

Mindblade in: Rock Bottom

By Psion
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Silicon City, after the events of Meet the Metalworkers...

As the sun began to signal the start of another day in Silicon City, the early morning rays chastising the city's various night dwellers into hiding, the city's homeless and disenfranchised began to stir for another day of life spent between the cracks. In a secluded grove in a disused corner of the city park, a lanky raccoon anthro dressed in ragged jeans and a t-shirt stirred. As Jeffery Biggs opened his eyes to greet the new day, he sighed and wondered just how did he manage to fall so far again.

In his early teens, Jeffery's telekinetic abilities blossomed and cost him his home. Staunch fundamentalist types who believed he had been touched by the devil; his parents kicked him out of the house when he was thirteen. After living on the streets for about a year, committing acts of petty thievery to survive, he had been picked up by a master criminal looking to put together a gang of gifted adolescent thieves. For a couple years it went well, then the mastermind decided that his protégées had outlived their usefulness. Unfortunately for him he taught his students far too well....

With their master in prison, the Applewood gang was free to do as it liked as their own careers in the criminal underworld went off like a rocket. Unfortunately they eventually bit off more than they could chew. It sounded easy enough when they discussed it, use their abilities to rob a military depot and sell the contents to a high-paying client that one of them met in a bar. Given they had made a fortune as masked criminals stealing from banks and jewelry moguls, they were right to feel cocky. But still, they paid through the nose for this one. The base was well protected and the DSA was on them within a heartbeat. And of course their client turned out to be a fairly temperamental head of one of the biggest cartels in Mexico; anyone in the gang that wasn't busted by the cops was gunned down by cartel soldiers. As far as he knew, Jeffery was the only survivor of that train wreck that wasn't in prison.

Down on his luck and on the run, Biggs drifted his way into Casino City. Once in the gambling mecca he was back to the beginning, using his powers for petty thievery and gimping the slot machines to pay out more often. Sick of the direction his life had taken, the raccoon's search for a way out caused him to cross paths with Stanley Ironhoof, a moose with powers of his own. Stanley was looking for furs to start a small fabrication franchise. It was supposed to be simple; move to this place called Alpha City, keep quiet about being metabeings to avoid trouble with labor unions and competitors, then get the business rolling and crank out as much product as their powers would allow. Easy as pie, a sure thing... except for the supervillain that waltzed into their workshop and ruined everything.

Escaping back home with their dreams in ruins and registration authorities on their heels, the four of them scattered and went their separate ways. Trisha, Anastasia,

and Stanley all managed to survive the setback well enough, their savings had taken a hard hit but not so that they couldn't afford a few weeks unemployment as they searched for other jobs. Jeffery unfortunately did not have as much to lose as his friends did. When it came time to chip in and contribute startup money, the reformed criminal went all in.

Which lead to where he was now, living on the streets with nothing but the clothes on his back and a couple dollars in his pocket. Hardly the glamorous lifestyle that people associate with metabeings, damn comics always portrayed them as insanely wealthy regardless of who they were. The vagrant snorted as he dusted himself off and kept an eye out for lingering thugs out for one last hit and run before they snuck off to bed, just the start of another glorious day in the life of Jeffery Biggs; super thief, craftsman, and now homeless street person.

Fingering the money in his pocket and ignoring the early morning joggers who just as readily pretended he wasn't there; Jeff swung the ratty bag containing the last of his worldly possessions and started walking. The park was otherwise deserted this early in the morning; children were probably getting ready to go to school while most adults were already at work. The telekinetic drifter was probably the only one there that didn't have anywhere to be.

There was a cold silence as Biggs left the park, a patrolman from SCPD walking in just as he was walking out. The SCPD had been cracking down on homeless sleeping in the city parks lately, part of some scheme to push them into shelters. But the shelters were overcrowded already, leaving vagrants to camp out in the abandoned buildings in the industrial zone. The two furs glanced at one another, both speaking volumes to the other without saying a word. Jeffery kept walking on, aware that the feline cop had done the same.

As the sun continued to rise, the ringtailed hobo wandered aimlessly. No job meant no demands on his time but no money to spend either. As he walked by a small jewelry store sandwiched between a deli and a laundry mat, his mind immediately went into overdrive as old habits started to come back. Security was light, only two visible cameras, and only one guard could be seen through the store windows. A pair of window displays showed off an impressive collection of emeralds and sapphires. Even if he didn't want to tangle with the joke of a security detail, one TK cestus would break the glass and allow him to grab... No, no he couldn't be that brazen. Even after five years neither the DSA nor the Mexicans would have forgotten about Mindblade. Even if they did, all his fences and other criminal contacts were back in Iowa. All these pretty gems were worth less than the concrete beneath his feet if he didn't know which pawnbroker would be willing to buy stolen merchandise. Pawnshops weren't half as scuzzy as crime dramas made them out to be and both the DSA and the SCPD were very fond of setting up bogus shops for sting operations. Bogus shops that weren't so bogus anymore, the latest rumor in the grapevine was that both agencies were hiring real pawnbrokers to help them make things look convincing...

Lost in his thoughts, Jeff stared at a marvelously wrought gold pendant with a ruby centerpiece as if he was thinking of buying it. Finally, with a hearty sigh, he kept walking. There had to be another way to pull himself out of this hole, he just had to find it.

The soup kitchen at Our Lady of Eternal Redemption was one of the few places that managed to serve all three meals, three very meager meals but three meals nonetheless. Biggs stepped in line and tried to avoid dwelling on the bitter irony of his situation. It was religion that turned his life into a mess yet it was that same belief in a glistening afterlife high in the clouds that kept him alive. There probably was a university professor somewhere studying how belief in something completely imaginary can cause such a crazy contradiction.

This week one of the donors had been particularly generous; a place called Little Treats Bakery donated a basketful of muffins to the church. Jeffery happily munched on his muffin as he carried a bowl of watery oatmeal to a table in the corner. While the portions were a joke, the staff was anything but inefficient. Within fifteen minutes everyone was seated and started to dig in. Conversations buzzed around who was going to go panhandle where and what the street gangs were up to lately. The South Side Vipers, a reptile gang with rumored ties to the cartels, were getting particularly vicious lately and the East End Ballers, a crew of vulpine techno-crooks who had been particularly lucky hitting Delta-6, the hypertechno junkyard outside of the city, had been recently evicted out of their turf. No one was sure exactly who kicked them out, but apparently it wasn't the cops.

Out of the corner of his eye, the wiry male saw the priest in charge of the kitchen talking with a rabbit doe. With a glance, the former thief sized her up. Middle class, average height and build, mid to late thirties, fairly well kempt, and as she talked with Father Richards she couldn't stop playing with the chain of her necklace. The elderly ursine priest put a hand on her shoulder to reassure her then turned to the crowd of weathered homeless.

"Brothers and sisters, may I have a moment of your time?" He projected in a voice that managed to be loud without sounding like he was yelling. Perhaps it was true that Father Richards was once a pitchman...

To the credit of his speaking abilities, the homeless furs looked up and gave him their rapt attention. Spoons were held in midair and oatmeal dribbled into Styrofoam bowls as the audience waited for him to finish this train of thought.

"Brothers and sisters..." he repeated. "This woman is Gloria Vale. She is looking for her son who has been missing for three weeks. I told her you would be willing to give her a moment of your time to see if you recognize him from his picture."

There was some grumbling at that, a trio of vagrants at the table next to Jeff had some musical talent and wanted to get a head start on playing on a street corner by the mall. But of course no one had it in them to say no to Father Richards. Besides, it wasn't like most of them had anything better to do.

The duo went from table to table, the ursine cleric not leaving Gloria's side as she showed one cluster of vagrants after another her son's picture. One thing was definitely certain; it didn't take long to work through the crowd. Ten minutes and the two of them were already halfway through. No one knew him, or if they did they didn't care. A few tried to take advantage of the situation by fleecing money out of the poor female but Richards knew a liar when he saw one and whisked the rabbit away in an instant. Finally, they were at Jeff's table.

What a difference a half hour made. When she first stood by the imposing minister, Jeff could see a faint flicker of hope beneath her fear. Now, her face was a mask of despair and worry. The raccoon half-listened to her as he looked over a picture of a teenaged rabbit buck dressed in a soccer uniform. Almost immediately his apathetic expression broke, there was no way...

"My husband was right; this was going to be a waste of time. The only people who care want me to give them money for God only knows what. No one here cares about-"

"Yeah, your husband's right. None of the junkies and deadbeats here would know anything about a lapine kid named Bobby." Jeffery interrupted sarcastically, sliding the picture back towards Gloria. The rabbit and bear stared back at him awestruck, he merely took another spoonful of his oatmeal before it finished turning cold. "So, why don't you tell me a little about Bobby and maybe I can tell you where to find him."

Rock Bottom Part 2

After meeting with Gloria Vale, Jeffery Biggs left the soup kitchen and slipped into a back alley. Something didn't sit right with him about how easily she agreed to meet with him later that afternoon, part of him wondered why she didn't push to have him take her to Bobby that instant. Then again, perhaps he was just being foolish by hoping that most parents weren't like his. In any case, he had a long walk ahead of him if he wanted to make it to Peaceful Acres by noon. Waiting until he was sure the Vales were gone, Biggs discreetly double-backed into the soup kitchen. Slipping in through the backdoor, he snuck into the pantry and managed to help himself to a couple more muffins. The raccoon ex-con wasn't sure who made these but damn were they good, Bobby would definitely want to try them. Sneaking back out onto the street and continuing on his journey, he walked the rest of the way to Peaceful Acres, seemingly oblivious to the green sedan following behind him...

Peaceful Acres was an abandoned suburban development relatively close to the city. Originally planned as a neighborhood for upper middle class families that worked in the city, the project was canceled when it was discovered that the homes were built on a brownfield site. What caused the contamination or whether it was particularly life threatening was something that Jeff didn't know but apparently it was bad enough that the project was dropped like a hot rock and people didn't stick around once it went public. As a result, the abandoned suburban duplexes attracted a new class of inhabitant, one that was willing to risk a little chemical poisoning in order to avoid attracting the wrong kind of attention.

Jeffery kept a wary eye to either side of him as he slowly walked down the deserted street. The lawns had grown thick with waist-high grass perfect for concealing an ambush and while the neighborhood was largely uninhabited, the few that did manage to live here were some of the shiftiest characters Biggs had seen in awhile. He hoped it wasn't a mistake helping Bobby hide here. The kid had proven to be a surprisingly quick study when it came to defending himself and spotting trouble but still... a couple of the people here had a vibe about them that gave even the raccoon pause.

Counting the houses till he found the right one, the lanky vagrant opened the door and stepped inside. "Hey Bobby! It's Jeff, I brought you a couple muffins!" He called to the empty house. The silence was deafening, the still air made the fur on his neck stand on end. He called again and set the muffins down on the counter. "Hey Bob, think I met your mother today at the soup kitchen."

"Jeff! GET OUT OF THE HOUSE!" The rabbit adolescent shouted from upstairs, his voice tinged with an equal mix of adrenaline and pure terror.

In an instant the raccoon's reflexes took over. He immediately grabbed a handy plank of wood from the kitchen counter and resisted the urge to call up his telekinetic swords; there would be time to conjure them if the situation warranted them. "This better be some kind of a joke Bobby." He replied, turning to face the sound of heavy footfalls. Someone was here that shouldn't be, someone walking down with a set of slow, methodical footfalls...

There, standing at the other end of the main hallway, was a muscular tiger dressed in a black three-piece suit. Pants and shirt were immaculately pressed, as if the black-haired male was on his way to a board meeting. Green eyes glistened with recognition as they looked back at the scruffy raccoon, a diagonal scar hovering over his left eye. "Hello Mr. Biggs, I did not expect to see you here. It's been a long time." He replied smoothly, his tone dripping with forced professionalism.

Jeffery cracked his own neck and discarded the wooden club for a telekinetic sword. "Not anywhere nearly long enough for my tastes Mr. Johnson, I see I didn't cut

quite deep enough last time, you still have both of your damn beady little eyes.” He scowled and took up a fighting stance, the TK blade glowing in the midday light.

“Mr. Biggs, there’s no need to be hostile. That episode with the moose’s daughter was simply business. Just business, just like this encounter here with Robert Vale.” The tiger defended, chuckling slightly. “Do you even know what you have here?” He asked with a bemused smirk.

“I have an awakened earth controller who isn’t going to be used as slave labor in your boss’s copper mine up in the Rockies, that’s what I have.”

“Heh, such childishly naïve beliefs for a hardened thief.”

“The Applewood gang never made deals with slavers.” Jeffery replied flatly, idly twirling the blade in his right hand.

“Oh no, you just robbed banks, jewelry stores, and I believe there was a minor incident at an auto show in Detroit you may remember...” The muscular feline replied sarcastically.

Biggs smirked. “Good times.... Still going to kick your balls into your throat though.”

Johnson sighed and put on a pair of red rubber gloves. “I was hoping you wouldn’t make me muss up my suit, dry cleaning is so expensive.”

“Not my fault you picked a messy profession. This isn’t some bondage fantasy world where everyone and their sister seems to be lining up to be a slave.” Jeffery smiled at the slave catcher and took up a fighting stance.

The two males stood ready to face off with one other, the smallest bead of sweat forming on Jeffery’s brow when out of the blue...

“Stop villain!” A male voice called out from behind Johnson, the striped feline turned to his side to make himself less of a target, giving Biggs a perfect look at the new challengers. Almost immediately his pulse quickened, there was no way...

Standing the entryway was a pair of rabbits clad in green spandex suits with brown trim. Faces were completely hidden by a pair of hoods that merged seamlessly with the rest of their costumes. The few visible features suggested that they were older, their bodies starting to show signs of aging but the active lifestyle they probably lead meant that the ravages of time have yet to wear them down. Jeffery grimaced as he recognized these two superheroes... weren’t both of them supposed to be retired?

“Oh dear, looks like I’ll have to play another time.” Johnson smiled as he reached for something in his pants pocket. “But as I said Mr. Biggs, you really don’t have any idea what you have here.” The tiger grinned as he threw down a smoke grenade and forced his way past the telekinetic swordsman. The raccoon swung furiously when he felt the other male rush by but only sliced dead air. The drifter gritted his teeth, how the slave-hunter managed to slip through his fingers twice now was a mystery Biggs wanted desperately to solve.

Banishing his sword before the smoke could clear, he turned and looked back at his apparent allies through the thinning mist. The rabbits looked back at him, too many coincidences were starting to pile up inside of the vagrant’s head. “Well this is already shaping up to be one of those days. Hey Bobby, come down and introduce me to your parents already!”

“I’m afraid you must be mistaken citizen, I do not-”

“Oh can it Geode, this is the first time anyone’s seen you or Quartz in costume in five years. I’ve been having a hell of a day already so why not humor me and drop the act for once?” Jeffery replied with a roll of his eyes.

Upstairs, Bobby slowly unlocked the bathroom door and crept down the stairs. The raccoon couldn’t blame him. Johnson was the kind of person you didn’t mess with, then again anyone who made it his business to hunt “wild talents” before they learned to fully control their abilities had to be tough. Still, the scared brown rabbit’s eyes lit up as he recognized the two masked heroes. Not a word was spoken but Jeff couldn’t even count the seconds before Quartz broke character and swept up the disheveled lapine teenager in a loving hug. Geode struggled to remain stoic in the face of the emotional reunion but ultimately lasted only a few seconds longer than his wife before joining her in embracing their son.

Crossing his arms and leaning against the wall, the raccoon smiled despite himself. The life Biggs found himself in was something no one deserved, least of all a kid like Bobby. The struggling ex-con knew that more than anyone. Finally the rabbits came back to the present and looked at their son’s caretaker for the last few days.

“Who are you?” Geode asked. A bit blunt but then again so was Jeff.

“Jeffery Biggs, just a guy with... gifts trying to make his way in the world without getting caught up in the biggest game of cops and robbers out there.” The raccoon answered, not a lie but not the whole truth either. This couple didn’t need to know he was also the only guy they couldn’t put behind bars before circumstances forced them to retire from the Great Game...

Rock Bottom: Chapter 3

Approximately six hours later...

Jeffery Biggs groaned as he awoke to a pounding headache, his mind feeling like it was suspended in a thick fog as things slowly came back to him. As his mind began to clear, the gray-furred raccoon took a quick look at his surroundings. A dimly lit room with cinderblock walls, the musty stench of sex lingering in the air, and he was currently suspended from the ceiling by an elaborate array of chromed steel chains and polished mechanical locks. The male vagrant closed his blue eyes shut in a wince as the events of the day came back to him in a flood...

After reuniting Bobby with his parents, two retired superheroes that turned out to be part of the collection of individuals that tried to put Jeff behind bars when he was still using his telekinetic powers for thefts both grand and petty. Surprisingly neither of them saw or recognized the blades he conjured out of psychokinetic energy, which was probably just as well given how one of the first things that Gloria "Quartz" Vale, Bobby's mother, did was invite Jeffery to dinner. Apparently being out of the Great Game for several years made Mrs. Vale a little rusty when it came to the whole secret identity thing. And well, with his choice being between eating at the shelter and eating with the Vale family... well considering what the shelter could afford to feed him, eating with a family of rabbits didn't sound like a bad idea even if Geode didn't like the thought of having Jeffery in his home for the evening.

Biggs never got to try that potato and vegetable soup that was allegedly Bobby's favorite. No sooner had they all sat down and Bobby's father led the four of them through the motions of saying grace, something that subconsciously irritated Jeffery but the raccoon was polite enough to let it go, did someone throw a gas grenade through the dining room window. In the scuffle that soon followed, Jeffery barely made out the gasmask-wearing image of Mr. Johnson and two friends of the well-dressed tiger that he didn't recognize, a lion and a domestic feline in paramilitary outfits. A minute later the gas had its desired effect, rabbits and raccoon were all out like lights. And now here he was... locked away in what looked like to be the dungeon playroom for a BDSM freak.

Suspended in midair with his arms chained behind his back in a perverse setup that would make Harry Houdini nervous. Biggs considered what he had figured out so far as he relaxed and went through the mental exercises of testing his telekinesis. This current bondage gimmick wasn't even remotely Johnson's MO, the guy was strictly in it for the cash, and Biggs seriously doubted he would risk partnering with someone who didn't share his priorities. Which meant that the raccoon had already been sold off... Still, it could be worse, he still had his clothes and there was nothing interfering with his telekinetic abilities, he hadn't been injected with any drugs and apparently the room didn't have a nullification field installed. Meaning whoever was holding him was either really stupid or didn't get the memo about his powers if they thought this kinkmail was going to hold him for long. Relaxing his mind and concentrating on his abilities, he

mentally felt for the padlocks holding him in place, telekinetic abilities coaxing the arrays of springs and tumblers into doing his bidding.

There were few pleasures in life that quite compared to being handfed exotic chocolates. Being handfed chocolates by one naked slave girl while getting a slow, soothing massage by two more was one of them. Madam Burrows enjoyed just such a thing as she answered a video call. If Mr. Johnson was jealous to see the white rabbit doe lying on a couch, tended to by three nubile vixens he didn't show it...

The slave-peddling tiger struggled to keep his expression and tone neutral as he watched the well-endowed bunny get her rubber-clad hourglass curves lovingly massaged. Of all the pompous, childishy debauched things... still, there was business that needed to be checked up on. "Thank you for receiving my call Madam Burrows, how are you enjoying your latest purchase?"

"Oh I just love him! Thank you so much Mr. Johnson, you just what a girl needs to treat herself when her affairs have been going so well! I'm going to have so much fun dressing him up and this collar you gave me for him... it's a little ugly but I think it will look really nice with some gold plating." She replied, holding up the psionic nullifier collar intended to suppress Biggs' powers.

The tiger's good eye twitched involuntarily as the psychic choker was currently devoid one raccoon neck. "Why isn't that nullification collar activated and around his neck?"

The rabbit frowned as she stared back at the other flesh peddler. "Fantastic... you didn't tell me this one required special handling." She scolded and motioned for one of her henchmen to come over and whispered in his ear. A second later, the "gimp wolf" walked out of Johnson's field of view, hopefully to check the prisoner.

"I gave you a free psi-null collar with your purchase, how much more explanation do you need?" The muscular feline growled, hands nervously playing with his silken tie.

"I don't deal in superpowered twits, they tend to break things and steal my girls away from me, at least an explanation for what this thing was supposed to do would have been appreciated." Burrows argued back. Behind the videophone, the rabbit's henchman reappeared. The madam only needed one look at the wolf's face to know that the news wasn't good. "I'll have to call you back Mr. Johnson, I have a security issue that needs to be dealt with." She apologized, hanging up and turned to her minion.

"Alert the guard staff, have them search room by room. We have an hour before the Warrens open for business tonight and I don't want this unmasked do-gooder causing trouble." She ordered, idly groping one of her attendants.

"Of course my mistress, but are you sure that's what we're dealing with?"

“What else could he be, a burglar?” She joked haughtily, silently wishing she had asked more questions of Johnson when she had the chance. She should have known it was too good to be true to have the tiger suddenly willing to make a deal that was in her price range...

The main problem with giving henchmen a distinct theme is that it made it very easy for outsiders to identify who was in charge. Toned and physically fit male wolves, foxes, and bears, tight leather pants, no shirt, and black leather gimp masks, the psychological tells of an inferiority complex. Jeffery recognized them in an instant, the personal guard and attendants of Madam Burrows, an over-hyped female pimp with delusions of being a mega-rich supervillain mogul in the sex slave industry. Living on the streets, he had seen her goons sulk about after dark, preying on prostitutes, female vagrants, and the occasional unlucky lady caught in the wrong place at the wrong time; kidnapping the lot of them to be pressed into the service of her brothel the Warrens. They weren't tough or particularly well armed by any stretch of the imagination, gimmick characters rarely were regardless of where they sat in the Great Game, but ten to one odds were still lousy chances for a relatively unarmed male.

Even though it was obvious where he was, getting out was going to be tricky. People suspected that the underground whorehouse was quite literally underground, but no one knew for sure. Sucking in his breath, the raccoon ex-thief let himself fall back into his old habits. The shadows of the dimly lit corridors and rooms of the Warrens welcomed him like an old lover that never really got over him, embracing and wrapping themselves around him like a welcoming shroud. Footfalls became slow, measured as his practiced soft step overcame the heavy weight of his boots. His respiration turned into a series of shallow breaths as his eyes sharpened and became alert for flashes of movement or the sparkle of valuables waiting to be swiped by a delicate touch. Guess old habits really never do die.

The guards were alert, forcing Biggs to quickly relearn the rest of his old tricks as they bunched up and systematically search from room to room. Apparently word of his escape finally reached the queen bitch herself. Unfortunately for her henchmen, he knew a couple of tricks for evading this sort of thing. Unfortunately for him, the one that involved picking them off one by one like the monster in a bad slasher movie required that he had a way out first. So without any better options, he stuck to his original plan, stay in the shadows, stay quiet, and always stay moving while he built up a mental map of the brothel he was trapped in. Not only did he have to find a way out but there was also the matter of some unfinished business to take care of. And while his mentor did try to use him for a fall guy in the end, two of his lessons that Biggs still took to heart was that a professional never left a mess or tolerated any loose ends...

For perhaps the first time, Madam Burrows wondered if it wouldn't be a bad idea to get some better lighting installed in some parts of the Warrens. Granted it benefited her clients, less likely to make out facial details in the dim lighting and coupled with the

handful of chemical smells designed to mask their scent, it would be impossible for her girls to point them out in a police line-up. Regretfully the downside to her investments in protecting her clients was becoming apparent, it was apparently just as impossible for her minions to find a single raccoon intruder traipsing around in the dark. Quite clearly her original appraisal of her new purchase was off the mark, he was not some unmasked caped crusader. Such an individual would have probably overpowered her guards and charged into her personal chambers full of piss, vinegar, and righteous indignation five minutes ago. No, this one was different. Whoever this Jeffery Biggs was he wasn't a supervillain either; if he was still here he was too quiet, if he was gone his escape was too clean. All her minions checked in without delay....

Alone in her personal chambers as all her attendants had been dismissed to either deal with the security breach or prepare for tonight's guests, the rabbit madam stood up to leave for the main foyer... and promptly turned around as her long lapine ears twitched in response to a pair of barely perceptible footfalls. Appearing out of the shadows like the dashing masked stranger in a trashy romance novel, he was suddenly there; his body barely a foot away from hers, a red bandanna wrapped around his face, and his cold glare making it plain that cliché-ridden and gag-inducing sweet nothings was the last thing on his mind.

A black cat-o-nines with a braided handle, her favorite whip, lay on the end table next to her couch. She made a grab for it and tried to bring it to bear. He closed the gap between them, got in under her reach, and hit her squarely in the face with a fist wrapped in a barely perceptible blue aura of psychokinetic energy. It was like getting punched with a cinderblock, the "Spoiled Pimpess of Silicon City" went out like a light.

Lugging the unconscious female back on the couch, draping her over the furniture as if she was asleep, he turned his search to the room itself. Burrows' room was a textbook example of Victorian elegance with polished hardwood floors, plush rugs, beautiful carvings in the furniture, and a glistening metal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The room was raised a floor above the main level, with a window that gave Biggs a view of the expansive foyer down below... and a way out of this twisted fun house. But first things first, he needed a couple things from this room.

First came the jewelry box on her dresser; ornate woodwork but still a relatively basic design, simple latch with no lock. Opening it and quickly scanning the contents, he thought better about most of the items in the mess of rings and necklaces. Most of it clearly looked like it was taken off her prey, the metal bands forged for fingers much thinner or thicker than the rabbit's digits. The necklace nestled in the center however, a gold pendant with a cluster of magnificently teardrop-shaped emeralds, that screamed the kind of thing that Madam Burrows would wear. Quick as a flash, deft hands slipped the amulet into his pocket as he searched the rest of the room. The computer and telecommunications equipment on the desk in the corner... and the filing cabinet he was looking for.

A quick search of the cabinet and desk produced nothing he could immediately use for finding where Mr. Johnson took the Vales. There was however about a thousand dollars in petty cash, arranged in neat stacks of twenties and fifties, that could be easily stuffed in his pockets or his boots. Guess there was only one source of information left for him to pump... To her credit, Burrows recovered very quickly from being knocked unconscious. Far too quickly to be natural or for Biggs general comfort, if he had been a lesser thief and lost sight of his priorities to dick around looking for a safe...

Instead, Burrows awoke to find a sharp, steel-like blade held against her throat and Jeffery inches from her face. "Alright, listen very carefully because I really don't have the time for your shit. The guy you bought me from, Mr. Johnson, where is he hiding?"

The rabbit struggled; the raccoon pressed his psychokinetic blade against her throat, drawing a thin trickle of blood. "I'll ask one last time, where is Mr. Johnson?"

"Alright, it was an old warehouse in the industrial district on Commerce Boulevard, West End Industrial Park, used to belong to that home improvement chain HIW or whatever it was." She growled. "I swear to God, I will hunt you down for this. Do you know who I am?"

Biggs merely smiled. "Good night Madam Burrows." He replied with a cruel smirk before punching her out again; now for the fun part of getting out of here.

Getting out turned out to be fairly easy once he got into the main foyer. The lights were dim, most of the guards had their attention focused on the dancers warming up for tonight's performance, the stench of cleaning chemicals prevented them from picking up the scent of a raccoon, and once they did finally spot him, he was halfway out the door running as fast as he could.

The Warrens turned out to be built in an abandoned subway station, part of a line that had been out of service since the last big Californian quake nearly a decade ago. Eventually, after walking for what felt like an eternity, he found where the tunnels intersected with a Department of Public Works station that still had access to the surface. The shop was devoid of people, a place for the DPW to store tools and equipment for when they had to work on that particular tunnel. It would explain how Burrows and her minions managed to move people and materials so easily into a generally remote location. It was also poorly guarded all things considered, barely more than a change of scenery before he returned to the surface, pulled off his mask, and escaped the Madam's clutches. One way or another, he would have to devise a more permanent solution for dealing with her before the end of the week. Burrows unfortunately looked like the kind of villain that didn't know when to just leave something well enough alone. But that would have to wait, the night was still pretty young and he had one more heist to pull off...

The streets of downtown Silicon City were full of nightlife as late-night diners, moviegoers, and barflies milled about oblivious to the raccoon in their midst or the horrors that lay right below their feet. The taxicab that picked him up however was definitely in for a night to remember though, a vixen cabbie looked up at him with a bored expression on her face. "Where to?"

"Commerce Boulevard in the West End Industrial Park please." He replied, holding up one of Burrows' fifty-dollar bills up against the glass separating him from the driver. Who was he kidding, this couldn't be enough to smooth over any suspicions she'd have about being asked to drive to one of the scummier parts of the city...

Apparently it was because the black-furred female merely nodded her head and drove off, must have been a slow business day for her. Thirty minutes later she pulled up to the corner of Commerce and Broadview. Getting out of the cab, thanking her and telling her to keep the change as he paid his fare. Always appreciate the little people was another thing his mentor used to say, they are always the ones who make or break you. Shame Biggs' old teacher never took that saying to heart; he might have not ended up in prison if he did. And besides, cabbies were probably the only people who got less respect than cops in superhero comics, always getting their cars ruined by the hero or blown up by dumb ass supervillains looking for a way to make a "cool" entrance...

The abandoned Home Improvement Warehouse distribution center looked pretty much as one would expect an abandoned commercial building to look in southern California. Weeds grew inside cracks in the parking lot, the flood lamps that would normally illuminate the parking lot for the nightshift were dead, and the only car visible in the employee lot was an old pickup truck with four flat tires. Hardly anything looked out of the ordinary about the exterior from the front or sides. However the rear loading docks in back, hidden from the street, told a different and interesting story. Several vehicles, a trio of fairly low-key sedans and a large delivery van, look like curiously recent additions for a legitimate franchise that hadn't operated anywhere in the state in nearly five years. Yeah this was the place all right, Burrows might have still set him up for another trap but this was definitely the place. Now to just figure out how to get in...

Taking another walk around the perimeter, there were a couple of options. The loading bay doors were likely locked or watched. The roof held possibilities but scaling a thirty-foot wall made of cinder blocks and corrugated steel was... well it was possible for him to fashion some climbing spikes out of psychic energy but did he still have the strength for that kind of climbing? And then there was the old employee's entrance, locked and likely forgotten about. Exert himself for the element of surprise and a superior perspective on things or take the easy road and gamble on Johnson overlooking a possible point of entry?

Sighing, he channeled his telekinetic energies once more, generating a pair of cestuses made out of pure force. Each construct ended in three spiked hooks ideally suited for punching holes in metal and supporting his weight. Might as well try the hard way, he never knew that tiger to miss a trick. Ten minutes later he had his answer, first

major purchase he was making if he ever got a regular income again was a gym membership. The climb wasn't as hard as he expected but the last few feet were a killer. The rest was a simple matter of quietly getting a skylight opened, slipping down onto the steel rafters, and seeing what sort of nightmare waited for him on the ground floor.

Inside, most of the warehouse was empty, rows of forlorn scaffolding and shelves once bearing all manner of home improvement products. A portable generator pattered away powering portable light stands and a handful of camping equipment... the kind of camping equipment favored more by tailgating fratboys and not any diehard outdoorsmen Jeffery knew. A metal prefabricated cage contained the slavers' catch, the Vale family and a handful of other prisoners the raccoon didn't recognize, Johnson had been busy...

The tiger himself was currently playing poker on a folding table with his two cohorts, ignoring the occasional jeer or challenging remark that came from Geode, pausing the game only to check on a portable nullification field generator. From his perch above, the raccoon resisted the urge to whistle. Devices that generated the psychic static necessary to disrupt most super powers were extremely expensive; the smaller generators even more so and as for the collars... suffice to say this whole line of technology was not the kind of thing one could pick up at their local industrial supply store or even their local black market dealer. Fortunately the field emitters were never self-powered so if he could take out the generator he could have this done before breakfast. Of course that was easier said than done given the other slavers in attendance.

The two masked felines Biggs didn't recognize during the attack on the Vale residence turned out to be Artemis and Fang. Artemis was a talented huntress, an ex-military marksman and ruthless tracker that made her fortune hunting metabeings that only recently discovered their powers, selling them off as slave labor for one client or another. By Biggs's reckoning, the domestic calico cat was definitely the scariest person at the table.

Fang, a golden lion with an impressive mane of jet-black hair, was a well-known kidnapper and thug that apparently decided to branch out into the slave trade. Heavily armored, muscular, and armed with both a weighted metal club and a custom semi-automatic shotgun, he was most certainly the brute of the group. A metal mask meant to help protect his face was currently raised up over his head, leaving his bright green eyes and devil-may-care smile visible as he looked over the cards in his hand.

"So why we selling the lot of them to this moneybags lady you two are both so in love with?" Fang asked in a tone that was more curious than stupid. "Can't we just sell them off to a wealthy sheik in the Middle East? I'm sure a few of the women will get us a nice penny on the market."

Johnson merely shrugged while Artemis groaned and glared at the leonine feline. "First of all, the majority of the sex slave trade is actually in North America and in, of all places, Australia. The Arabic countries haven't been a big seller in decades, it's only thanks to racists and Islamaphobes keeping obsolete stereotypes alive that people believe

they're still buying sex slaves by the boatload... Thank the Ascended Sultan for ruining much of that market, that damn mentalist's country is practically a regional leader in how it persecutes our business when it finds us. The rest was cleaned out with the help of idealistic idiots who proved that weakling values like compassion and kindness are not necessarily cultural things.

Second, every two-bit supervillain loser that wants to make big money tries to get into that market. In addition to flooding it with cheap product by people that have no idea what they're doing, it means that's the first place where the authorities are going to look when they try to bust people like us. Better to deal in the market for cheap labor, less competition and more demand.

Third and finally, 'moneybags' happens to be one of our biggest buyers. She has her fingers in everything and a number of shell companies in the agricultural and raw materials industries. She could buy up the lot we have here in a heartbeat and it wouldn't put a dent in her labor needs. So if you want your cut of the million dollars a head we're getting for this run, play nice with her."

Fang was silent after this, whether to reflect on how much money he was about to make or to discreetly grit his teeth after being scolded by one of his peers, Biggs couldn't tell. In any case he needed to focus back on the problem of rescuing everyone while keeping the slavers from retaliating against him later. Idly he looked down at the pile of wallets, jewelry, and other junk they took from their prisoners... there were a few cell phones that he could see. It wasn't the best idea but he did not like the idea of facing the three of them together.

Watching his foes carefully, he waited until he was sure they were focused on their cards and telekinetically levitated a phone up to his hiding place up in the rafters. Pressing the power button on the trendy smartphone, he felt his heart sink. The battery was completely dead. Slowly he began the process of bringing up another, almost getting caught stealing it when Fang stood up to grab a beer from the portable cooler the three had with them.

Holding the second phone in his hand, he flipped it open and turned it on. The phone was an older model, one the companies stopped selling about a decade ago.... It was Geode's phone. The name "Gerald Vale" appeared at the bottom of the LED screen and a picture of Robert and Gloria was on the background... And thank god Bobby's father was an anal-retentive hard ass; battery had almost a full charge left.

Sucking in his breath and dialing 9-1-1, he occasionally looked down below to make sure the three idiots were still there. Seconds later he was connected to the calm, soothing voice of an emergency dispatcher.

"911, what's your emergency?" A composed masculine voice began.

Biggs made one quick check before answering... all three chairs at the card game were empty. They couldn't all have decided to go to the bathroom or patrol the perimeter all at once, could they?

"Oh God, they're looking for me." The raccoon began with a nervous tone that wasn't entirely faked.

"Sir? Calm down, who are you and what's happening?"

"My name is Gerald Vale. Last thing I remember I was having dinner with my family and one of my son's friends when these three thugs broke into my house and kidnapped us. Now I'm in this warehouse, trying to get help but they're looking for me. They know I slipped away." Biggs answered, pretending to be Geode's civilian persona.

"Hang in there Gerald, I'm tracing your call. Can you see any landmarks that would help the police?" The dispatcher asked.

Biggs couldn't see any from his current position but he did get a look at a few on the way in. "There's a factory of some kind right across the street from us. Some plant owned by the tire people, Good Dog. Next door is a textile company named Comfort Threads." He answered, looking over his shoulder again. They were gone far too long for a simple bathroom break.

"Okay, police have been notified of your location. They are on their way." The dispatcher assured just as a bullet narrowly whizzed past Jeffery's head. The raccoon looked down into the maze of shelving units, Artemis looked back up at him through the scope of her rifle. Time to go...

Several more shots were made as the repentant thief raced back through the skylight onto the roof. "Well I guess you can figure out they found me." He replied sarcastically as he ran across the metal roof and carefully climbed down near the loading bays, telekinesis holding the phone against his ear the entire time. Police sirens wailed off in the distance. Conjuring a telekinetic blade with his free hand, he slashed the tires on the moving van and two of the sedans. One escape vehicle with space for four people, he knew what Johnson would do if his hand was forced like that. And sure enough, the tiger fled with his two goons in tow, leaving the police to free his captives. That was it, everyone got to go home and have a happy ending to this little adventure, everyone except him...

By the time the police finished taking stock of the inside of the warehouse and searching the grounds, he was long gone. A detailed search found Gerald's phone on the edge of the parking lot, the cell phone's battery about a foot away from it. But there was no sign of the Samaritan who made the call...

Our Lady of Eternal Redemption, next morning...

Jeffery Biggs sighed as he walked into the soup kitchen once more. A great deed had been done last night... and the status quo resumed once more. The cash and the necklace were carefully hidden in the ratty bag that contained all he had left that he wasn't wearing. He probably could get breakfast at some place decent if they didn't throw him out for being a ratty, unwashed street person but... Jeffery didn't know why he thought the way he did as he went through the line and getting his small bowl of oatmeal one more time, sitting down at a corner table with his back to the wall.

As breakfast started to end, some of the last three people Jeffery Biggs expected to see walked through the door. The entire Vale family was there, dressed as if they were going to spend a Saturday at the mall or the like. They stayed close together, scanning the crowd of homeless until they spotted Biggs. A minute later they were sitting at the table with him.

"Did you lose someone else?" The raccoon joked in between spoonfuls of oatmeal, remembering how this whole ordeal started.

"No but there are a couple of questions we would like answers to. The first being what happened to you after what happened at dinner. Johnson said that you were sold to Madam Burrows."

"And I was. Unfortunately security's not quite as tight as you would think once you found her little lair, much of the difficulty in getting in or out is in finding the place."

"Given that woman's interests in locks, chains, and rope, I suspect there's something you're not telling us." Gerald replied suspiciously, smiling knowingly. "But I think I have seen enough to suspect what it is... Mindblade." The older rabbit accused softly.

Jeffery looked back at the other male and snorted. "You did not come all this way just to satisfy your curiosity and laugh knowing that the only one you didn't catch before you retired is currently panhandling for spare change. Why are you really here?"

The elder Vales looked at one another and laughed slightly before Gloria picked up where her husband left off. "Well, two things really. The first is somewhat obvious, the police, DSA, and several dozen independent vigilantes want to shut Madam Burrows down before she moves again and you are currently the only one who has been inside her Warrens and escaped. The other is that after we retired from the 'business' we both ended up advocating for a metabeing labor rights group... Stanley and those two girls have been worried about you. Bobby was able to tell them where they could find you, Trisha and Anastasia will be meeting us in a few minutes; they want to take you home with them."

Home... a hot meal, a sturdy roof over his head, and a soft bed shared with someone who cared for him. Guess everyone in this crazy adventure did get a happy ending after all. But his happiness was bittersweet, tainted by the realization that

somewhere out there was still a handful of people out there somewhere in the city that would love to take away what little joy he had anymore...