

THE SOCIETY OF CAPES: EGOS REVEALED

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ABSTRACT

JORDAN ELIZABETH FISHER. *The Society of Capes: Egos Revealed*. (Under the direction of DR. PAULA CONNOLLY)

In Paladin City, superheroes have become commonplace to the ordinary citizens--all of them except for twelve-year-old Catori Powers, who spends all her time dreaming of becoming a superhero. She finally gets her chance when she acquires her own superpower and a mysterious man enrolls her into training program for potential heroes. Despite her father's objections, this could be the chance she's been waiting for.

However, not everything is as it seems within the superhero community. Not only must she pass 'the Exam' to become a superhero, but a break-in at the superhero headquarters threatens to rid the world of superheroes forever. With the heroes in charge at a complete loss, Catori and her newfound friends may be the only ones who can stop this plan.

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Chapter 1: An Impossible Dream

While an out-of-control school bus and two battling super-powered individuals might be ludicrous in any other city, it wasn't in Paladin City. Although, even in Paladin City, it was a bit odd to have both occurring at the same time. This city was both the safest and the most dangerous place in the world. This was because it housed the most superheroes and the most supervillains in the world. No one was certain why there was such a high concentration of super-powered beings in the city, but there were a few theories. Some theorized that Paladin City was the birthplace of all superpowers. Others believed that the city had been built on an old nuclear site that had long ago naturally drawn out superpowers.

As a school bus sped past, Catori fell back hitting her head on the sidewalk. She could already feel some tears beginning to well up from the pain on the back of her head, when she was suddenly distracted by something just above. Battling in the sky just above her were two muscular figures, one in gold and another in gray. The figure in gold thrust out his arms causing the gray figure to be thrown backward smashing into a nearby building. Instantly, the gold figure shot forward towards the school bus causing Catori to jolt upright just in time to see it disappear over a hill.

Without warning, she was hauled to her feet by an anxiously pulling hand moving her away from the amazing rescue. With a shrug and light pull, Catori slipped out of the grip and sprinted right after the bus. As she made it over a small incline, she could just barely glimpse the bus speed over another hill slipping out of sight. Again, she dodged under the same anxious hands as they reached out to grab her. Without thinking, she raced after the bus, ignoring the voice calling her name.

Somehow, she was able to catch up with the bus enough to see a man in gold smash into the ground only a couple of feet in front of the careening bus. With a nonchalance that seemed almost impossible, he put out one hand. As soon as he did, an invisible force hit the bus. This had the desired effect and the bus started to slow down just as a large dent in the front fender and a long crack on the windshield appeared. As the bus continued to roll, he put out his other hand and with a determined stance he pushed the invisible force harder against it. Although the bus began screeching and squealing to a halt, it was pushing the man in gold backwards. As he was pushed further and further backwards, Catori realized that the bus was heading for an uncompleted highway ramp.

All of a sudden, the ground beneath him crumbled, causing the man in gold to push even harder against the bus. But it was too late and the ground beneath his feet broke away, causing the man in gold to plummet. Catori gasped. She rushed forward only to be pulled back by a familiar firm hand.

“Catori! What are you doing running off like that? Come on, your mother’s waiting,” said her father as he pulled her down the street. Catori shook her head and pointed towards where the man in gold had just disappeared. “Don’t worry about him. He’ll be fine. Those superheroes always come out on top,” continued her father in clear irritation.

Ignoring her father, she turned her attention back to the edge just in time to see the bus rock forward. Just as it was about to tip over, the bus magically righted itself and rolled away from the edge. She gaped as the man in gold glided over the side of the bus, as the doors promptly swung open. Immediately the children swarmed around the man,

who smiled and waved at them briefly before floating up into the air. As he soared overhead, Catori waved ecstatically up at him all while disregarding the impatient tugging of her father.

Despite appearing as if he was in a hurry, the man in gold took the time to shoot her a dazzling smile and wave back at her. Catori grinned and gazed after him until he rounded the corner of a skyscraper, drifting out of sight. In that moment there was nothing she wanted more than to fly up there and join him.

Without warning, she felt the ground disappear from under her, however, instead of falling, she started rising into the air. Although she knew that she should probably be questioning how and why this was happening, she quickly decided that she didn't really care. Forgetting everything else around her, Catori did a flip in the air and dashed after the man in gold.

But just as she flew over the skyscraper, she instantly plummeted towards the sidewalk. Working through her stomach's churning, she flapped her arms and did aerial flips to try and reclaim her power. With nothing working, she cried out as she smashed into the sidewalk only to discover that the sidewalk was actually her bedroom floor. It was just a dream. Her disappointment manifested in a low sigh, as she sat up from her slumped-over position and rubbed her eyes.

Catori hadn't thought of the day she first saw her hero the Psionic Brain in years, but it was in that moment that she knew she had to be a superhero just like him. Superheroes and supervillains were commonplace in a city like Paladin City, so much so that many of the ordinary citizens thought it all mundane. Catori was not one of those people. Ever since she was little, she loved superheroes; their heroic deeds, their

dedication to protecting innocents, and their determination to defeat supervillains, it had all enchanted her. There was just one problem: unlike in her dream, she didn't have a superpower.

Instead she was reduced to just wishing that she had superpowers and taking superhero quizzes, most of which were currently littering her floor. Yesterday, Catori had aced the fast costume changes quiz with her vast knowledge of areas that would be ideal hiding places for a quick change. Her personal favorite was the telephone booth, but since those weren't around anymore, she was forced to come up with a more creative answer like a dumpster. She had also aced the perfect hideout quiz with her answers of a cave, an iced-over fortress, and an auspicious luxury building. Despite her doing well on all the other quizzes, they were completely irrelevant compared to the last and most important quiz: the Legendary Superhero Quiz. Taking a deep breath, she decided to try again and opened to the back of the latest issue of *The Phenomenal Psionic Brain*.

"Last question. You are facing off against a dangerous supervillain and he or she has taken a hostage. Do you A. Sneak around to his or her butt? B. Attack him or her head on? Or C. Wait and assess the situation?" read Catori aloud to herself. A was probably the most obvious answer, but maybe it was too obvious. If the supervillain was really that dangerous, he or she was probably prepared for that. B couldn't be the answer, it was just too reckless. No one would do that, but maybe that was the point, so she could take the villain by surprise. Maybe C was the best option-that way she could think through her options. Yes, it had to be C! She circled her final answer and quickly flipped to the next page to see how she did.

Surely, Catori the superhero expert would get a perfect score. Surely, she who was constantly gathering more and more information on superheroes would make an equally great hero. That's why she was shocked to find that she only got three out of ten questions right. She shook her head and counted all the points again. It just couldn't be right! But when she counted it again she got the same amount. How was it that, despite all her superhero knowledge, she couldn't pass a simple quiz?

One could plainly see her obsession on full display just by looking around her room. The walls were almost completely covered with posters of superheroes fighting thugs or saving civilians. Her sheets and comforter featured her favorite superhero, the Psionic Brain, with his perfectly coifed blonde hair and dressed in a gold costume. He also happened to be on many of her posters as well as most of her comic books. On top of that, she had three bookcases full of comic books that she had been able to buy or had gotten as presents over the years. Most of them were currently littering the floor since she had been studying them prior to taking the quiz. Too bad it hadn't done any good. It may have looked more like a room for a five-year-old than a twelve-year-old, but she didn't care. Her room was the best way to show off her superhero nerd pride.

Suddenly, she had an idea and raced out the door of her room.

As she sprinted down the stairs and out the door, she heard her father call after her. "Catori! Where are you going?"

"I'm just going out. I'll be back by lunch," responded Catori in one breath. Before her father could ask anything else, she was out the door and rushing down the sidewalk.

It wasn't long 'til she was at her destination, the Collector's Vault. It was her frequent hangout and her favorite comic book store. It was a little place nestled between

two much larger shopping centers that only caused the store to look even smaller in comparison. It was also a stunning contrast to see the sleek glass-like buildings right beside an old short red brick shop. The Collector's Vault had certainly seen better days, with its name displayed in large rusted red letters. Despite the outside not being particularly impressive, it was the window displays that drew customers in. A gigantic battle between superheroes and supervillains portrayed by vibrantly colored posed action figures currently filled the giant window. This, of course, included custom-made figurines designed to show each hero or villain's various powers. A beautifully drawn background of the Paladin City skyline provided the perfect backdrop for the eye-catching scene.

It certainly wasn't the most popular comic book store, especially when compared to the comic book store chains. But it was, in Catori's opinion, the best comic book store in the city. After all, if there was ever a specific issue of any comic books you wanted then there was only one place you could go: The Collector's Vault. She entered the store and though still feeling frustrated, she did feel a tad more at ease in her inner sanctum surrounded by her beloved comics.

One thing she always admired about the store was that, despite the outside not being particularly impressive, the inside was the complete opposite. Inside the store were ten shelves stacked full of comic books all sorted based on comic company, genre, age, and price. There was also a counter full of action figures and artifacts that weren't rare or valuable enough to be put in a secure case. The figurines looked as if they had been set up by a five-year-old creating an epic battle. The walls were covered with posters of famous comic book covers as well as newspapers with headlines about real superheroes.

Catori couldn't help but be amazed that, despite all the clutter, the place was always clean and orderly, though that was in part due to her.

"Hey H.C., I need the April issue of the Good Samaritan," she said as she leaned against the glass counter at the front of the store.

"Well, if it isn't my most loyal customer who rarely purchases my customs," replied H.C. as he came out of the back room.

H.C. was the owner and only worker in the store as well as her uncle. She had no idea what H.C. stood for. But it was what her father always called him, so she did the same.

He was a skinny man in his mid to late twenties with a short, thin, light brown mustache and beard, which matched his wild curly hair. His dark brown eyes were hidden behind large round black glasses.

However, it was his clothes that interested Catori. They were always a mixture of clean stylish clothes and wrinkled casual clothes. Today he was wearing a storm gray fedora with a coral red band at the bottom that matched the coral red scarf around his neck. This was complemented with a wrinkled white collared shirt that was partially covered by a coat with thin storm gray and white stripes. Lastly, he had straight storm gray dress pants with plain old red and white tennis shoes.

"Did you see the newspaper today? Mastermind has been seen somewhere in Paladin City!" exclaimed H.C. Though she was in a rush to get her hands on the Good Samaritan issue, she couldn't help but be curious.

"Who's Mastermind?"

“Oh, that’s right. You would have been just a baby when he was around,” he answered as he grabbed an old newspaper with the front-page headlines reading “POLICE AND HEROES UNABLE TO COMBAT NEW SUPERVILLIAN MASTERMIND!”

“No one knows who he really is or where he came from because he’s never been captured. Despite his successful track record, he disappeared ten years ago and hasn’t been seen since... until now,” explained H.C. in an ominous tone. While somewhat fascinated to learn about a dominant supervillain returning from obscurity, Catori quickly remembered that wasn’t what she had come there for.

“That’s really interesting, H.C., but about my old issue of the Good Samaritan,” said Catori as she pushed aside the newspaper.

“Oh yeah. You wanted the February issue, right?”

She let out a sigh of frustration. Had he even been listening to her? “The April issue,” she corrected.

“Right, right I knew that.” He went through the cabinets behind the counter. He quickly began searching through several different drawers clearly having no idea where the issue really was. Eventually he found the issue and set it out in front of Catori who snatched it up immediately. She flipped through the pages until she came to the superhero quiz and took out her pencil. “Hey what are you doing?! You can’t go marking up my magazine. What if someone actually wanted to buy it?” He attempted to snatch the pencil out of her hand, but Catori was faster and held the pencil away from his grasp.

“Calm down, H.C., I’ll erase what I mark down and no one will be the wiser.”

H.C. didn’t appear all that convinced, but he didn’t say anything. As soon as that was taken care of, she turned her attention to the magazine and started taking the quiz.

This time was going to be different. She was going to pass this quiz with flying colors! She just had to concentrate hard this time, which was the only justification she could think of for failing the first quiz. Perhaps she was overthinking the quiz, but then again how could you overthink something as important as your superhero responsibilities? Catori made sure to take her time with the quiz even more than she had previously.

Finally, when she was finished and satisfied with the choices she had made, she let out a deep sigh and turned to the page where the answers would be. She anxiously started adding up her score, throwing the magazine on the ground once she realized her total. This time she got two questions out of ten correct! How was it possible that she got an even worse score the second time?

Despite her growing frustration, there was one thing that could help get her mind off it. But first she needed something, which fortunately could be found in the store.

“H.C. could I see *The Phenomenal Psionic Brain #323*?” she asked. She leaned against the glass counter containing various rare old comic books, action figures and artifacts, and searched for the comic herself.

“Oh! It’s one of those days,” laughed H.C. as he began rummaging for the comic in his many drawers.

“How did you know?”

“Because you always want to read that issue when you’re upset about something,” he said with a smirk.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s just that most fans hate this issue so much that it has been officially called non-canon by the comic book producers, and yet it appears to be your favorite comic book.”

“People are too hard on Smarty-Pants. She could have been a great sidekick to the Psionic Brain if they had only given her a chance.”

Smarty-Pants was the incredibly short-lived sidekick of the Psionic Brain lasting through only one issue of the comic series. Smarty-Pants was a thirteen-year-old girl with a pink helmet in the shape of a brain. She donned a white lab coat with a black domino mask that matched well with her black rubber gloves.

“Well, you have to admit that costume is ridiculous.”

“Blame the designers of the costume. It’s not her fault. Besides, her characterization more than makes up for it,” retorted Catori.

“You mean the amazing characterization of being a know-it-all and the superpower of knowing useless trivia?”

Catori opened her mouth to vigorously defend Smarty-Pants, when she realized that H.C. was shaking slightly from contained laughter. “Would you stop teasing me and give me my comic book already?”

He let out a chuckle. “Sorry Catori, but you should know by now that I also have a bit of a soft spot for Smarty-Pants. However, I do admit I’m not as into these newer

superheroes as much as I am the superheroes of yore.” At this comment, Catori gaped in disbelief.

“What are you talking about? How can you get any better than the Psionic Brain?”

H.C. rolled his eyes. “You only say that because you don’t know any better.” He went back to his cabinet and pulled out several old-looking comic books. “You don’t know the awesomeness of heroes like the Blue Asteroid and Captain Thunderhighs.”

Knowing that H.C. was being completely serious, Catori attempted to contain her laughter. How on earth had anyone taken someone seriously with a name like that?

Thankfully H.C. didn’t appear to notice and stood up straight and proud with his left fist raised, “Being a superhero used to be about wanting to protect and help people not just about what superpower you had. Superheroes used to be anyone; they used to acquire their powers. Now, every superhero is just born with superpowers.”

Catori stiffened at that. Did that mean there was a way she could get superpowers too?

“Superheroes used to gain their superpowers?”

“Oh yeah, back about two hundred years ago or so that was how every superhero used to get their powers,” answered H.C. with a wave of his hand, obviously annoyed that his rant had been interrupted.

“So, is there a way anyone could still get superpowers?” she asked hopefully.

“Nah, not anymore. Like I said, it’s been over two hundred years since the last person accidentally came into their powers. The only way to have superpowers these days is to have one superhero parent to pass on the genes.”

Catori's shoulders drooped as all her previous excitement escaped her. She should have known it would never be that easy. All this time she had been holding on to a sliver of hope for superpowers because she heard stories about a great grandmother who caused the lights in a room to dim slightly when she sneezed.

"Anyway, I need your help, my favorite niece. You know what today is, right?" said H.C. He wrung his hands and glanced back and forth as if he was waiting for something.

"Buffalo Saturday," she sighed.

Buffalo Saturday was the day that a soccer team made up of grade schoolers came by the Collector's Vault. Normally this would be great since it was always good business, but unfortunately before they came to the store they stopped to eat Buffalo wings. Due to this, they often left greasy red prints over everything they touched in the store, and they touched pretty much everything.

"You know what you have to do," said H.C. in a low tone.

"Yes, yes, I know. I hide all the expensive valuable stuff in the back while you keep lookout." Catori went to the stands and grabbed several expensive comics, as well as some fragile action figures. With her hands full, she began transferring all the collectibles to the safe location of a set of drawers in the back room. Once finished, she turned back to flipping through the issue of the Good Samaritan again until she was interrupted by a stampede of at least twenty kids descending upon the store. As the kids spread out around the store, H.C. shot her what she assumed were supposed to be big puppy dog eyes, but ended up looking more like he had allergies.

“Hey, favorite niece. You think that maybe you can stick around for a bit?” Catori rolled her eyes. He tried to pull this every Saturday.

“First of all, I’m your only niece. Second, I was here last Saturday all day when I should be like other kids and doing nothing all day. Sorry favorite uncle, but I’m going to have to sit this one out.”

“Come on Catori, at least help me clean up afterward.”

She sighed. Somehow despite being significantly younger, she ended up the more mature of the two of them in these situations. “Fine. After dinner I’ll come by and help you clean up.”

“And that is why you are my favorite niece. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to stop those children from breaking my toys that took me six hours to assemble.”

With that, he raced over to one of his stands while Catori slipped out the door before H.C. attempted to guilt-trip her into staying the entire day. But just as she stepped out from the store, something slammed into her so hard that she was spun around and knocked onto her butt. She looked up to see nothing there. Frowning in confusion, she glanced to the right just in time to see someone in a long brown trench coat and baseball cap briskly walking away.

“Hey!” she shouted after the person as she got to her feet. However, the trench-coated individual didn’t even give any indication of having heard her. Without so much as a nod in her direction, he or she disappeared around the corner. What was that guy’s problem? Before she could consider it any longer, she noticed something shining on the ground right next to her. Curious she picked up a small metal object about the size of a large button. It was covered in strange rectangular markings that she couldn’t identify.

She turned it over to try and figure out what it was, but she didn't find any useful information. Just as she was contemplating throwing the metal button after the rude trench-coat person, it suddenly began glowing green so that she could no longer see what was etched into it. She was forced to shield her eyes as it grew brighter and brighter. Before she could come up with a plausible explanation for what was going on or it blinded her, it abruptly stopped glowing.

Catori vigorously rubbed her eyes in an attempt to bring them back into focus only to stumble to the ground at what she now saw. Floating and dancing across her vision were neon markings exactly like those she had just seen on the metal button.

She closed both her eyes and opened them. The symbols were still there. She closed her right eye while leaving the other open; they were still there. She covered both her eyes. In the darkness, she could still see the symbols flitting around in the air in front of her as if they were taunting her. What was she going to do? She couldn't go through her entire life attempting to see around random symbols. Not to mention how dizzy she was already feeling from their continuous wave-like movement. Briefly shaken from her panicked thoughts, she realized that the neon markings were getting dimmer. Despite Catori's futile efforts, the symbols began to fade on their own until they disappeared completely.

Although still slightly unnerved, she got to her feet and glanced around to see if anyone else had been stricken by this same mysterious experience. But upon seeing everyone else just passing by without even a peek of concern for the girl who had just been slumped over on the sidewalk, she had a feeling that she was the only one this happened to. Maybe looking over the metal button would give her some ideas? She

stuffed her hands into both jean pockets and found nothing. She tried the back-jean pockets and likewise found nothing. She must have dropped it.

Thinking that perhaps it was still nearby, she stared down at the sidewalk with great intensity and focus. While ignoring the venomous glares and mutterings of passerbys as they were forced to walk around her, Catori retraced the exact areas she had been. Unfortunately, she didn't find the strange button, but maybe it didn't matter. After all, the symbols were gone and showed no signs of returning. So, maybe it would be best if she just forgot about it. With a shrug and a sigh, she started on her way home still wanting to get some fun in before she had to battle the grease-covered warzone after dinner.

Catori had no idea what had just happened to her, but one thing was certain. If what H.C. said was true, then there was no way for her to gain a superpower, and without a superpower she could never be a great superhero.

Chapter 2: The Boring Life of Catori Powers

“Catori! Your breakfast is ready!” Catori’s father shouted up the stairs.

“Okay!” Catori shouted back as she checked her appearance in the mirror.

She had tan skin that she inherited from her parents. She also had short ragged auburn hair that barely made it to her shoulders. As far as she was concerned, long hair just meant more hair to get in the way of her eyes. Her eyes were copper and had been hidden behind round emerald green glasses since she was six years old.

She strolled down the stairs where she was met with the delicious smell of chocolate chip pancakes. Her father must have been up early again, which meant that he probably had another bad day at work yesterday.

“Thanks for the pancakes, Dad.” She sat in her chair and started shoveling pancakes into her mouth.

“Hey, off for another exciting day of school?” Her father sat down next to her and began reading his newspaper. Catori smirked at the idea of any day at school being exciting.

Catori’s father had tan skin similar to her own and short black hair that was usually stuck up with a bit too much gel. He had dark reddish-brown eyes that had bags under them. He was currently wearing his light brown suit that seemed a tad crumpled. He probably hadn’t bothered to iron it again.

“I wish something interesting would happen for once. By the way, how are your houses?”

Her father let out an annoyed snort. “Another one of my apartments was destroyed during a fight between Captain Volt and Jack O’ Lantern.”

Her father was a real estate agent who, unlike Catori, was not a fan of super-powered individuals. Mostly due to superheroes and supervillains constantly destroying his property before he could sell it. It was a good thing that Paladin City reimbursed all property damage, unfortunately, it was never even close to the amount of money he would have gotten selling the property. It was a lucky thing that her father was able on occasion to sell a few houses.

“You can’t blame the superheroes, Dad. They’re just trying to protect us; it’s not like they’re purposely targeting your buildings.” Despite Catori’s inspiring assertion, her father didn’t answer or acknowledge it. Though this was certainly nothing new, as she and her father often got into arguments over the subject. Honestly, this was a step up from usual.

He then folded the newspaper and stood up, “Well, maybe I’ll get lucky today.” He glanced down at her hat. “Wearing your hat again?”

“What’s wrong with my hat?”

Catori was a creature of habit when it came to clothes, probably because she didn’t care about clothes. She often wore what was essentially the same outfit. Catori was generally found wearing an entire rainbow of colored hoodies (this time it happened to be red) and jeans (regardless of the time of year). Lastly, she almost always had on her favorite hat, a white baseball hat featuring a white crescent moon being overtaken by a black shadow. The symbol on her baseball cap was apparently the symbol of some famous superhero. Although, it must have either been a superhero from long ago or have been a less popular one for Catori to not know who he or she was.

“Would it kill you to try wearing something not related to superheroes?” asked her father.

“We’ve talked about this, Dad. When I’m just sitting in a classroom for six hours I might as well wear what I want,” replied Catori. She hoped that this would end the conversation. Unfortunately, it didn’t.

“But wouldn’t it be nice to be complimented on an outfit for a change?” Actually, Catori would rather be complimented for impressive fighting skills or an encyclopedic knowledge of superheroes, but she wasn’t going to tell her father that.

“I have no time to change. If I’m late again to school, my teacher said she would send me to the principal’s office,” explained Catori. She knew this would be the best way to get out of the situation.

“Fine, but you’re going to have to realize at some point that dressing up like a superhero isn’t going to make you one.” Deciding to ignore this possible truth for the moment, she humored him.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll see you when I get back.” She raced out the door before she was forced into boring normal clothes.

“Hey!” called her father out the door, but she was already making her way down the sidewalk.

“Good morning, everyone,” greeted the teacher. She entered the room with a stack of papers in her arms. Once Catori saw the papers, she felt herself start to clam up.

They had to be the graded tests from last week and she hadn't exactly felt confident when she'd taken it. She nervously twisted a strand of hair around in her fingers.

Before she could think over it any longer, the teacher began passing out the papers. The student seated next to her received his test first and Catori leaned over to see that he had gotten an A, causing her to feel a little more confident. The teacher placed the paper face down on her desk. Catori attempted to catch a glance from the teacher to gauge her reaction. Unfortunately, the teacher seemed too preoccupied passing out tests to notice her. Deciding that there was only one way to truly know, she flipped over the paper and let out a relieved sigh when she saw it was just a C-.

It was certainly better than she was expecting, though that probably wasn't going to be a good enough excuse for her father. It had been the third C of the month, but it wasn't that big of a deal. Was it? C was a passing grade after all. It was average and while that meant she wasn't overly smart, it also meant she wasn't overly dumb. So, that was something. Although, she had never been this carefree about her grades before.

Catori shrugged her shoulders. Truthfully, she didn't understand her recent disinterest in her schoolwork. Then again, what excuse did a kid need to be disinterested in school? Besides, in a city that was full of superheroes and supervillains, how could a person focus on subjects as mundane as math? Almost on cue, the teacher spoke.

"Let's start this morning's class with some math."

Catori resisted the urge to let out a groan, which couldn't be said for some of the other students. The teacher ignored this and started writing math problems on the whiteboard. As Catori felt her eyes start to glaze over, she glimpsed something out the

window that instantly caught her attention. Outside, a battle was going on between Gale Tornado and Velocity.

She nudged the A student next to her and pointed to the battle outside. After glancing briefly out the window, the student simply rolled his eyes and continued taking notes. Although annoyed with his lack of interest, she decided to ignore him and turned her attention back to the fight outside. Gale Tornado (well-known superheroine with the ability to fly) was fighting a villain known simply as Velocity.

Velocity was a man with the ability to race at super speeds whose true appearance was unknown due to him always wearing armor that covered his entire body. The armor appeared to be made from some sort of shining metal and was a gleaming white color. Covering his head was a white helmet with an arrow-shaped forehead and a pitch-black mouthpiece. The eyes of the helmet were a reflective surface that made it impossible to see his real eyes. The chest plate of the armor was also black and strangely didn't have a crest on it like most of the superheroes and supervillains' costumes had. His armored gloves were all white except for the palms of the hands, which were black. Finally, he wore black armored boots that appeared to be heavily re-enforced.

While Catori knew enough about Gale Tornado to know she held a distrust for all flying vehicles (from airplanes to blimps), the same couldn't be said for Velocity. This wasn't through Catori's lack of trying, after all she was the Superhero Encyclopedia and she had a reputation to uphold. She knew so little about Velocity because there was hardly any information recorded on him. However, being a determined individual, Catori had been able to scrounge up some information. Apparently, no one knew Velocity's true identity or even what he vaguely looked like, and he never spoke a word. He often

worked for various supervillains, but never took the lead role. He must have felt more comfortable taking orders than giving orders. Then again, perhaps he couldn't give orders, maybe he couldn't talk at all.

As she watched the two, she realized that her eyes seemed to be drawn to Velocity. It was as if she was analyzing his every move and for a few minutes she couldn't take her eyes off him. Numbers and figures surrounded him with her eyes being particularly drawn to his feet. Then, just as fast as they appeared, the numbers and figures disappeared. Unable to understand what had just happened, Catori simply shook her head clear and turned her attention back to the explosive battle.

She watched in awe as Gale Tornado dove down on Velocity, only for her to smash into the ground as he raced to the side to avoid the attack. The impact created a small crater in what had been the school's soccer field. Gale Tornado was not deterred as she brushed the dirt off her clothes and soared back into the air just as Velocity sprinted under her. The two turned to face each other and for Catori time slowed down as the two super-powered beings charged towards each other, Gale Tornado from above and Velocity from below. Just as they were about to meet, the blinds suddenly closed, making it impossible for her to see any of the fight. Enraged that someone had ruined the only exciting thing to ever happen to her at school, she spun around to see the teacher glaring down at her.

"Miss Powers, I hope it isn't too much to ask for your undivided attention for a few hours," lectured the teacher. Catori considered pointing out to her that keeping a twelve-year-old's attention for several hours five days a week was a lot to ask for, but thought better of it. She simply settled for shooting the teacher a sheepish grin, which just

got her another angry glare. As soon as the teacher turned back to the whiteboard, Catori immediately used her pencil to prop open the blinds. When she realized that she couldn't really see a thing, she let the blind drop and leaned against her desk in exasperation. Why was it that when something exciting did happen all she could do was try to catch a glimpse?

After several hours of attempting to not drown in the sea of complete tediousness that was her ordinary life, Catori made her way home. She had considered stopping by the Collector's Vault, but thought that H.C. would try to rope her into working more at the store. And after spending several hours wiping off red fingerprints last time, she wasn't really feeling up to it. Not to mention that being surrounded by comics telling the amazing exploits of superheroes would only bum her out more.

As she was strolling down the sidewalk, a shadow passed overhead. Gale Tornado flew by. Catori grinned at the sight. That answered her question of how the fight went, though she didn't see Gale Tornado carrying an unconscious Velocity. Did she beat him several hours ago and had already delivered him to the authorities, or did he escape? Catori shook her head and turned her attention away from the heroine. Why did she care? It wasn't like there was anything she could do about it, so why did it matter? She let out a sigh and glanced back up at the sky to see that Gale Tornado was long gone, so she continued walking.

As Catori wondered what she should do next, she heard shouting coming from farther down the sidewalk. She walked past the entrance of a construction site and spied Jay Courier and a much taller kid.

Jay Courier was a boy her age with long coffee brown hair that was spiked up with so much hair gel that it looked like it would break off if someone touched it. Despite being of average size, he always managed to stay at the top of the school's hierarchy. She couldn't explain why, but Jay always had a kind of smug confidence that kept him from being bullied by boys much larger than him. It was as if he knew something that everyone else didn't. Strangely, he never used his high status within the school to be popular. Instead, he didn't seem to think much of anyone at the school.

"Why are you talking about me behind my back?" asked the taller boy.

"First, you're going to have to be more specific, I talk about a lot of people. Second, I never talk about people behind their backs. If you want, I'll tell you what I said right now," answered Jay with a bored look on his face. At this, the boy seemed flabbergasted by his bluntness. He must have been new to the school because this was how Jay spoke to everyone.

"Look, I don't want any trouble. I just want you to stop talking about me. I mean, I don't even know why you have a problem with me when I don't even know you."

Jay snorted. "You're all the same. Cowards that either run from any kind of trouble or just wait for others to save you."

Catori frowned. What did he mean by that? Who was he referring to? The boy looked just as confused as Catori felt. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to process his statement because he was knocked to the ground. It happened so quickly that she didn't even see the hit, but his legs were swept out from under him. So, she could only assume that Jay kicked his legs. "Come on, fight back! I could use the practice," said Jay as he cracked his knuckles.

Knowing that no real hero would allow a bully to keep, well... bullying, Catori sprang into action. She noticed a pile of gravel and realized it was the perfect place to make her entrance. She scrambled up the pile of gravel 'til she was at the very top.

She puffed up her chest and put her arms on her hips. "Leave him alone, Jay!"

Jay spun around to face her. However, when he caught sight of her he smirked. "Well, if it isn't Powers, or maybe Lack O' Powers would be a more accurate name."

Catori felt her cheeks get hot with anger. "You're one to talk," she countered, though Jay didn't appear even slightly irritated by the comment. Suddenly, she felt the gravel from under her feet slide down causing her to lose her balance and tumble to the ground. Unable to catch herself on the way down, Catori slammed her face into the ground.

"You can play hero all you want Powers, but without any superpowers you'll never be a real one. In fact, you're not even worth my time."

Catori glared up at Jay only to see that he had already turned his back on her and was walking away. She glanced around for the boy she had foolishly embarrassed herself to try to save, only to realize that he was nowhere to be seen. He must have escaped when she had distracted his tormentor.

After letting out a snort of frustration, she sat up and rubbed her sore forehead. Luckily, she hadn't hurt herself too badly. How had she fallen so terribly on such a small pile of gravel? Was she really so clumsy? Maybe Jay was right. She would never be a superhero without superpowers. Not that it mattered. After all, how could Catori Powers ever hope to be anything else but ordinary?

Chapter 3: How to Build Swift Boots

“You will never win Jack O’ Lantern, not as long as justice lives in the hearts of every good citizen of Paladin City,” proclaimed the Psionic Brain as he was slowly lowered into a vat of melted down metal.

“You won’t sound so confident when you are melted into someone’s paperweight,” sneered Jack O’ Lantern. The hero continued to be lowered into the vat, but at a faster speed. “I’d love to stick around, but I have a whole city to heat up.” With that, the villain raced off with an evil cackle, leaving the hero to his fate.

“It won’t work,” Catori commented to herself as she stuffed another spoonful of cereal into her mouth. Ever since the incident with Jay, her schedule was going to school and then heading home to watch *The Psensational Animated Adventures of the Psionic Brain*. While this was partly due to her father grounding her after he found out about her test grade, it was mainly because she was still coming to terms with the fact that despite being in a city full of heroes, she would never be one.

Luckily, she was still able to watch her favorite cartoon show featuring her favorite superhero. No matter the time of day, she always loved to watch the show with a bowl of some marshmallow-filled cereal. At least it gave her something to do.

“It’s a good thing I brought along my trusty Psionic Scissors,” the Psionic Brain exclaimed. Then he used his telekinetic powers to take out a pair of scissors from his pocket. Catori edged closer to the television to watch. He swung back and forth to gain momentum. Once he had enough of it, the scissors cut through the rope. He landed on his feet with ease, just barely missing the vat of melted metal. “Now I need to find Jack O’ Lantern before he unleashes his fury on the innocent public,” said the Psionic Brain to

himself. He raced from the empty warehouse and jumped on his motorcycle, the Psych-Bike. Being such a devoted fan, Catori knew that the Psionic Brain would soon tell the audience where Jack O' Lantern was and how he knew where he was. She waited on the edge of her seat for the explanation, but suddenly she saw numbers and figures spinning around in front of her again.

She leapt to her feet and began rubbing her eyes vigorously. This couldn't be happening again! Was she going to have to deal with this strange affliction all the time? Maybe she needed to see a doctor, but how was she going to explain it to a doctor? How was she going to explain it to her father? She could barely explain it to herself. It was then that she realized that the numbers weren't covering her entire vision as before, but instead they were concentrated in one area. Curious, she followed the numbers to the area where she kept her pair of ordinary chocolate brown boots. As soon as she picked up the boots, the numbers completely disappeared. Still, she couldn't take her eyes off the boots. She felt this strong need to try the boots on. Not only that, but she felt this weird awareness that she needed more materials to do something. But what?

Not knowing what she was doing, she raced out to the backyard with the boots clutched tightly in hand. Due to living in the city, the backyard was quite small with only a small space for grass and a tiny run-down shed in the corner. She walked through the shed door and took in a deep breath, only to spit as she walked right into a wall of spider webs covering the inside. To Catori's knowledge her father had never so much as tightened a loose bolt, so she had no idea why they had a workshop at all. Although considering the state of it, maybe the workshop had just come with the house and been left to rot.

Using a tattered rag she found in the corner, she wiped off the dust that had been collecting on the work table for who knows how long. After she finished with the table, she grabbed a broom from the kitchen and swept out all the remaining dust as well as dirt on the floor. Once she was finally satisfied with the brisk cleaning, she placed the boots on the wooden work table and shut the door. Seeing that there was a deadlock bolt, she quickly snapped it shut. The last thing she needed was her father interrupting her.

She had no idea what she was making or even how she was making it. It was as if she was in some sort of trance unable to be distracted from the task at hand. As she built her...whatever it was, she kept racing out to grab more and more materials, which was difficult since she had to keep bolting and unbolting the door, but her daze kept her from really paying attention to what they were. Her hands worked of their own volition. She was so deep in her thought that she nearly missed the glowing symbols dancing across her vision. In fact, it took her a minute to realize that someone was knocking on the door.

“Catori, are you in there?” asked the familiar voice of her father. Still stuck in her trance-like state, she didn’t stop working or even so much as glance at the door. Yet, she knew she had to say something.

“Yeah, dad. Could you come back later? I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“What are you even doing in there? You’ve been in there at least an hour.” Had it really been that long? She could have sworn she had only been in here about twenty minutes. Then again, she had a feeling that in her dazed state she could have been here a week and not noticed. However, she was more concerned with her father’s question. She couldn’t even explain what she was doing to herself let alone her father. Thankfully, she thought up the perfect excuse.

“I’ve just been working on a school project. I’ll be done soon.”

“Do you need any help?”

“No thanks, I’m fine. Besides, I’m supposed to do this project by myself.”

“Well, okay. I’ll be in the house if you need me,” he said as his voice trailed off.

Catori sighed at the clear disappointment in her father’s voice. She knew that it was wrong to lie to her father, but she couldn’t figure out a better way to get rid of him to continue building.

As she placed in one of the screws, she suddenly couldn’t figure out what she should do next. Blinking slowly, she realized that the glowing figures had again disappeared. She picked up the boots and took a good look at them. Her boots now had steel plating on the tip of the boots and heel as well as glowing neon green accents that flowed throughout the boots. She couldn’t tell for sure, but it looked finished to her.

Deciding that she would have a better chance finding out what her boots could do outside, she grabbed the boots and sprinted out the door. Once outside she quickly replaced her tennis shoes with her new unusual boots. She balanced her weight from one leg to the next, trying to figure out whether she felt any different with the boots on her feet. She felt the same.

Going mostly on instinct, she sprinted for the back door. To her astonishment, she sped forward far faster than she ever had before. She went so fast that she just barely made it through the door before she smashed right into the dinner table hard enough to completely collapse it.

“Catori? What was that?!” asked her father followed by the sound of rapid footsteps coming down the stairs. Trying to shake herself from her initial shock, Catori

stood up and brushed some of the splintered pieces off. However, her reaction was nothing compared to her father's. "What happened to the table?!" Catori opened and closed her mouth uncertain as to how to respond.

"I-I'm not sure. I just kind of ran into it," she admitted.

"How hard did you run into it to destroy it?"

She just shook her head. "Sorry, dad. I guess I wasn't paying attention." Her father ran his hand through his hair and let out a deep sigh while continuing to stare at the rubble.

"It's fine. I've been wanting to replace that old table anyway. Why don't you go finish your homework while I clean this up?"

Catori frowned. Her homework was the last thing she wanted to do after the discovery of possible superpowers. "Actually, I was thinking of going to the Collector's Vault."

At the mention of the comic book store a scowl emerged across her father's face. "The last thing you need to be doing is goofing off with your uncle. You have grades you need to bring up, especially after your latest test grade."

"Come on, dad. I've been working on school stuff all day. I need a break."

Her father rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Fine. You can take a small break, but I want you back soon. I don't want you getting distracted by H.C.'s stories about superheroes just when you're getting back on track." Simply happy to be allowed out of the house, she nodded and practically skipped out the door. Before she made it out, she stopped to grab a pair of sunglasses sitting on top of the nearby built-in coat rack.

Although a bit guilty over how easily she could lie to her father, Catori knew it was the only way she could get out of there. Besides, if it turned out that she did have superpowers, who was going to care about a little white lie? After bending down to make sure that her boots were firmly tied to her feet, she looked down the empty sidewalk. She pulled up the hoodie that she happened to be wearing, pulled up her shirt to cover some of her mouth, and put on her sunglasses. It was Superhero 101 to always protect your identity. While not exactly a superhero yet, Catori figured it was probably best to be prepared anyways. She took a deep breath and sprinted forward.

Like before in the backyard, she shot forward like a cannonball. Her hood was instantly swept back, her hair flew around her face, and her sunglasses rattled back and forth on her nose. She was going so fast that she would have gone face first over a fire hydrant had she not zigzagged out of the way in time.

In fact, she was having difficulty just staying on her feet that kept threatening to trip her, not that it mattered. She had a superpower! She had super speed! Or at least she had boots that gave her super speed. She knew that she should probably be asking some questions as to how or why, but honestly, she was too overjoyed to really care. By some miracle, her dream had come true and she was going to make the most of it; she was going to become a superhero. But this opened up yet another question, how did one go about becoming a superhero? Did she just go out and fight crime or did she have to get registered somewhere?

Before she could think about it any longer, she heard a scream that shook her from her thoughts. Catori barely noticed in time that the sidewalk had suddenly become full. Unfortunately, it was in that moment that she realized that she didn't exactly know

how to stop. Having no other choice, she swerved into the road and smacked into a parked motorcycle on the opposite side. The force of the collision vaulted her over the motorcycle and smashed it into the pavement.

With a low groan and a stumble to her feet, she looked down at the damage she caused. The motorcycle was on its side with several long white scratches on the side and a broken mirror. Her first day with superpowers and she destroyed some innocent civilian's property. Though on the plus side, superheroes did tend to cause a lot of property damage, so maybe she was closer to being one than she thought. With that self-reassurance, she glanced from side to side for a possible owner. Not seeing one, she began picking the motorcycle up. Hopeful that she could get it back up and looking nice before the owner returned, she pushed it upright. Just as she got the motorcycle halfway up, an explosion erupted from a nearby bank. Catori leapt backward dropping the bike in the process. When she made a move towards the bank, something struck her hard enough to once again knock her to the ground. She looked up to glare at whoever had pushed her, only to see the superheroine known as Hindrance.

Hindrance was a young woman probably in her early to mid-twenties with very short messy mahogany brown hair with a pair of golden goggles resting on her forehead. She wore a skintight Tuscan yellow leotard with a flowing azure belt around her waist. Underneath her goggles was a silver mask extending down her neck, but leaving her mouth and chin uncovered. She also wore matching gloves and boots. Hindrance was one of the few superheroes that Catori wasn't that familiar with, mostly because she didn't have a comic book series and kept out of the spotlight. The most she knew about her was

her superpower, the ability to briefly disrupt another person's superpower by touching them.

When Hindrance noticed Catori on the ground, she shot her a brief grin as she headed for the exploding bank. The only explanation for Hindrance's sudden appearance was that the explosive bank was the result of some criminal. Her assumption was confirmed as Hindrance opened the bank's entrance, only for her to duck as a fireball flew over her head. In an act of complete ease, Hindrance cartwheeled to the side as a person came running out with a large duffle bag. Flying out of the partially zipped bag were newly printed dollar bills.

The person was a muscular man with black spiked hair with orange streaks. His face was painted orange with black triangles around his eyes and nose with an angular black smile painted on. The remainder of his outfit was almost completely black with black jeans, black tennis shoes, and even a black leather jacket with flames down the sleeves. Putting the easiest puzzle together, Catori knew the supervillain must have just robbed the bank.

Running right towards her was the villain known as Jack O' Lantern. The weird thing was that he didn't look how she was familiar with him. All the comics and television shows she had seen showcased him as a ridiculous man with a giant pumpkin head and an obsession with plans revolving around a fire-theme. Those appearances were hardly measuring up to the intimidating presence she was currently faced with.

When he caught sight of her, fire exploded from his hands. "What did you do to my motorcycle?! I'm going to...I'm going to!" The fire from his hands spread up his arms and it raged so brightly that she had to take a step backward to escape the heat. Jack O'

Lantern must have noticed the fire leaping up his arms because he shook his arms wildly. “Gotta calm down, gotta calm down,” he said in a much quieter voice. He then closed his eyes and started counting down. Despite the dangerous situation, Catori couldn’t help but stare. She had never seen a super-powered individual unable to control their powers, she especially didn’t expect it from such a high-profiled villain.

It didn’t take long for Jack O’ Lantern to calm down enough for the fire to disappear, only for it to quickly reappear in his hands. Backed into a brick wall, Catori hunkered down. But instead of frying her to a crisp, he spun around and threw a fireball at a sneaking Hindrance. Caught by surprise, it struck Hindrance in the chest hard enough to make her slam into a lamppost. Although a hard hit, somehow Hindrance wasn’t even knocked out, but she did appear dazed. Slumped to the ground underneath the lamppost, Hindrance shook her head back and forth with an unfocused look in her eyes. Jack O’ Lantern smirked slightly and sauntered towards her with another fireball growing larger and larger in his right hand.

“You know Hindrance, I’ve been in a bad way ever since those jackals got the rights to use my name and likeness in your superhero propaganda.” Now towering over Hindrance, his grin broadened. “But taking you out might be enough to make even me feel better.”

She looked up at him with a grin. “Hey Jack, you’re not still upset about that incident with the fire extinguisher, are you?”

His smile was wiped off to be replaced with a scowl. “I see you still can’t take anything seriously, I guess everyone at your funeral will have to do it for you.”

Without thinking, Catori darted forward and, still unable to control her powers, she ended up crashing right into Jack O' Lantern. Normally she probably wouldn't have even moved such a large brawny figure, but luckily this time she had enhanced speed. The two of them ended up flipping over each other and sprawling out into the road. After a few seconds of lying face down on the pavement, she sat up on her elbows. She was just rising to her knees when she saw two legs right in front of her. With a wince, she looked up to see Jack O' Lantern glowering at her.

"Have I lost so much respect in this city that little brats like you think you can take me?" he asked in a low voice.

"No, not at all. I have respect for anyone with a pumpkin for a head," replied Catori with her hands out in front of her. Recognizing that this was the wrong thing to say, Catori rolled to the side as fire whizzed right past her right arm. It was so close that it slightly singed her sweatshirt. She prepared to roll to the side again, but her exit was blocked by a parked van.

"Nowhere to run now, brat," said Jack O' Lantern as two more fireballs appeared in his hands. Catori's mind raced for a way out of the situation. She wouldn't be able to get to her feet and race away fast enough. She doubted that she could take him in a fight even with her boots. The only reason she had knocked him off his feet was by crashing into him and even then, it didn't keep him down long. She couldn't even roll out of the way since he was so close she barely had any room to move. Just when Jack O' Lantern was going to burn her, the fire in his hands suddenly vanished. He frowned at his hands and frantically waved them up and down in frustration.

“What?!” Then a look of clarity crossed his face and he spun around in time to have something knock him back. Catori scrambled out of the way as Jack O’ Lantern landed right where she had been sitting. She looked up at her rescuer to see Hindrance. She shot a grin at Catori before returning her attention back to her opponent.

Jack O’ Lantern immediately stood up and rushed at Hindrance with his fists drawn back. But now that his powers were temporarily disrupted, he stood no chance against Hindrance. As he lunged at her, she ducked under his outstretched arms and kicked his back. He landed in the middle of the road, however, this didn’t deter him and he drew back his arm to punch her. Hindrance simply spun to the side with a large smile on her face as Jack O’ Lantern tripped. He caught himself, but when he turned around to face her again she punched him right in the face. This was with enough force to both knock him to the ground and knock him out. Seeing that her opponent was down, Hindrance’s smile deepened and she even did a little twirl of triumph.

“You alright?” asked Hindrance as she held out her hand to Catori.

“I’m fine,” lied Catori. She was still shaking a little from almost being incinerated, but Hindrance either didn’t notice or ignored it.

“You know you could have been really hurt there.” Catori tensed up. She waited for Hindrance to tell her that what she had done was dangerous and stupid and she should never do something like that again, etc. However, instead she just grinned and responded, “Anyways, thanks for what you did back there. I thought for sure that my goose was cooked.” She chuckled at her own terrible joke.

“No problem.” Catori could hardly believe that such a high-class hero was praising her. She also couldn’t believe that she seemed so...well eccentric to put it nicely. Wasn’t such a prolific superhero supposed to be more serious?

“By the way, that was some fancy footwork. You must have super speed,” said Hindrance.

Catori looked down at her boots. “No. It was these boots. I don’t know how, but I built them in this like trance that was so deep that I can’t even remember how I made them. This is just too weird. I mean, who ever heard of boots giving people superpowers? Can other superheroes do this? I thought it was only supervillains who made gadgets and machines. Can I make other gadgets like this or is this all I can make? If I can make more things, how do I make the trance happen again?”

She had no idea if Hindrance had been able to follow any of her rambling, but it was as if all the things that she had been thinking just burst out of her as soon as someone noticed her. Then again, maybe Hindrance could help her, maybe she had the answers to some of her questions. On top of that, since she had managed to save Hindrance’s life, maybe she would be so impressed with her abilities that she would make Catori her official sidekick. Feeling hopeful, she stared up at Hindrance to see what her reaction was.

She looked from the boots to Catori and grinned. “Well, whatever your power is, it certainly helped save the day today.” Catori’s previous excitement instantly deflated. Ignoring or perhaps not noticing, Hindrance stroked her chin in reflection. “I wish there was something I could give you for saving my bacon.” Just as she said it, a look of clarity moved across her face and she took off the goggles stationed on her forehead. With a

carefree grin, she dropped the goggles into Catori's hands, "There you are. Do with them what you wish."

Catori gaped at the goggles unable to believe she received such an iconic costume piece. "T-t-thank you. But don't you need them?"

Hindrance put her arms behind her head and stared up at the sky absentmindedly. "Nah, I have loads of extras."

The goggles were made of a red leather. On the goggles themselves were thick gold accents with golden gears on the side. At once she put the goggles on and looked at herself in a nearby window. She grinned at the reflection with her arms on her hips in a heroic fashion. It felt right.

Before she could properly thank her, Hindrance said, "I'll be sure to put a good word in for you." Catori frowned. What was Hindrance talking about? She opened her mouth to ask, when Hindrance hauled the unconscious Jack O' Lantern over her shoulder and rushed away.

Uncertain of what else to do, she slowly (to make sure she didn't speed into a wall or anything) began making her way home. She knew that she should be going faster since her father expected her little outing to be quick, but she was too busy thinking over everything that had just happened. What did her strange abilities mean? Could she make more gadgets that gave her superpowers or was this a one-time thing? If she could make more gadgets, how did she do it? Lastly, what had Hindrance meant when she said she'd 'put a good word in'?

Whatever was going on, Catori had a feeling it had only just started.

Chapter 4: Captain Phenomenal's Training Facility for Young Heroes

Catori had daydreamed for years over what she would do the moment she gained a superpower. Most of these involved saving civilians and fighting supervillains, not sitting on the living room couch watching TV. Unfortunately, she wasn't sure how to hide her new abilities from her dad. After all their arguments, she had a pretty good feeling what his reaction would be about her becoming a superhero. Until she figured out what to do, she hid her super speed boots (that she had taken to calling Swift Boots) under her bed.

So instead of practicing her possible superpowers, she was stuck sitting at home with nothing to do. Well, nothing to do, except watch her favorite cartoon show. This episode happened to be one of her favorite two-parters, where all the supervillains the Psionic Brain had fought teamed up to get their revenge. A classic! The supervillains were just about to drop a giant oversized cage on the unsuspecting hero when the doorbell rang. Since she was closest to the door, she got up and answered. What she saw made her blink twice in utter confusion.

Standing at her door was an elderly gentleman. His dark gray hair was tied up in a long ponytail and he had a matching gray beard that curved into a mustache. At the tip of his nose were thin rectangular glasses that drew attention to his glowing green eyes. However, it was his outfit that caught Catori's attention. He was wearing a cream-colored suit jacket with a matching buttoned up shirt that had intricate hot air balloon designs on it. He also wore a dark red bowtie with gold flowery designs that were so crammed together that it made it almost impossible to make out any of the art. Lastly, he was wearing dark red suit pants that were held up with a brown belt.

“Greetings...” The man quickly looked down at his hand, which Catori noticed had something scribbled on it. “Catori Powers,” finally continued the man looking quite triumphant. “I’m Captain Phenomenal and I run a training facility for promising young heroes like yourself. I have come to invite you and your family to visit our headquarters before you begin your training Monday.”

For a solid few minutes Catori stared at the man, unable to believe what she was hearing. Captain Phenomenal was standing in her doorway. *The* Captain Phenomenal!

He was one of the most influential members in the superhero community. That is until he had been hit badly on the head during an investigation that caused him to go a teensy bit crazy, which led to his subsequent retirement from hero work. He had the power to instantly understand how objects and powers worked, a power that had so many applications and uses that it alone probably made him such an influential member.

Captain Phenomenal knocking on her head, as one would a door, awakened Catori from her thoughts.

“Ow. Oh right, I’ll get my dad right away!” she said as she rubbed her head and rushed to the kitchen. “DAD!” she screamed as she burst through the swinging door. Her dad dropped the newspaper he had been reading on the floor.

“What?! What?!” asked her father as he rushed over to her.

“There’s someone at the door you need to meet.”

“And you had to come in here screaming to explain that?” questioned her dad as he picked up a few pages of the newspaper.

“Just come on.” Catori had a feeling that it would be easier to show him than explain it. She rushed back into the living room to find Captain Phenomenal watching

The Psensational Animated Adventures of the Psionic Brain on the couch. Apparently, he had just decided to make himself at home while he waited. He was so engrossed in the program that he didn't even look up as she entered the room with her father close behind.

Her father cleared his throat causing Captain Phenomenal to glanced over at them as if he just noticed them. For a moment, he stared at the two of them with a glazed over look when a sudden realization dawned on his face.

"Oh yes! You must be..." he paused to look down at the scribbles on his hand again, "Catori Power's parent." Catori let out a soft sigh. She was starting to understand why he had been forced into retirement.

"That's correct, Mister..." responded her dad as he put out his hand.

"Phenomenal. Well, actually it's Captain Phenomenal to be exact," replied Captain Phenomenal as he crossed his arms over each other to shake both of their hands. Her father's eyes widened, obviously recognizing a superhero name when he heard one.

"I'm Ahote Powers. What is...someone like you doing here?" asked her father carefully. Despite his clear dislike of superheroes, Catori was thankful that he was at least being tactful while talking to such an esteemed hero.

"Catori Powers has been selected as one of the lucky few super-powered children chosen to receive special training at Captain Phenomenal's Training Facility for Young Heroes or CPTFYH for short."

"CPTFYH?" asked Catori.

"You wouldn't believe how hard people tried to make an acronym, but it ended up being too difficult, so we just went with CPTFYH."

"But Catori doesn't have any superpowers," said her father.

At this comment, Captain Phenomenal frowned, “That’s odd. Hindrance recommended you personally herself.”

Thinking quickly, she said, “No, no, no don’t listen to my dad. I do have superpowers.” Deciding to forget hiding it any longer, she rushed up the stairs, grabbed the boots under the bed, and sprinted back into the living room. She turned to Captain Phenomenal again, “I do have a superpower. I made these boots and they give me super speed.” She pushed them into Captain Phenomenal’s hands, “See!” Captain Phenomenal studied the boots, turning them over in his hands and looking over every part of them from every angle.

“Fascinating, I’ve never seen any knick-knacks like this before,” he said as he handed them back to her. She promptly put them on while trying to figure out how her super-speed boots qualified as knick-knacks. He then clapped his hands together and said, “Well, should we go check out the facility together?” At this suggestion, her father’s eyes grew wide and he shot her a look.

“As kind as your invitation is, I never really considered Catori becoming a superhero,” explained her father. Once he said this, it was like time itself stopped for Catori. She had been hoping and waiting for this moment all her life and now her father was prepared to throw it all away. Before she could raise an objection, Captain Phenomenal beat her to it.

He put his arms out in front of him and shook his head. “Now wait just a second, Ahote Powers. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We would only be training her to control her powers. If she wants to become a superhero, she would have to pass the Exam.”

Catori frowned. What was this Exam he was talking about? Before she could verbalize her question, she was interrupted as her father continued.

“Just how long will this program take? And will it get in the way of her schoolwork?” asked her father with an unreadable expression on his face.

“Maybe, four to five months. The program has been scheduled so that it’s after school, for those who wish to continue their intellectual pursuits.”

Her father stared hard at the superhero as if he was trying to read his mind. Despite this, Captain Phenomenal beamed, as if he didn’t find anything wrong with her father’s stare. Finally, her father nodded.

Captain Phenomenal clapped his hands together and started walking out the living room opening. “Wonderful! Well, now that we have that figured out I think it’s time you see our pristine program.” Catori frowned at the fact that she was only able to attend for five months, but realized quickly that she should probably just be grateful that her father was even letting her go. Not wanting her father to change his mind, she raced out and opened the front door.

“Come on! Come on! Let’s go!” she shouted.

After driving through the city, Captain Phenomenal’s car pulled into an old warehouse. It was a huge warehouse with windows on nearly every space of it, though every single one of them was either cracked or completely smashed. It was built with red bricks which were faded, chipped, and some were even completely brown. Pasted to the bricks were some old torn and ripped posters and fliers.

Catori frowned in puzzlement. This was the amazing superhero training facility? As they all stepped out of the car, she walked up to the building beside Captain Phenomenal. She shot a perplexed look at Captain Phenomenal who didn't appear to notice and just walked through a rusted steel door. She followed him with her father close behind. Catori gasped at what she saw inside.

The inside of the building was somehow larger. It was a gigantic open area that could easily house hundreds of superheroes within it and still give them all plenty of elbowroom. It had large light brown pillars down the middle that stretched all the way to the ceiling as well as small gardens between them and the floor was multi-colored marble. At the center of the room was a large white marble statue. The statue depicted several superheroes and superheroines circled around a globe in varying poses. Despite the impressive inside, it was seeing so many heroes that really made her jaw drop.

"Wow," was all that Catori could manage to get out. Even her father seemed dumbstruck.

"Welcome to the Paladin City Superhero headquarters known as Crimson Cape Citadel!" exclaimed Captain Phenomenal flourishing with his hands towards the interior. No one said anything as they continued to gape at the unbelievable sight, so Captain Phenomenal continued. "No one is quite certain why so many super-powered individuals are drawn to Paladin City, but one thing is certain, this is the core HQ for all the superheroes in the whole world. If you will follow me, I'll show you the most important areas for you."

He pointed at the opposite end of the building to a giant steel door that extended halfway to the ceiling. "That door leads to the Crusader Hall, one of the most important

rooms in the entire building. It is where all the heroes in the city meet to discuss major problems or issues within the city.” He was about to go down a hallway to the right when Catori noticed a giant reinforced metal door with chains, a padlock, and even a keypad on the second floor just above them.

“Captain, what is behind that door?” she asked while pointing to the door.

Captain Phenomenal blinked and turned to Catori slowly. It suddenly occurred to her that the reason he had seemed more coherent here than he had been before was that he was simply on autopilot. This caused Catori to blush slightly. He was a more elderly gentleman with serious head trauma and not only had she interrupted his flow, but she had asked him a question he was probably not used to. Luckily for her, the pause didn’t last too long and Captain Phenomenal even managed to answer her question.

“That door protects the most important room in the Crimson Cape Citadel. However, that isn’t an area you will have to worry about while you’re here.” Captain Phenomenal paused as he sauntered over to a door on the right and grabbed the handle. He opened the door and bowed low to Catori and her father as they went through the door.

The door opened to an equally large expansive area, however, it was slightly different. While it had similar flooring, the ceiling was completely made up of hundreds of square windows. This lit up the inside of the building considerably more than the previous area. At the other side of the building were several archways to pass through made up of slightly faded red bricks. Similar to the last room, there were pillars leading all the way to the other side. The thing that caught Catori’s attention was the cabinets that were lined up on either side of them.

“What are those?”

“Those are trophies and awards given to superheroes for their various heroic deeds.” Catori nodded and took a closer look at the cabinet closest to her. Sure enough, she could see gleaming trophies, plaques, and even a few keys to the city displayed in the cabinet. Before she had a chance to try and read a name off one of the trophies, Captain Phenomenal and her father continued down the hall. Reluctantly deciding to follow after them, she ran up just in time to see the elderly superhero point to the second floor. “Up there is where the largest archive on all superheroes is located.”

This statement immediately caught Catori’s attention. An entire library on all things superheroes! If she could get in there and read everything, there would never be any contention on whether she was a superhero expert. While tempted to split from the group and start her self-imposed studies, she was curious to see what else the Crimson Cape Citadel had in store. As they were walking down the hallway, Captain Phenomenal pointed to a room on the left that they could see into due to a long window.

“We also offer babysitting services for superheroes who need to fight crime or just need some time off from kids.”

Catori peered through the window and flinched at what she saw. Inside was a young woman grappling with one toddler who was burning everything he touched. In fact, it looked like the woman had already had some trouble with the little fire starter since one of her eyebrows was gone and her hair singed. The other children were running around, throwing things, literally climbing up the walls, and causing general havoc with their different powers.

“Is she going to be okay?” Catori asked while pointing slightly towards the woman.

“No need to worry, Lady Cinderblock is nearly indestructible. She’ll be just fine,” explained Captain Phenomenal offhandedly. Catori looked back at the woman who was apparently named Lady Cinderblock. It didn’t look as if her indestructibility was making it any easier for her. Before she could voice these concerns, Captain Phenomenal said, “Now we’ll need to create a superhero costume for you.” Instantly she forgot all about Lady Cinderblock.

“I get my own superhero costume?!”

Captain Phenomenal looked at her with a frown. “Of course, it is part of the training program’s policy to always be in superhero costume. After all, if you finish your training you’ll need to get used to it.”

“Excuse me, I thought we had agreed that Catori would only be a part of your program until she learned to control her powers,” said her father while shooting Captain Phenomenal a glare.

“That may be true, but it is the program’s policy, so even if Catori doesn’t continue with the program she is required to follow its rules and guidelines.” He then turned away and walked down the hallway before her father could say anything further. Catori rushed after him, excited to get a real superhero costume for herself, and started considering the possibilities. Perhaps a cape, bright primary colors, an intricate mask, or maybe all of the above; her hands couldn’t keep from shaking at the idea. She was so wrapped up in these thoughts that she walked right into Captain Phenomenal when he stopped suddenly at a door.

Not acknowledging the mistake, Captain Phenomenal went into the room and called out, “Miss Grace!”

“Just a moment!” responded an out of breath voice. A second later a woman crashed through the doorway.

She was a pale woman with wavy dirty blonde hair that was barely held out of her face by an orange cloth headband. Despite the bags under her green eyes, they were bright and alert. She was wearing a large dark green overcoat with large buttons that were all fastened up. The overcoat covered an orange dress with a swirling pattern that was only visible at the bottom. On her feet were Ugg boots and long orange socks. Lastly, wrapped around her neck was a golden scarf that was slightly uneven and falling off.

“How can I help you, Phenomenal?”

“Catori Powers is in need of a superhero costume,” explained Captain Phenomenal as he gestured towards her. At this, the woman grinned brightly and grabbed hold of Catori’s arm.

“Wonderful! Come on, dear, let Grace Calvert create the perfect outfit for you.”

Ms. Grace dragged her into a back room, leaving both Captain Phenomenal and her father behind. All that was in the room was a circular pedestal in the middle with mirrors surrounding it. “Stand up there, please.” Catori nodded and did as she said. Once she did, Ms. Grace took out a measuring tape and motioned for her to put her arms out. While waiting patiently for her to finish, her eyes wandered around the room, particularly the drawn to the full colored sketches that covered the room. Although too far away to see many details on them, she could tell that they had a lot of diversity in colors and style. “Now, what is your power?”

“I can create gadgets that mimic other superheroes’ superpowers.”

Putting away the measuring tape, she rolled out an easel and tucked a pencil behind her ear. “Hmmm...interesting. Okay, then I say we go with the gadget theme. I’m thinking maybe circuitry lines along it, but we should keep it simple enough, so it doesn’t get in the way of your various gadgets.” As she was saying this, she started sketching something on the easel. “I suggest that the colors are likewise neutral, like maybe a brown with black and accented with a neon blue. What do you think?”

Having no idea what colors were supposed to look good together, Catori shrugged. “You’re the expert. I’ll just have to take your word for it.”

“It’s nice to finally have someone listen to my advice. Usually it takes me at least ten times to make costumes that heroes are satisfied with.”

“Really? I can’t even figure out a good color combination much less design a costume myself.”

Ms. Grace chuckled as she continued drawing. “Yes, well the costume is one of the most important aspects of a superhero. On top of that, most heroes these days are almost always in their costumes. It’s understandable that they want to look their best.”

“What’s your superpower?”

“Oh, I don’t have any superpowers.”

Catori nearly fell off the stand at this statement. “I thought only superheroes could get in here.” How did Ms. Grace even know about this place? Catori was the superhero expert and she didn’t even know about this place.

“This is certainly their building, but they can’t run everything here.” Ms. Grace paused and glanced back at her. “You’d be surprised how many regular citizens keep this

place running.” She spun back around to resume drawing before continuing. “There’s a group of inventors and scientists making all the fancy equipment that protects this place and an entire IT department that keeps it all working.” After a few more strokes of her pencil, she turned around with the paper in hand. “So, what do you think?”

Catori grabbed the paper from Ms. Grace and stared down at it in wonder. The costume was made up of a jumpsuit that was covered in the circuitry lines Ms. Grace had mentioned. Covering the jumpsuit was a trench coat with a high collar, and her face was obscured with a large domino mask.

“The jumpsuit would be black, the trench coat would be brown like your boots, and the lines and mask would be a neon blue, maybe I can even make it glow,” continued Ms. Grace. A grin spread across Catori’s face as she looked up at Ms. Grace.

“It’s perfect. Don’t change a single thing.”

Ms. Grace smiled back warmly. “Well, that certainly makes my job easier. I’ll have it ready for you before you start training.” With one last grin to her, Catori hopped down from the podium and rushed out the doorway.

However, her smile faltered when she caught sight of her father. While Captain Phenomenal was simply standing there staring up at the ceiling, her father was another story. Despite the superhero’s amiable stance, her father was glaring at him. She made a slicing motion by her neck signaling to her father that he should at least fake a friendlier expression, when Captain Phenomenal caught sight of her. Attempting to cover this action, the motion morphed into an awkward wave. Either he didn’t notice or didn’t care, because he simply beamed and clapped his hands together.

“Well now that Ms. Grace has finished designing your perfect costume, all that’s left is your superhero name.”

Her father grasped Captain Phenomenal’s arm and whirled him around to face him. “Wait a minute, a new outfit is one thing but now you people want to change her name!”

Somehow Captain Phenomenal remained calm in the face of her father’s outburst and simply responded with, “We’re not exactly changing her name so much as giving her another one.”

“Besides, it’s a secret identity, Dad. I need it as protection,” explained Catori while attempting to keep her face as neutral as possible. If her father kept this up, her chance of becoming a superhero could suddenly be revoked. It was all she could do to not shoot glares at him. Thankfully, their arguments must have been enough for him because he let out a loud ‘harrumph.’

“Fine, but remember this is only until she learns to control her powers and nothing more.” Captain Phenomenal nodded repeatedly with what she assumed was supposed to be a serious look, but ended up looking more spacey.

“Of course, of course, Mr. Powers.” He then turned his attention back to Catori. “Anyways, I’ve been brainstorming on some names and due to your ability to create these knick-knacks I thought a great hero name for you would be Knick-Knack.”

Once again, she winced at her impressive gadgets being called knick-knacks, it made them sound like souvenirs that might be found on an old lady’s shelf. If she didn’t think of a new name quickly, she would be stuck with Knick-Knack. At the same time, she didn’t want to just ignore his suggestion. Even if he was slightly delusional and

maybe past his prime, he was still a crucial member within the superhero community.

The last thing she wanted was to offend him. This left her with only one option; she had to modify it.

Catori scratched the back of her head in contemplation. For several seconds she was stumped, the name seemed unworkable. Maybe if she broke the halves apart it would be more workable. Knick didn't really mean anything so that was off the table, but Knack on the other hand had possibilities. It did mean 'to have the skill to perform a task'. She did have a 'knack' for creating gadgets. Liking the sound of it, she took a deep breath and prepared her wording as carefully as possible.

"It's nice, but maybe we could shorten it to...Knack?" For the first time that day Captain Phenomenal's face fell and his eyes became serious. Catori's grin disappeared. Had it not worked? Did she offend him?

Just as she was beginning to panic, his grin returned bigger than ever. "Sounds perfect!" Catori let out the breath she had apparently been holding, she was starting to believe the stories about the aging superhero being crazy. "Now that you have your costume and name, you're ready to go. When you are acting as your superhero persona, you must be in costume and only go by Knack. This isn't to say that no one can know you are Catori Powers. However, we feel it's better if our heroes and heroes in-training keep their secret identities as...well...secret as possible."

She nodded. It made sense and honestly, she didn't really want her fellow trainees to know her as Catori. The training program was a second chance for her and the last thing she wanted people to see her as was her old boring ordinary self. But that would all

change when she was all suited up. In costume she would no longer be Catori Powers.

She would be Knack!

Chapter 5: Losers in Capes

Today was the day she had been waiting for her entire life, at last she was going to be a superhero! Not to mention this was the big debut of her superhero ego Knack. Unfortunately, her excitement hadn't transferred to her father who had spent the last few days in a cloud of gloom. Afraid that he would revoke his permission, she made sure to not mention it despite her growing anticipation. This was also why she was currently sneaking down the stairway.

She was so busy stepping softly on each step that she didn't notice her father until she reached the bottom. He was standing at the door with the frown that had been permanently grafted onto his face since he met Captain Phenomenal. Catori put on a strained smile and shifted back and forth on her feet while trying to find a way around him.

"Hey, dad. Just heading out for school."

"So, today's the day you start learning to control your powers," stated her father with a grimace.

"So, it is," she replied as if she had just recalled.

"I just want you to keep in mind that this is only temporary. You shouldn't get too attached to the program. Hopefully you'll be finished in just a week or two." Now she was in trouble! She had, of course, expected her father to want her to finish as soon as possible, but she hadn't expected him to try and hold her to a time limit.

"Well, yeah maybe, but it could also take a lot longer. After all, most of the other trainees have been learning to use their powers for years while I've had mine only a few

days.” The explanation must have done the trick, at least a little bit, because he snorted in annoyance.

“You’re probably right. I just don’t understand why they would want you, these superheroes don’t care about us.” Uncertain as to how to react to such a conspiracy-filled comment, she just nodded slowly.

“O-okay, dad. I’ll keep that in mind.” Not wanting to wait another second, she snuck around him. “See you later,” she said with one last wave as she made her way out the door.

After an eternity of sitting in school Catori.... well Knack, finally arrived right in front of the Crimson Cape Citadel. Having already picked up her costume earlier, she was ready. Her costume was exactly like the one Ms. Grace had designed a few days ago, combined with her superspeed boots that she had taken to calling Swift Boots. However, there was one other addition to her new outfit: Hindrance’s goggles. Not only did they hide her identity even further by being placed overtop her mask, but it was also her way to show her appreciation for the heroine that gave her this chance. Though if she was being honest with herself, it was really so she could show off her superhero paraphernalia.

Taking one last deep breath, Knack stepped into the building. This quickly changed into a gasp; unlike when she visited with her father, it was packed with colorfully costumed individuals. While fighting every nerdy instinct in her to ask each one of them for their autograph, she glanced around for where she was supposed to go.

Despite giving them a tour, Captain Phenomenal had somehow forgotten to tell her where the training facility even was.

She looked back and forth for some sort of sign pointing the way, but there was nothing. Knack twisted a strand of hair anxiously in her fingers. If she didn't figure it out soon she was going to be late, and considering she was probably behind the other trainees, she was beginning to panic. If what H.C. had said was true, then she was the first person to acquire superpowers in two hundred years. This meant not only did the other trainees have years of experience using their powers, but also they were established within superhero community.

Then again maybe she was overreacting, maybe they wouldn't care; they had invited her, after all. On the other hand, Captain Phenomenal did mention that it was a difficult program to get into. So, maybe being late on the first day would be enough of an excuse to kick her out! As Knack's mind continued to run through every possible thing that could go wrong, something hit her from behind in the shoulder. She stumbled forward, but was able to catch herself.

"Hey!" She looked in the direction the cuff came from only for there to be no one.

"If you don't want to be run into, don't just stand braindead in front of the entrance, like an idiot," replied a voice. She followed the sound to see a boy her own age walking away from her. Knack opened her mouth to make a clever retort when something struck her about the boy. Although she couldn't see his face and only saw the back of him, there was something familiar about him. By the time she came out of her second stupor in a row, her moment to say something back was gone. It was probably for the best; her best comeback was a bit lackluster (honestly, she didn't really have anything).

But wait a minute—that boy was her age, maybe he was a part of the training program like her!

Not wasting another second, she sprinted after him, while being careful to not go fast enough to activate her Swift Boots. Due to the boy having a head start on her, she just barely glimpsed him going through the door on the far side. All she had to do was follow him; the only problem was there was currently a crowd of superheroes in her way. Rubbing her hands together in preparation, she stepped forward to fight against the current. Having lived in Paladin City all her life, Knack was accustomed to making her way through crowds. She squeezed, shifted, and dodged around each superhero that got in her way, careful not to so much as graze them as she passed. The last thing she needed was to antagonize anyone before officially becoming a part of the community.

Knack had nearly made it to the other side when all of a sudden, a man stepped in front of her. Too close for her to stop in time, she turned sideways to just barely miss him. While she missed him, her unexpected and close maneuver caused her feet to get tangled around each other. She tripped forward and put her arms out to brace herself. Unfortunately, she was heading right for the door. When her hands hit the door, she slammed through onto the other side, stumbling slightly before finally finding her balance again.

Hoping that no one had noticed, she straightened up only to be met by several costumed kids either staring at her or whispering to each other. Perfect, her first chance at making a good impression and she had already established herself as a klutz. Ignoring their gazes and the heat building up in her cheeks, she instead looked around the new room.

The room was open and large with tall, vaulted ceilings. Despite all the room in the area, a lack of furniture left just the reflective dark gray marble floors. Matching the sleek floors were equally sleek white walls that were highlighted by bright orange around the edges. The only other thing in the room was some sort of tall black monument that appeared to be made up of diagonal plates, it was positioned a bit out of the way to the left side. When she moved slightly closer to get a look, she realized there were names and dates written on each plate. Maybe it was some sort of memorial for past heroes or even awards given to them. She was about to move in for an even closer look when a familiar voice caught her attention again.

“They really need to update the requirements for this training program. I swear there’s more losers every year, before long they’ll just be letting the average civilians into it,” sneered the boy who had run into her earlier.

Now that she was closer, she could get a better look at him and hopefully figure out why he felt so familiar (it was beginning to drive her a little crazy). Physically speaking, all she could pick out was his spiked-up chocolate brown hair; the rest was hidden behind his costume. He was wearing large shield sunglasses that concealed his eyes. Unlike Knack’s costume that was made of softer material, his almost looked like armor. His army green jumpsuit was covered by white armor placed on his chest, arms, legs, and shoulders. She crossed her arms and frowned. She still couldn’t quite figure out where she knew him from. Her thoughts were interrupted as the conversation was continued by a girl with long braided blond hair.

“What do you expect when it’s run by that old lunatic Phenomenal? What you should be asking is why the Citadel hasn’t retired him already?”

The boy snorted in response. “You’re probably right....” He paused and glanced at Knack disdainfully. “Hopefully, it’s sooner rather than later.” It was with that stare that she finally figured out who he was.

Without thinking, she voiced it a little too loud, “Jay?” The boy’s head instantly swiveled towards her at the sound of the name.

“Who are you?” he asked, his eyes squinting in suspicion. Knack smirked. It was nice for her to have the best of him for a change, especially after their last encounter, and this time she even had a clever comeback prepared.

“Just someone who no longer *lacks powers*.” She put emphasis on the words ‘lack’ and ‘powers’. He must have understood her implication because a look of clarity hit his face, which was quickly replaced with an annoyed frown.

“Powers? What are you doing here? You don’t have any powers.”

“Actually, I do have powers and the name is Knack. In fact, Captain Phenomenal invited me himself and even gave me a grand tour of the place.”

“Fortress, do you know this girl?” asked the blonde girl as she appraised Knack.

“Yeah, I know her. She’s from the civilian school, but she shouldn’t be here. She doesn’t have any powers.”

Knack glared at the two uppity trainees. How many times was she going to have to repeat herself before they got it? “Didn’t you hear me? I told you I just got my powers.”

The blonde girl rolled her eyes. “Pssh. Yeah right. You don’t get your powers, everyone knows that you’re born with them.”

Knack opened her mouth to retort, but closed it when she was suddenly stricken with doubt. She had only just heard that superheroes used to acquire their superpowers from H.C. and while he was an expert when it came to superhero comic books, that didn't mean he knew everything about their community. He had sounded certain, but maybe this time he was wrong. She was broken from her thoughts when Jay (apparently now called Fortress) walked up to her and jabbed his finger at her.

"I don't know what that old codger told you, but he was wrong. You don't belong here."

She didn't know how to respond. She was beginning to wonder whether they were right. Was her superpower even a superpower at all? It was possible that she had somehow learned to make gadgets that could replicate superpowers on her own.

"That's where you're wrong, Fortress, as usual," said a voice from behind.

It came from a boy their age with ragged black hair that was mostly covered by a silver fedora with a dark purple band. His skin was a pale brown that was much lighter than her own and complemented his dark brown eyes. Like Fortress, the rest of him was covered by his costume. He was wearing a dark gray high collared long-sleeved shirt with an eggplant colored symbol and pants held up by a thick silver belt. The symbol was a small circle in the middle with two parentheses on either end. He also had matching armored silver gloves and boots with the dark purple color highlighting several areas throughout the costume. Lastly, his mouth and nose were covered by a lead gray bandana. He looked a bit like an old-style detective.

“No one asked you. Or are you admitting that you have as much right to be here as she does?” jeered Fortress. The boy in the fedora moved forward so that he was only inches from Fortress’s face.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, just not the way you mean it,” he replied through gritted teeth so tight that it must have been painful.

“You sure you want to do this, Whodunit? There’s no way your tiny force fields can hold up against me.”

The fedora boy’s eyes narrowed. “We’ll see about that.” Both boys took a step back with their fists up ready for a fight. Knack glanced between the two, debating whether she should try and break them up or sit back and watch a potentially awesome superpowered fight. Before she could commit to one or the other, another boy rushed forward and put himself between them.

The boy had yellow blonde hair with bangs swept to the side, though what the rest of it looked like was impossible to say since he was currently wearing a backwards red baseball cap. A crimson domino mask concealed a part of his face, but Knack was still able to take note of his steel gray eyes. His t-shirt was likewise the same crimson color with thin white lines in the middle that she assumed was meant to be his logo. Half of his pants were white while the other half was red and held up by a circular white belt with a red rim. The costume was finished with white tennis shoes with red shoelaces. Unlike the other costumes she had seen, this one had more in common with a sports uniform than a superhero costume.

“Get out of the way, Blur,” growled Whodunit. He tried to step around him, but Blur kept his arms out and moved to block him at each turn.

“This doesn’t concern you,” agreed Fortress. Without warning he threw a punch right at Blur. Not missing a beat, Blur did a somersault backwards, landing on his hands with a bright grin. With incredible ease he stayed in this position and even moved on his hands to get in the way of Fortress when he tried to walk around. As Fortress took another swing at Blur, he cartwheeled to the side causing his downward punch to hit nothing. Though once again Blur didn’t seem all that upset about Fortress’s attempted attack, if his continued beaming face was any indication.

“Come on, guys. It’s only orientation. Let’s try and be friends or at least not kill each other,” said Blur as he wrapped his arm around their shoulders.

Immediately, Fortress threw the hand off him while Whodunit simply shrugged it off. “Whatever. None of you are worth my time.” He shot one last glare in Knack’s direction before walking back to the group he had been speaking with.

“Well, I tried,” laughed Blur with his hands placed behind his head nonchalantly.

“You should have let me fight him. Beating him would prove once and for all that we belong here,” said Whodunit with crossed arms.

For the first time Blur’s smile faltered. “It wouldn’t have done anything and you know it. Correction, it would have done something; gotten us in trouble.” However, as fast as it was gone, the smile returned brighter than ever when he turned to Knack. “Hey. So, you’re the new girl everyone’s going crazy over. Don’t mind what the others say. You’re the first person to acquire superpowers in two hundred years and in my book, that makes you awesome.”

Although surprised by this speech, Knack was just glad to find someone friendly. “Thanks. I’m Cat—I mean Knack.”

Blur placed his arms on his hips. “The name’s the Red Blur, but you can just call me Blur...” He paused and gestured his thumb at Whodunit, “...and the ‘tough guy’ here is Whodunit.” Whodunit let out a ‘humph’, but otherwise didn’t acknowledge his friend’s jab while Blur continued. “What’s your superpower? Mine is aim dodging, which basically means I can dodge anything that comes at me.”

Knack stared down at her boots as she scuffed her right boot against the floor. “I think I can create gadgets that copy other superpowers.”

Whodunit shook his head. “You think? Don’t you know?” Her eyebrows scrunched up in response.

“No, I don’t know. I’ve only had my superpowers a few days and all I’ve made are these boots that give me super speed. Honestly, I’m just guessing here.”

Tipping his hat downward, Whodunit’s eyes narrowed. “If what you guess is true, then you’re lucky. You don’t have just one power like the rest of us. I create force fields, so I can protect myself, but not much else. Can’t complain though, there are way worse powers to be stuck with.” He turned his head away and just under his breath added, “And I would know.”

Although curious about what he was referring to, Knack didn’t press the issue. Besides, he was clearly speaking to himself and they had just met. The last thing she wanted was to overstep her boundaries with her new friends. Well, actually at the moment they were her only friends. Her eyes slid over to Fortress’s group. While not all the trainees appeared to be a part of his group, they were all milling around it. In fact, their group of three was the only one standing apart from all the rest. Her attention

returned to a laughing Blur and a head shaking Whodunit. Maybe the reason they were hanging out with her was because they were outcasts to the community like her.

As she was considering whether she should ask either one about it, a man came into the room. Actually, he floated into the room. As he soared over her head, his perfectly coiffed chestnut brown hair shifted slightly while his silver cape swished around him. With such grandeur and grace that seemed almost unnatural, he slowly descended to the floor.

“Welcome trainees to Captain Phenomenal’s Training Facility for Young Heroes and thank you for coming to orientation. I am Aether the Program Director. Normally Captain Phenomenal would be the one to greet you, but he is.... away at the moment.” A knowing and smug look passed between Fortress and the blonde girl at the later part of his speech.

“His presence is certainly missed, but I have partaken in enough orientations to explain everything in his place. While this program partially exists to teach you how to best use and control your powers, the main objective has and always will be to help each and every one of you become the hero you were always meant to be.” He paused and gazed around the room, carefully meeting each trainee’s eyes. “Tomorrow afternoon you will begin training under the guidance of your mentors to learn everything about being a superhero. We expect great things from all of you.” Mentors? They were supposed to have mentors? She had never been given a mentor. Had she? Aether clapped his hands together, “That’ll be all for now. Enjoy your afternoon off.”

Her questions still unanswered, Knack turned to her new friends. “What did he mean by mentors? I don’t remember getting one.”

“Oh, that’s just the person who recommended you for the program. They’re usually either retired or have a superpower that isn’t useful in fights,” explained Blur. Eyes squinting, she gazed up at the ceiling as she tried to think of who hers could possibly be. That’s when she suddenly remembered what Hindrance had said. She had mentioned putting her name forward. Did that mean....?

“But my mentor is still an active superhero. At least, I think it’s Hindrance.”

“That’s not possible. Active heroes never take on trainees. It’s too time consuming,” said Whodunit.

“Actually, it is possible at least in this case.” They all spun around to see Aether strolling towards them.

Whodunit took a step back while Blur’s eyes grew large. “What?” they both said simultaneously.

Aether nodded twice. “You must have left quite the impression on her, Knack, because despite the time it will take, she has agreed to be your mentor. However, since the Citadel doesn’t want to lose one of our greatest new superheroes I will be filling in for her a majority of the time.” His explanation finished, he turned his back on the three while waving backward as he left. Unsure of how to respond to everything, Knack blinked rapidly. Whodunit must have felt the same way because he stared after Aether blankly.

“Looks like you’re not only lucky with your powers.”

“Yeah,” responded Knack quietly without looking at him. She did seem to be really lucky, so lucky that she was beginning to wonder how long it would last.

Chapter 6: Heroes In-Training

Catori could barely sit still in class that morning. Today was her first day training to become a superhero, how could she? Ever since the orientation it was all she could think of, which made it extremely difficult to pay attention in class. Eventually she just gave up the attempts and spent the rest of class daydreaming of what this training would be. Right after orientation she had even managed to create a new gadget. It was a pair of robotic arms that slipped right over her current gloves, she had taken to calling them Robo Arms. She had a feeling she copied the power from the girl in pink she had seen briefly after the orientation. Unfortunately, she hadn't had a chance to test them out, but she figured that was what the training program was for.

She could just imagine going through an obstacle course with buzz saws, laser beams, lava pits, and maybe some.... Brrrrriinnngg! Catori blinked rapidly. She hadn't realized class was already over, in fact not only was it over but it was also lunch time. Well, at least it meant she was halfway through school, and that meant only a few more hours until training. With a long stretch of her arms and a wide yawn, she got up from her desk and made her way to the cafeteria.

Her lunchbox in hand, she glanced around for an empty table to sit at. When she did, she caught sight of Jay....er Fortress. His eyes met hers and narrowed into a glare. Sure was weird seeing him at school in just a t-shirt and jeans after seeing him in a superhero costume. Of course, it was weird to think of him as a superhero at all, mainly because he didn't act like one. Choosing a spot far away from Fortress's table, she sat down at a table that was mostly empty except for two boys sitting at the very end. Catori

started unpacking her lunch when she heard something from the boys that made her pause.

“So, did your dad say anything about today?”

“Just that he was proud of me and expected greatness. You know, the usual.”

Looking over at the boys, she saw one with blonde side-swept bangs and the other with messy black hair.

Scooting over closer to them with her head bent downward she whispered, “Blur? Whodunit?” Immediately both their heads whirled around to her. While Blur’s eyes simply grew wide and he bit his lip, Whodunit stood up roughly and made his way over to her, his fists clenched. Sensing trouble, she put her hands up. “Wait, wait, it’s just me from the orientation.” He paused for a second and studied her face, no doubt trying to remember who she was. It didn’t take long for a dawning look to cross his face.

“Knack?” he whispered back, to which she nodded with an arched eyebrow.

Regret quickly took the place of his previous expression, “Sorry. I didn’t recognize you.” He made his way back to his seat and Catori slid down the rest of the bench until she was right next to him. “I know you’re new to this, so here’s some free advice. If you recognize someone out of costume, don’t call them out by their hero name.”

Catori smiled awkwardly back. “Right. You guys probably have to worry about supervillains coming after you.”

Blur nodded, but then shrugged. “Well, yeah sort of. But it’s not like we’re constantly under attack or something.” He slumped onto his arm and stared blankly at the wall. “Honestly, I think we’re too overprotective of our civilian identities especially when we barely use them.” Seeing Blur so dejected was quite off-putting. Although she had

only known him a short while, he struck her as the type of person who either had a constant smile on his face or was telling jokes every minute.

“Speaking of which, I suppose we need you to call us something when we’re dressed like this. Call me Ken, Ken Yamauchi,” said Whodunit. The change of subject worked as Blur perked his head up off the table.

“And I’m Zach Faraday.” He turned his head slightly to catch a glimpse behind him before whispering again.

“But just think of us as Blur and Whodunit; that’s who we really are.”

“What do you mean?”

“When superheroes have kids, the first name they give them is their hero name before they ever give them a civilian identity,” explained Whodunit as he took a swig of his soda.

“Well, I am.... or was Catori Powers.” That’s when another thought struck her at this revelation. “Wait, what?! Isn’t it supposed to be the other way around?” Silently, Whodunit and Blur both looked at each other when suddenly Blur burst out laughing causing Whodunit to likewise snicker (though he attempted to hide it with his hand). “What? What’s so funny?”

Although still chuckling, Blur answered, “You read comics, don’t you?” Now getting annoyed especially since they were laughing at her, she shot them each a scowl and slammed her hands on the table causing both to instantly stop.

“Yeah, so what if I do?” While fine to declare herself a superhero geek to anyone, she wasn’t about to have them make fun of her for it. She got enough flack about it at home, she certainly didn’t need it at school as well.

She was preparing an oncoming tirade justifying her nerdy obsession when Blur nearly fell from the table his eyes wide. “Woah calm down, Knack. We weren’t laughing at you, we were laughing about the comics.” Just as quickly as her anger, came it dissipated. She suddenly became aware of her clenched jaw and her nails digging into her fist, which slackened at his words. Seeing that she had calmed down, he continued. “Despite the comics being based on real-life superheroes, nothing in them actually happens. It’s all made up.”

“What?!” shouted Catori. Blur fell off the bench at the outburst while Whodunit scanned the room to see if anyone had noticed. She ducked her head in embarrassment and whispered to make up for it. “Sorry. It’s just that I-I’m the superhero expert and a lot of that comes from the comic books. If what you say is true, then....” she stopped, not wanting to voice her fear.

“If it makes you feel any better, some of it is true, not a lot but some,” said Blur.

“But I’m already an outsider to the community. The only thing I had going for me is that I know everything there is to know about superheroes and now you’re telling me that all of it is lies. My only advantage is gone!” With that, she collapsed both her head and arms onto the table, perhaps a bit overdramatically but it matched how she felt now. If people hadn’t been paying attention to them before, they probably were now.

“To be fair, since you’ve not been a part of the community until now, you were always going to be at a disadvantage,” said Whodunit. Still face down on the table, Catori let out a loud groan to indicate how she felt about his ‘comforting’ words. Ignoring her, he said, “Besides, knowledge about the community isn’t how you move your way up our hierarchy.”

Too intrigued by this statement to continue wallowing in her sorrow, she lifted her head up. “Hierarchy?”

Whodunit nodded. “That’s right. You didn’t think you civilians were the only ones to have them, did you? Except ours isn’t based on position, money or anything like that.” Without warning he tossed his soda can right at Blur’s face. Merely tilting his head to the side, the can missed his head by a couple of inches and landed right in the trash can. Smirking at Catori’s gaping face, he continued, “For us it’s our powers.”

“So, the better your power, the higher up you are?”

“Exactly. So, you see you have nothing to worry about.” As if on cue, the lunch bell rang, causing everyone to begin clearing out of the cafeteria.

Blur stood up and started towards the exit but not before calling out, “See ya later.” Whodunit likewise stood up, he nodded once to Catori before following his friend. Sighing she finally got up, hoping that the last few hours of class would go by quickly.

Knack gazed around the auditorium-sized room that they met in for the orientation. However, unlike before when there had been about twenty to thirty kids, today there was no one around. Was she in the wrong room? She sighed. She should have waited for Blur and Whodunit. Instead, as soon as the bell had rung she had sprinted out of the classroom leaving all her books and folders behind. Now despite how fast she arrived, she was going to be late. At the sound of an opening door she jumped, surprised by the sudden noise amid the deafening silence.

“Knack?” Although embarrassed, she turned to see Aether standing halfway in the doorway. Relieved to have found someone who could tell her what was going on, she ran over to him.

“Sorry if I’m late, Mr. Aether. I ran all the way here from class, but I didn’t ask Blur or Whodunit where to go so I just came here—”

Aether stepped into the room and put his hands up. “Slow down, Knack. It’s okay. It’s my fault for not explaining it to you, I forgot that you were new to all of this. Normally we do all meet in here, but on the first day most mentors and mentees’ get to know each other. This generally amounts to mentors heading over to their mentee’s houses to meet with their families.”

“Oh,” replied Knack trying to not look too disappointed. This meant she wouldn’t be training, but mainly she really didn’t like the idea of taking home her new mentor to meet her judgmental father. What if he insulted him? What if Aether was so insulted he didn’t want to be her mentor anymore?

Her face must have showed her worry because Aether frowned. “Although if it means that much to you, we could train today anyways. In fact, it might be the best way for us to get to know each other.”

Knack gaped up at him before grinning excitedly. “Could we, Mr. Aether? I’ve been looking forward to this all day.”

“Of course, but just a short session. I had assumed I would have extra time today, so I have some errands I must attend to.” Knack nodded as he walked past her and moved to follow, when he stopped and looked back at her. “One last thing, Knack. Just call me Aether, otherwise some other superheroes are going to think that I am trying to copy their

naming gimmick,” he said with a slight smile. After she nodded again, he walked to the center of the room and crossed his arms.

“Now I understand from what Captain Phenomenal told me that you have some sort of knickknacks that give you your powers.”

Immediately Knack’s smile faded. “They aren’t knickknacks exactly, they’re more like gadgets.” Aether chuckled as he seemed to realize the elderly hero’s mistake as well.

“Yes, I had a feeling that wasn’t the best word to describe them. I assume those gadgets on your hands are some of them?”

“That’s right, but I don’t know what they do yet. I just made them and haven’t had the chance to try them.”

“Well let’s remedy that. Try using them now and then we’ll decide the best way to train with them.”

Knack looked down at her Robo Arms in the hopes that she would just magically know what to do with them, but nothing came to her. Then again when she had first used the Swift Boots, it had been mostly by accident.

Swoooooosh! The right Robo Arm soared upward only narrowly missing Knack’s jaw, which was fine since her jaw dropped at the sight. It was then that she realized she had accidentally pressed some sort of button hidden on the underside of her gauntlet. The arm must have gone over ten feet up into the air before it slowly stopped and rapidly began retracting back. Once it had returned to its original position, Aether crouched down, his hand under his chin.

“Fascinating. It appears that this gadget is meant to copy the power of elasticity.”

“You mean to stretch really far?”

He stood back up and looked up at the ceiling scaffolding. “Exactly. I wonder if you can only elongate the hands or if you can actually grab onto anything.” Considering this possibility, Knack pointed the arms at the ceiling and pressed the button at the same time. As both arms soared upwards, she opened her hands and gasped as the Robo Arms did the same. When the arms got close enough to the scaffolding, she clenched her hands as if she was grabbing something and the arms locked onto it. Knack screamed as she unexpectedly shot upward, the arms pulling her all the way up into the scaffolding. She kicked and wiggled to at least climb up, but her arms were too weak. Already feeling her arms beginning to get sore, she chanced a glance downward.

“HELP!”

“Don’t panic! Try extending the arms again, that should lower you back down!” shouted Aether back. He was probably right. If she could just push the buttons again, she would be saved...but it was high and what if he was wrong.

“I-I can’t!”

Aether stared at her a second before finally nodding. “Okay I’ll be right up.” He floated up into the air only coming to a stop when he was right underneath her “You can let go. Don’t worry, I’ll catch you.” Closing her eyes tightly, she did as he said and landed right in his arms. When her feet touched the ground, he crossed his arms and frowned while Knack looked down at her feet as if she found her shoes very interesting. “I think that’s enough for now. However, I want you to practice using your gadgets. If you make any more gadgets, be sure to study your process. If you can discover how you do it, perhaps you can learn to do it on command.”

“Okay Aether,” she said quietly.

“There’s no need to look so dejected. You still have plenty of time before the Exam.”

Surprised, she looked up from her shoes with a raised eyebrow. “Exam?”

“Yes, in order to be accepted into the Citadel, you must pass the Exam. If you don’t pass, you cannot become a superhero.” Something inside Knack broke. Despite having superpowers, there was a chance she might not become a superhero. Such a thought had never even occurred to her before. Not noticing his mentee’s distress, Aether patted her on the shoulder and made his way out the door. “Now, I must get going but you be sure to keep training.”

Once he was gone, Knack stood there alone and in the silence. Becoming and being a superhero just got that much more complicated.

Chapter 7: The Loser Escape

For the last two weeks, the only thing on Knack's mind was the Exam. Her entire life she'd been dreaming of being a superhero and by some miracle she'd acquired superpowers, but now this exam could ruin everything. Not to mention she had no idea what the Exam was. How could she even prepare for it if she didn't even know what to prepare for?

"Knack, pay attention!" shouted Aether. Unfortunately, she was broken from her thoughts too late and she tripped over a traffic cone. Due to her super speed, she flew briefly through the air until she crashed and skidded across the ground. She rubbed her head with a groan with her humiliation only growing more, when suddenly a shadow fell over her. Looking up slowly, she winced at the frowning Aether.

"Sorry. I must have spaced out for a minute," apologized Knack as she stood up and fixed the cone she'd knocked over.

When her mind wasn't preoccupied with the Exam, she had been busy training with Aether. Currently, this consisted of Knack wearing her Swift Boots trying to swerve through a line of traffic cones that went from one end of the orientation room to the other. So far, she'd made it about halfway through before either tripping or missing one of the cones. As hard as she tried, she just couldn't manage to get any further. How was it that she could take out a supervillain (well sort of) but not a simple training exercise? It didn't help that now her failures were on full display for the other trainees. Almost every day after training, Fortress made sure to pass her on the way out, just to make a snide comment. Most were generally puns about falling or tripping. Blur told her to ignore them, while Whodunit rolled his eyes and scoffed at each new one. Knack knew they

were right that the lame jokes weren't worth even acknowledging, but she couldn't help it.

"Is something on your mind? You've seemed distracted," said Aether. In that moment she was tempted to tell him everything. Like that she was frustrated at her failed training, that she felt like an outsider, and that it felt like she could be kicked out of the training program at any moment.

Instead she just said, "It's the Exam. What's on it? What do I have to do to pass? What if I fail? Will I never be able to be a superhero if I do?"

"Well, to answer the first question, the Exam is like an obstacle course not unlike the one we're doing now, albeit quite a bit more intensive. Every student must get through it while dealing with the main weakness of their particular superpower. As to what happens when you fail...." He paused and frowned with an unreadable expression. "When you fail, you can't become a superhero. You aren't completely cut out of the community, so you can still become a mentor or work in the Citadel, but you'll never be able to be a registered hero."

Knack twisted a strand of hair in her fingers. "B-but that's not fair. Why do we only get one chance?"

Aether nodded blankly. "While I agree, you children should count yourselves lucky for even getting accepted into the program. If you had a power deemed useless in a fight, you wouldn't even get the chance to take the Exam." It was then that a thought struck her. Aether was her mentor instead of Hindrance because she was too busy with her superhero duties, which meant he must not be a hero himself. Maybe he had taken the Exam and failed or maybe he hadn't been allowed to take it at all. She opened her mouth,

but closed it when she decided that it might have been too personal to ask a person she'd only known for a couple of weeks.

“Anyways, I wouldn't worry about the Exam quite yet. There's still plenty of time to train before then. In fact, we haven't even started planning the Exam. I also wouldn't be too concerned about your training. Everyone starts out at the bottom.”

Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed Fortress put out his hands with a determined expression. As soon as he did, something shot out of the bucket next to him and covered his entire body except for his face. It took her a minute to realize that the objects covering him were large children's toy blocks. The mentor punched at Fortress's face, but he easily blocked it with his armored right arm. Apparently, his superpower was to telekinetically create armor out of any loose objects near him. As much as she disliked him, Knack had to admit that it was a pretty cool power. Her eyes likewise slid over to Whodunit and Blur who were being pelted by a tennis ball machine. Whodunit simply put out his left hand causing a circular forcefield to materialize that the balls reflected off. Blur on the other hand ducked, jumped, and flipped to dodge each one that came his way.

Following her gaze, Aether looked over at her two friends. “They're doing well now, but there may be a point where you are doing well and they're struggling.”

Knack responded with a raised eyebrow. “Do other heroes usually struggle this much?”

Aether rubbed his chin then smiled. “I see, so that's your problem. I fear you may be idolizing superheroes a bit too much.”

Knack stared at him with wide eyes. “Of course I do, they risk their lives to protect us and fight evil supervillains. What's not to look up to?”

“Awwww...But you have to keep in mind that unlike civilians, we have powers that make the risks considerably less dangerous for us,” he replied with a waggle of his finger. Knack frowned, suddenly not liking the direction this conversation was taking, especially since what he was saying made sense.

“Yeah, I guess, but there’s still the supervillains they fight. They have powers equal or even more powerful than their own.”

“True, but that doesn’t mean that they’re infallible. Not to speak ill of your mentor, but you may have noticed that Hindrance tends to not take things as seriously as she should.” She didn’t respond; she remembered her own thoughts when she first met her mentor. “And I admire and respect our founder enough to admit that with each progressive year he slips further away.” At this statement Aether looked over at the other trainees, as if he was suddenly very interested in them and for a brief moment she could have sworn she caught a pained expression. It didn’t last long, as he shook his head and turned his attention back to her. “Sorry, I’m afraid I was being a bit overly pessimistic there. All I meant was that you shouldn’t put superheroes up on some impossible to reach pedestal because they’re not as perfect as you’ve been led to believe.”

Brinnnnnnnnng! Aether looked up at the clock on the wall. “It looks like we’re out of time for the day.” Placing his hand on Knack’s shoulder and looking her directly in the eyes, he continued. “Keep practicing with your gadgets and don’t place so much pressure on yourself. You’re doing fine.” Satisfied by her nod, he nodded in return and followed the rest of the exiting mentors.

She knew that Aether was just trying to make her feel better, but it made her feel worse. She looked up to superheroes and to learn that they weren’t everything she’d

imagined they would be created complex emotions inside that she couldn't even identify. He had only mentioned Hindrance and Captain Phenomenal, so maybe they were just the outliers. Having a sudden headache, she rubbed her forehead with squinted eyes. What if the Psionic Brain disappointed her? He was the entire reason she'd become obsessed with superheroes and dreamed of becoming one. If he was a disappointment, would that change everything? An unexpected hand on her shoulder made her jump and broke her from her thoughts.

The subsequent laughter told her whose hand it was. "Woah! Why so jumpy? Sorry for scaring you, but you were so spaced out I couldn't resist," said Blur beaming as he placed his arms behind his head.

Still upset, Knack could only manage a small smile. "It's fine. Don't worry about it."

At this response, Blur frowned, "You okay? You seem kind of out of it." She shrugged, not really feeling like talking. "Come on. You can tell me I promise not to judge or laugh, though I can't say the same for Whodunit." Genuinely smiling this time, Knack considered telling him. Except there was one thing still stopping her, the fact that he was a part of the superhero community. How was she going to tell him that she was beginning to wonder whether his community was as great as she'd been led to believe?

Instead she said, "I'm worried about the Exam."

Blur's face likewise became solemn. "Oh that. Yeah, I'm not exactly looking forward to that either." The expression changed with a snap of his fingers. "I know how to cheer you up, we'll take you to see our hideout."

"You guys have a hideout!"

“Correction. It’s our hideout,” he said as he pointed between himself and her. Their hideout! Despite having spoken with Blur and Whodunit multiple times, they hadn’t exactly officially stated that they were friends. But the fact that they (well at least Blur) were willing to share their hideout with her...maybe that meant they were friends. At least she thought so. Honestly, she didn’t have much experience having friends.

“So, we’re heading over to the hideout?”

This time Blur leapt backward at his friend’s sudden appearance. “Geez. Don’t do that, I hate it when you do that.”

“Not my fault you’re so unobservant,” replied Whodunit as he walked away. Uncertain as to whether this meant they were going or not, she and Blur looked at each other in confusion. Whodunit glanced back at them. “You guys coming?” Not needing any further prodding, they both sprinted after him.

Knack wasn’t sure what she had been expecting when they had said hideout, but it certainly wasn’t this. The ‘hideout’ was an abandoned lot hidden behind a large business building with sewer pipes just behind it and an old chain link fence surrounding it. It was an old building that she guessed might have been a convenience store at some point. There was a concrete patio with part of the roof just covering it that was held up with four rusted steel poles. As if it were a slithering snake, a green vine wound down one of the poles. The rundown building had two front windows, one was cracked and the other smashed out. Grass had grown up in the lot surrounding the building and was as high as Knack’s knees. Unfortunately, the lot had become a dumping ground for cardboard

boxes, tires, and old steel chairs, some of which were stacked while others were just thrown wherever.

“So, what do you think?” asked Blur.

“It’s.... impressive, nothing like what I was expecting,” answered Knack carefully.

“Tch. Don’t hold back, Knack, we know it looks like crap,” said Whodunit. He crossed his arms and let out a sigh. “But it’s the best we can do. Besides, at least it’s fairly well hidden and still standing.”

“Hopefully, it stays standing while we’re under it,” said Blur.

Deciding that maybe their optimism wasn’t quite so misplaced, she added, “We’re probably lucky just to have a hideout. Right?”

A rare smile lit up Whodunit’s face. “True, I doubt any of the other trainees have their own hideout. Who are the losers now?”

She looked over at him with a frown. “Losers?”

“Yeah, ever since we started at the training program, Fortress’s group of cronies have been calling us the Losers in Capes. But just wait because we losers are going to come out on top.”

“We should name it,” said Blur.

It didn’t take long for Knack to come up with something. “What about the Loser Escape?”

“I know they’re calling us losers, but why would we call ourselves losers?” asked Whodunit.

She held up two fingers before explaining. “It’s got a double meaning, one is that it’s a hideout for us losers and the other is that we’re escaping from being losers.” This must have convinced Whodunit because he placed his hand to his chin and nodded.

“That.... that’s actually pretty clever. Yeah okay, the Losers in Capes and their hideout the Loser Escape.”

Blur punched his fist into the air, “Yeah, it’s perfect and we’re going to make the perfect team.” Knack smiled. Despite her frustration at her training and her growing doubt about the superhero community, she was beginning to feel some hope. Now that she had friends, things felt like maybe they wouldn’t be quite as bad.

She looked between Blur and Whodunit then gazed up at their hideout. “We are a perfect team.”

Chapter 8: A Case for Heroes

“It’s nice to be doing something normal for a change. Isn’t it?” said her father.

“Uh, sure, dad,” responded Catori as she walked alongside him down the sidewalk. This had been the first time since she started her training that they had really spent any quality time together. Honestly, she couldn’t help but be a tad suspicious. Due to their varying interests, they rarely hung out together on the weekends. In fact, when her father had asked her to go shopping with him, she had declined. She was busy working on a new gadget not to mention practicing with the ones she already had. Besides, she had never enjoyed shopping. Unfortunately, her father had been insistent and so here she was.

“Speaking of which, do you think you’ll be finished training anytime soon so that things can go back to normal?”

Catori bit back a laugh. So that’s what this little outing was about, trying to keep her normal after all her time in the Citadel. “Actually, it seems like it might take longer than you might have thought. I’ve not exactly been doing well with my training. It could take months maybe even years.” It wasn’t exactly a lie, but it wasn’t exactly the truth either. In fact, she had a feeling that since her powers revolved entirely around her gadgets it was unlikely that she required training at all. Not that she was going to tell her father that.

“Then I want you to spend all your free time practicing your powers,” he said.

Catori glanced at her father with a raised eyebrow. Since when did her father care about her training? “The sooner you learn to control your powers, the sooner all of this will be done.” So that was it, she should have known better. “So, where do you want to go first? I

heard that there's a new department store down the street," he paused and looked over at her. Catori gazed down the sidewalk, feeling her eyes begin to glaze over in boredom at the thought. Until, she caught sight of the Collector's Vault.

"Can we go see H.C. first?" She asked the question in the most amiable way possible, but it must not have worked because her father frowned. He likewise turned his gaze to the comic book store, his eyebrows scrunched up in annoyance or perhaps thought. Without giving her an answer, he continued down the sidewalk. A couple of times she opened her mouth to ask again, but quickly decided against it. She finally got her answer as they reached the Collector's Vault door when her father pivoted suddenly into the entrance. Grinning, she rushed past him to the counter.

Not seeing H.C., she put on her best posh voice and called out, "Where is the cashier? Where's the manager? I swear this is the worst customer service I have ever encountered." As soon as she did, H.C. rushed out from the back.

"Wait...wait, I'm sorry Miss I was just—" he cut himself off when he realized who it really was.

Only just barely holding back a laugh, it burst out of her at the sight of her disheveled uncle breathing heavily with wide eyes. "Sorry H.C. I knew it was the quickest way to get you out here and I just couldn't resist."

H.C. shook his head. "Don't scare me like that. Do you know how important customer satisfaction is for a small-time business owner? I thought my store's entire reputation was going to be ruined online."

"You don't need their help to ruin this place," grumbled her father.

H.C. looked over her head in surprise, apparently just noticing him, and shot him a glare. With his laid-back personality, he rarely got so much as a crease in his face. Even when a three-year-old Catori had jammed all his action figures in the toilet, he didn't so much as frown at her or raise his voice. There was only one person that could break through his usual demeanor: her father.

"Hey Ahote, did Catori drag you here? Who knew it was so difficult to get my big brother to visit every once in a while?"

Her father's eyes narrowed. "Maybe I'd visit more if you'd stop forcing your superhero propaganda on my daughter."

H.C. rolled his eyes. "I don't force anything. I know this might be too much for you to comprehend, but she's capable of making her own decisions." Her father's hands clenched along with his teeth, causing Catori to look back and forth between the two. How did she always end up the one stuck in the middle of these two?

"Please, you sell comic books literally documenting how amazing these so-called heroes are. How is that not propaganda?"

"It's called entertainment." H.C. then turned his back on them and whispered under his breath, "Geez, do you even remember how to have fun anymore?"

"I don't have time to just have fun because I'm too busy taking care of you two."

H.C. crossed his arms. "Well, no one asked you to." Her father looked as if he'd just been hit in the face. He opened his mouth to retort then closed it with a hard stare.

"You know what, I really need to get some errands done," said her father as he made his way to the exit. He glanced back slightly at them both before continuing, "I'll come back to pick Catori up when I'm finished."

H.C. spun around and snorted at the closing door. “Good riddance.”

Although she had her own issues with her father, she frowned disapprovingly at him. “Can’t you guys get along for just a few minutes?”

“Hey! I was being perfectly friendly, he’s the one that started it.” This time it was her turn to roll her eyes. Sometimes her uncle acted like such a kid that he even used their excuses. “Besides, I doubt I’m the only reason that my brother’s being such a grumpy gus,” continued H.C. with a raised eyebrow. “From what I hear, I might be selling a comic book about you one day.”

Catori scratched the back of her head in embarrassment. “Yeah, well, it’ll probably be awhile until I’m at that level.”

“Speaking of which, your dad never told me what power you have. What is it? Have you met any superheroes? Have you been in the Crimson Cape Citadel? Have you seen any cool superpowers? How’s your training going?” he asked, his speech getting faster and faster with each question.

“For the first question, I can make gadgets that copy other heroes’ superpowers. As to the others, yes, yes, and yes. The last question is where it gets a little tricky.”

“You mean the training. What about it?”

Catori sighed and leaned her back against the counter. “My training hasn’t exactly been going well.”

“I wouldn’t worry. It’s probably just because you’re still getting use to your powers,” he answered casually. Not exactly what she’d been hoping to hear, but then again maybe it was a bit much to expect advice from anyone since there hadn’t been someone like her in hundreds of years. It was possible that nobody would ever be able to

fathom her situation, unless someone else somehow acquired powers. The sudden thought was sobering that she was completely alone.

Catori was so deep in thought that she was only vaguely listening to H.C. talking about some new comic book. That is until he said, “Did you hear that the Crimson Cape Citadel was broken into yesterday?” She spun around and slammed her hands on the table causing H.C. to jump.

“Someone broke into the Citadel?!” However, she paused as a thought struck her. “Wait.... How do you know someone broke in? *I* didn’t even know someone broke in.”

H.C. merely shrugged. “Oh, those superheroes might try to keep everything top secret, but if you keep your ears open something always leaks out.” It was a pretty good answer, but something about it didn’t sit right with Catori. Her eyes squinted with suspicion.

“If that’s the case then how have I never heard these secrets before?” With characteristic nonchalance he smirked and started filing a stack of comic books that were on the counter.

“Probably because you have a tendency of hanging out by yourself. Kind of difficult to hear the rumors if you have no one to hear them from.”

She hated to admit it, but what he said made some sense. At least, it did if she was still an ordinary citizen. How could she be missing rumors about the Citadel when she was literally a part of the Citadel? Of course, recently she had been too distracted to really listen for news. Still it seemed odd that H.C. always seemed to know what was going on within the community. Well, wherever he was getting his information, he wasn’t telling her. Knowing she couldn’t force H.C. to talk if he didn’t want to, she

decided to drop it...at least for now. She turned her back on H.C. again and prepared to lean against the counter when two figures across the street caught her attention.

Not wasting a second, she made a rush for the door and ignoring her uncle's "Hey!" she swung open the door.

"You two look like a couple of comic book nerds. How about you come check out the best comic book shop in Paladin City?" she screamed through cupped hands. As expected, the figure in a black t-shirt twisted around to face her with his familiar Whodunit glare. Catori grinned back at him in response, causing his eyes to widen and then roll. With a saunter that she bet was an attempt to make up for his burst of emotion earlier, he made his way over with a laughing Blur behind him.

"You should have seen the look on his face when he heard you call him a nerd. Actually, let me show you." Blur scrunched up his face into an over-the-top frown that made her chuckle in return. Ignoring their laughter, Whodunit pushed past them and lifted one of the action figures from the nearby display table.

"I'm surprised you'd be interested in comic books anymore, after we told you how worthless they are," he said as he studied the action figure of Professor Titanium.

"Well, I'm not here so much for the comics as I am for the owner." Swinging her hand towards H.C. in an elaborate manner, she continued in her best announcer voice, "May I introduce the owner of the Collector's Vault and my uncle, H.C."

Blur's eyes grew to the size of quarters and he put his arms out to H.C. "Oh. When we said worthless we didn't really mean..."

In a calm almost emotionless voice, Whodunit finished his friend's thought. "We meant worthless for learning anything about the real superheroes, obviously they still have their entertainment value."

Not missing a beat, Blur nodded. "Yeah, yeah that's exactly what we meant."

Luckily for them, H.C. didn't get upset easily. He examined the two with relative interest. "So, you've finally made some friends outside of me? I'm guessing from that little exchange that your friends are heroes in-training like you?"

Exchanging a quick glance with Blur and Whodunit, both of whom shook their heads slightly enough that H.C. wouldn't notice it, she put on an unconvincing smile and shrugged her shoulders. "Ummm.... maybe."

"I get it. I get it. Keep your secrets, just promise to tell me if you find out who broke into the Citadel. I still can't believe someone was able to steal something from there."

While Whodunit explained that they couldn't tell him confidential information from the Citadel, a thought occurred to Catori. For weeks she had been worrying about the Exam, but maybe there was some way to get around it. She gazed down at a folded-up cape inside H.C.'s glass counter and her mind raced at the possibilities. If she could prove that she was already capable of being a superhero, then she wouldn't need to take the Exam. All she needed was the perfect heroic act and the perfect team to make it possible. Her attention turned to her friends, one of whom was now arguing with H.C. and the other who was caught between them looking as if he was debating whether he should say something. Catori's heart beating and a grin taking over her face in excitement, she grabbed hold of Blur and Whodunit's arms.

“Sorry for interrupting, H.C., but me and the guys need to talk about something important,” she said as she pulled the two away.

“Look, I know he’s your uncle, but we can’t give an ordinary citizen confidential information on the Citadel,” started Whodunit.

“What? No, I didn’t grab you for that. I just had a great idea of a way to get out of the Exam,” she explained.

While Whodunit crossed his arms, Blur frowned. “How? The only way to become a superhero has always been through taking the Exam.”

“There’s been a break in at the Citadel, right?” Both Whodunit and Blur nodded. “So, what if we investigated, found out who was responsible, and maybe even caught the suspects. It would prove that we have what it takes to become heroes without having to take the Exam.”

Blur shook his head. “I don’t know, we’re in-training for a reason. It could be dangerous, possibly even deadly. Besides, how do you know they won’t just make us take the Exam anyway?”

“You’re right, I don’t know, but I do know that we’ll have a better chance solving this case ourselves than taking some test we know nothing about.” This didn’t seem to convince Blur any further, who kept glancing over at Whodunit as if his stare could will him into stopping her. Unfortunately, Whodunit did nothing of the sort. Instead, he paced back and forth his hand under his chin. Blur wasn’t the only one watching him intently. Catori knew that if she was going to have her perfect team to crack this case then the one she had to convince was Whodunit. Both her and Blur’s eyes followed him as he paced back and forth, his face pointed downward.

Suddenly, his head shot up his eyes gleaming. “Catori’s right. This is our chance to prove to everyone what we’re really capable of.”

Glancing between both Catori and Whodunit, Blur shook his head. “You’re both insane! The Exam exists to do just that!”

“Do you honestly think anyone will respect us anymore just because we pass the Exam? Face it, the only way to truly prove them all wrong is to do something that none of them will ever do,” said Whodunit.

Blur sighed. “You guys are going to do this no matter what I say, aren’t you?” At their nods, Blur slumped over, his arms and his head hanging towards the floor like he lost all the bones in his upper body. When he finally straightened up again with a loud groan, he said, “Then I guess I’ll have to come along.” He turned to Whodunit with a smirk. “After all, you’ve always been lost without me.”

“Since when have I been los—” Not wanting them to change their minds in an argument, she cut Whodunit off.

“Perfect! So, it’s settled. After our next training session, we’re going to investigate what happened at the Citadel.”

AFTERWORD

As a long-time fan of superheroes, the subject for my first novel was a no-brainer. Although there were multiple novels based around superheroes (and more coming out), I couldn't find the kind of book that I wanted, a series that captured the ridiculous fun as well as the seriousness of the genre with fantastic world-building and relatable characters. While I was developing the series, I was struck with a concept based around these two questions: What if superheroes lost sight of what it meant to be a superhero? What if superheroes became an elitist community separate from the civilians they protect? It was from this concept that the world, character motivations, societal rules, etc. were born.

The age of the audience I'm going for is primarily the ages of eight to twelve. This would be similar to the age range found for most books in the middle grade genre within children's literature. This is because I primarily read (and I am a fan of) the middle grade genre. Another reason would be due to the main characters' ages being twelve, which generally automatically classifies a book for readers the same age.

For these first eight chapters, I strived to introduce main and important characters, establish the basic rules and workings of the world, and begin setting up the main conflicts for the book. In terms of characters, I was able to establish the main character Catori Powers/Knack and introduce important characters like Blur, Whodunit, Ahote Powers, H.C., Captain Phenomenal, and Aether. For the plot, I have set up Catori being enrolled in the superhero training program and becoming increasingly unconfident as she has trouble using her new powers. I have also begun setting up the growing tensions between the superheroes and the civilians along with the hint of the break-in at the

Crimson Cape HQ. This break-in will serve as the main conflict of the book, as Knack and her friends investigate it and discover who is behind it.

In the next chapters, Knack and friends will find out that someone hacked into the computer and stole all the information documenting every superheroes' civilian identity. Their initial investigation leads to a red herring, but eventually they discover the culprit is the supervillain Mastermind. During this time, Knack learns that for her Exam she'll have to get through the obstacle course without her gadgets. While unable to defeat Mastermind in a fight, Knack and her friends are able to put a stop to Mastermind's plan (Knack in particular) before he can broadcast all the superheroes' identities. His plan in shambles, he leaves with the promise to come back with a new plan. Despite their great accomplishment, they are still required to pass the Exam to have the chance to become superheroes. While her friends are now fine with this (having discovered new and unique ways of using their powers thanks to Knack), Knack is still unconfident about her abilities to complete the Exam. After watching her friends pass the Exam, she decides to go off practicing by herself.

While practicing, she meets Mastermind again, who was impressed by her ability to stop his plans. She learns that Mastermind had disappeared because no hero was ever able to defeat him or stop his plans, so he left out of boredom until he came up with a plan. His plan is to get rid of all the current superheroes with the hope that this will force all the heroes in-training to rise up and become better heroes that might pose a challenge to him. Due to Knack already rising past his expectations, Mastermind offers her a reward in the form of a gadget that will help her get through the Exam. He also reminds her that she never discovered who exactly broke into the Crimson Cape Headquarters in

the first place. He hints at the fact that it might be a trusted superhero within the community. Although tempted to use the gadget, she ultimately decides not to and passes the Exam. Due to her father still greatly disliking superheroes, she decides to continue training to be a superhero without his knowledge. The book ends with Knack lying to her father by saying that it'll probably be years until she's mastered control of her powers.

This book will be the first in a series. The following books will feature: Knack and friends discovering who the traitor within the community is, Knack's father discovering that she's been lying to him, putting a stop to various supervillains' plans, and more. The overall conflict throughout the series will be the growing distance between the superheroes and civilians. Knack ends up as the only one who can bridge the gap between the two groups, since she is the only one who is both a superhero and a civilian. While Knack attempts to keep the peace, she must contend with Mastermind's plans to destroy what peace she's managed to create. Overall, I have a ton of ideas for future books and I hope to one day have them all become reality.

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