mike started. He wasn’t great with words, but he had to start somewhere. “I get why you want to do this. I promise, I understand. But... Do you really think this is safe?”

Nicole kept scrubbing a dish that had probably been clean for a few minutes. “It will be fine. The chamber doesn’t...”

“I’m not talking about the chamber. If you say it’s better and it’s fixed, I’m sure it is.” At least, if she and Dr. Aster BOTH said it, it probably was, but he wasn’t about to put it like that. “I’m talking about... this. This life. It’s dangerous.”

Nicole finally turned the water off and put her dish down. “I know it’s dangerous. But I’ll have an edge. And it won’t just be me out there.”

“I know that. But what happened last time...” Mike could barely say it. He really did wish their relationship had more time to grow. Maybe it had grown for him in her absence. “Six of them died, Nicole, including your sister. Six, and they had all been doing this for a while.”

“Mike, he’s dead. That was a one-time thing, I think.”

“You THINK?”

“How many big-time villain criminals have we come across, or even heard about? Just the one.”

“Yeah, just the one, but he killed every hero in the city in a few minutes.”

“Maybe they died because they didn’t know how to work together. We will.”

Those words hit home for Mike. He knew that the group had been weak because they had never really been a group. Maybe she was right. Maybe if they cooperated from the beginning, maybe if they weren’t up against some psychopath trying to kill everyone in the city, maybe if Mike was the glue that held them together... it was a lot of maybes.

“Nicole, promise me that you’re going to take it slow.”

She looked at him. She thought she could hide it, but he knew. She wanted to be out there, doing this, doing what her sister had as Force. She didn’t want to be on the sidelines anymore, didn’t want to be known only as ‘Force’s Sister’ when anyone knew who she was at all. She wanted to help the city, probably, but she wanted to have the things her sister had while she was on the sidelines, too.

“Do you still want to be with me?” she asked.

“Yes.” Mike wasn’t sure he should have said that, but it was out in the open, now.

“Then be there *with* me. Help me. I’ll start slow.”

Mike knew she wouldn’t.

“I’ll get in touch with my other friend,” Adam said. They were putting on their jackets, getting ready to leave Nicole’s house. “I think he’ll be helpful with what we’re trying to do.”

“If you don’t mind telling us, who did he work for?” Laura asked.

“The Shield.”

Laura and Nicole’s faces lit up, probably without them realizing it. The Shield had something of a reputation, more than Asphalt or Bullet or the others. A very strong reputation with the women of the city.

“Easy, ladies,” Mike growled. “He’s not the actual Shield.” They both gave him a blank look, but he knew what they were thinking.

“He’s not the Shield,” Adam agreed. “But I think he may have some skills that can help us.”

Dr. Aster nodded. “Are you two going to the ceremony tomorrow? Maybe the four of us could go together.”

Adam looked a question at Mike. “Ceremony?”

“You didn’t know?” Nicole asked.

“I was sort of out of it for a couple of days. What is it?”

“The city is making a dedication at the Civic Center tomorrow afternoon,” Laura said. “They’re unveiling a monument. Six statues, one for each of them.” Her voice was solemn, but there was that ring of pride under it, too. She really was proud of Bullet.

Mike wished he knew that feeling, but he didn’t. He knew about the ceremony but was on the fence about going. It’s not like anyone there would know about his role, but he found it hard to think of a statue of Asphalt going up in the city. Asphalt beat on criminals more out of need to just beat on someone than actual justice, in Mike’s opinion. Criminals just wouldn’t go to the cops and complain about it, and the cops wouldn’t listen if they did. The guy was a little unhinged. Having a monument to that kind of a person seemed wrong, but nobody else knew how he was. To the rest of the city, he was a hero. Mike wasn’t about to shit on that just

because he knew what a prick he really was. If the people of the city needed to remember him as a hero, who was he to deny them that?

Nicole saw his hesitation. “Mike, you should go.” All three of them were looking at him now.

“I should. I guess I will.” Adam and Nicole looked satisfied. Laura seemed to sympathize with his hesitation, but wasn’t about to press him on it. She was too new; they didn’t know each other well enough for those kinds of conversations.

“We’ll be in touch,” Adam said, “but for now, start thinking about moving. It may be wise to consolidate our base if we’re going to team up, and everyone moving on from their current residence may help keep a low profile.”

Laura nodded. “So many people are moving away from the city, it will be easy for our disappearance to blend in with the rest.”

“Can you blame them?” Mike asked. “I don’t think anyone expected every hero we had to be killed and half of downtown ruined.”

“More likely they expect things to go south now that the heroes aren’t here to keep people more or less in line,” Adam said quietly. Laura and Nicole nodded – they had told them about the mugging yesterday.

There was an awkward silence for a moment before Nicole spoke up.

“It’s really going to be up to us, now, isn’t it?” Maybe she was starting to realize what Adam was proposing actually was quite dangerous.

“It will be up to all of us,” Mike said. “Not just one of us alone.”

“Was that really their mistake?” Laura asked, eyes seeming to well up again. Mike hoped this phase ended soon. “That they didn’t work together?”

“Not a mistake,” Adam said. “Just... I don’t know. Maybe it wouldn’t have saved them, but it might have helped. We’re never going to know.”

Another silence and then Mike and Adam made their goodbyes, heading to the car. It felt like what they were proposing, what they were starting should have left everyone with a different feeling. Something like purpose or anticipation.

It seemed like each of them only felt worry.