

W°NDER CITY ST°RIES

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THE MORE THINGS STAY THE SAME

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THE MORE THINGS STAY THE SAME

The footsteps made the back of Angelica's neck prickle and her stomach tighten, made her feel chilly despite the muggy August evening's lingering heat. She replayed in her head the little group of catcallers she'd passed without answering. She'd seen half a dozen out of the corner of her eye, late teenagers mostly. Their catcalls had grown uglier as she'd gotten closer (she'd gotten used to passing more or less easily; getting clocked at 15 feet had been an unpleasant surprise), and it had been hard not to walk noticeably faster. But they were following now.

She could hear the rumble of low male voices, detected the slight change in pace as they got closer. She clenched her jaw so that it ached where it had been broken the first time this happened. She evaluated: six blocks to anything that could be considered her own neighborhood (fuck the bus anyway for breaking down in this no-man's land between the university neighborhood and hers, fuck herself for deciding to walk home instead of waiting with a group an hour for the next bus), not much in terms of neighborhood activity in those six blocks, nor even storefronts. She wearing flats and a mid-thigh-length skirt. That group was, to a boy, shorter than she was.

Yeah. Fuck it.

Angelica broke into a run, letting her skirt hike up until she could get a full long-legged stride.

She had a few second's grace before the confused pack started to pursue.

There were no lingerers on doorsteps to witness the nearly silent chase, no faces in the doorways, no children dawdling home in the twilight. Everyone was inside, in the air conditioning, watching television.

One block. Pressing her tiny advantage to its utmost. Darkening their part of the street while brightening the sidewalk ahead of her. Two blocks.

Sweat rolled down her spine, poured under her breasts and down her belly.

She heard the one that was catching up to her over her own panting.

My boyfriend is a god, she thought frantically. Not that that did her any good unless he happened to be well outside his usual haunts. She'd ask him for a Coyote signal watch if she lived through the next ten minutes.

She knew better than to shout for help in a place where people didn't know her. At worst, it would bring more people to join the mob. At best, it would bring the police and she could look forward to a night in lockup, with or without her pursuers.

She wasn't sure if another night in lockup was preferable to being killed out here or not.

He was almost within reach of her. She could sense him with that horrible new power she had. Angelica stopped dead, pivoted, and was able to bring her fist around to somewhere around his face. She judged a little low, but he went down gurgling as his momentum carried his throat into her punch.

Then the rest of them were on her, shouting and cursing, tackling her to the pavement, where she landed on top of the one she'd felled.

Each time this had happened, she'd taken more of them to the hospital with her.

She fought as dirty as possible, gouging at eyes with her nails, going for balls with anything that would hit or wrench them, breaking a nose or teeth with the back of her skull. She was so focused on doing as much injury as possible that it took her several moments to realize that she wasn't hurt yet.

This confused her and broke her attention, which she regretted, because one had gotten to his feet and aimed a kick at the side of her head. It connected, and while it dazed her a bit *it didn't hurt at all*. Likewise the second kick into her ribs.

The knife that had appeared somewhere in the proceedings then failed to penetrate her stomach.

Oh, Jane, you glorious bitch, she thought.

It was amazing how much more damage one could do if one was impervious to damage oneself. Even if *someone* hadn't provided superstrength as well. When they realized that they weren't hurting her *enough*, they went into a frenzy of trying everything to hurt her: kicks, punches, hard clawing gropes at her crotch and breasts and throat. The only things they succeeded in doing was tearing her clothes and keeping her on the ground.

They however, were bleeding all over her, from busted noses and mouths, from hands cut with their own knives. They made horrendous animal noises of pain whenever she connected. One rolled away whimpering, another shrieked and bubbled. She struggled to get out from under them, but couldn't slip away.

Unfortunately, invulnerability does not prevent one's breath from being knocked out of one. She saw stars after that, trying for breath in great noisy whoops, and the mob changed tactics.

Before more happened than fabric getting torn, though, there was a crunching thud into the pale, sweaty one leaning closest to her and he howled and tried to roll away.

It was like Moses parting the Red Sea, if the Red Sea had been screaming teen boys and Moses a grim black woman with an iron-gray flattop, leather jacket, and baseball bat. She turned and chased after them, the rhinestones on the back of her jacket flickering in the streetlights. Her companion, a tall, lanky, light-skinned black butch in leather bent down solicitously, saying in a smoky voice, "How bad are you hurt, sweetheart?"

"I... I'm okay," Angelica said, finding her voice for the first time in what seemed an eternity. "I think." She drew her hand away from her throat, saw that it was red to the wrist, blood splattered all up her arm. She still didn't feel any pain. "I think all the blood is theirs."

"Can I help you up then?" Big, warm hands helped her to her feet. One of her feet was bare against the rough, pebbly concrete.

The other butch came back, the baseball bat cocked over her shoulder, looking back over her shoulder after the fleeing group. Angelica could just make out the "SPARKLEBUTCH" on the purple tank top under her jacket. Something about it made her burst into tears.

She tried to thank them through the tears.

"No, no, it's all right," the tall one said, putting arms around her. "We're sorry we didn't pass by sooner."

"Can we take you home?" said the sparklebutch said in a warm basso. "We've got bikes."

"Yes, please," Angelica said, clutching the tall one's jacket around her shoulders.

"You sure you don't need a doctor?" the tall one said.

"No, I don't hurt anywhere," Angelica said, finally looking down at the ruin of her blouse and skirt. "I didn't all through that," she said, in a daze.

They exchanged glances, then nodded and led her to their motorcycles. The one with the baseball bat produced a folded purple bandana, and the other poured a little water on it from a steel water bottle, and they handed it to Angelica so she could wipe her face and hands. She was grateful and said so. The blood on her hands was getting crusty and itchy, and she suspected her face was a mess.

When the makeup and blood came off, she thought she detected the tall one's expression freezing. *Yeah, didn't know who you were saving, did you?* she thought wryly.

"You're one of Mel's friends, aren't you? I remember you from that house," the one with the baseball bat said as she holstered her bat on the bike.

"Yes," she said. She returned the bandana to its owner, and she folded it away into a pocket. "Angelica."

"I'm Jersey," the baseball-bat virtuoso said. "This is Sarge." Jersey looked at Sarge and said, in a significant tone, "She's one of *Mel's friends*."

The pair eyed each other for a long moment, then Sarge nodded brusquely. Jersey looked back at Angelica.

"Thank you so much," Angelica said, thinking that it was as much to Jersey as to Jane Liberty, bless and damn her eyes.

"Let's get you home," Sarge said, only slightly less warmly than before, and helped her onto the back of an admirable black Victory bike. Jersey located her missing shoe and helpfully fitted it onto her bare foot, then returned her purse to her. Jersey had a Harley, of course. Purple.

As they pulled out from the curb, Angelica hid her face against Sarge's leatherclad shoulder and tried not to cry any more. *Goddammit, Jane, I can't even be angry with you for this one.*