

Hey folks! So, here is January's short story. It's a self-contained story about a super criminal whose past has finally caught up with him. Some of the scenes are flashbacks, hopefully they will make sense.

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Breakdown by Teiran

The room was silent except for a soft, electrical humming sound. The buzz came from the only light in the room, which hung from a long cord directly over the table. At said table sat a husky named John Carby. The dark black and white furred dog had been stripped down to his boxer shorts and he sat there without moving, staring across the table at the two way mirror. His dark facial markings gave him the sinister appearance some husky's had, as if he were always angry even when he was smiling.

That didn't matter much, since right now John looked like hell. His face was puffy, even on his good side. Blood splattered the fur of his chest. His left leg had a splint on it because of a fracture, and if he tried to run it would probably get fully broken. Not that John would get far with his good leg shackled to the floor, and his mangled right paw wasn't going to be much help getting him out of that. They hadn't even bothered to restrain his ruined paw; they'd just cuffed his good paw to the table. The thick bandages on what left of his right paw was soaked through with blood, despite the tourniquet around his wrist, and occasionally a soft drip, drip sound broke the continuous hum of the light as blood dripped to the floor.

Of course, those are only the fresh injuries, John thought bitterly as he looked at his reflection in the two way mirror. His ragged stump of a left ear twitched, and he wished he could shift the eye patch covering his ruined right eye to a more comfortable position. No matter how long John had worn the patch, it still itched. Ten years, and the damn thing still itched. Dozens of scars and burn marks, patches where the fur would never grow again told anyone looking at the husky that this was not John's first time to be injured badly. This was probably the worst he'd ever been though. The husky couldn't even feel the pain in his arm anymore, it was just numb. He'd lost too much blood to feel it anymore.

John breathed slowly, trying to keep his balance to ensure he didn't fall over. They likely wouldn't even bother coming in and picking him up off the floor at this point. Not after the trick they had played with the water.

The soldiers who had captured him had brought in a water pitcher and a glass when he asked for something to drink, and set them both on the table just out of reach of his shackled paw. His ruined paw didn't have the strength to pour, much less pick the glass up, leaving him to drink only with his eyes. At very least they could have given him a cigarette.

Time passed slowly. There was no real air circulation, and no sound save the buzz of the light and the drip, drip, drip of blood. He didn't even bother thinking of escape. He tried to think of the last time he'd been in an interrogation room like this and couldn't. It had been so long.

It used to happen pretty often in his youth, though he never stayed in them for long. Once, John Carby had been known as "Breakdown", a notorious super criminal with a colorful costume and everything. That had all ended years ago though, and it had been so long since John had used his power to distort perceptions and the world around him publicly, that he the media even remembered him and who he used to be anymore.

Looks like somebody remembered him though.

The wind whipped past John Carby as he trudged to his truck in the Montana snow. The husky huffed gently; his breathe billowing in the air as he moved away from the barn. He always came out to check on the horses on a cold night like this, just to make sure they were doing alright and the heating system was working.

It wasn't strictly part of his job in the winter, but he did it anyway because three years ago, in the first six months he'd been at the Double U horse ranch, John had saved the whole barn after some fool horse had kicked a hole in the heater unit and shut the system down. It was down near to freezing inside the place by the time John found the busted heater, but he'd got there in time to repair it before any of the horses had been injured. The ranch boss had been mighty pleased by that.

Working on a horse ranch wasn't that interesting, but there wasn't much to do in Cloud, Montana beside ranch, drink, and fuck. Since he didn't have the face for the last anymore, he had more time for the first. At least the extra hours meant he had extra cash to drink with.

John snaked a paw into his pocket for his keys, and he was struck by how hard and coarse his paw pads were. Nearly a decade of ranch work had made his paws like leather, just like they had been back before he'd left his family farm and moved to St. Louis all those years ago. He missed having smooth paw pads. He missed smooth paws, strong arms, and being warm. He never felt warm anymore, even when sitting in front of a fire.

John sighed, his breath coming out like a warm cloud. His fingers flexed a moment and looked at the moon in the sky. It was a lonely night. He just wanted to drink and go to sleep. There was still a part of him that wanted more than anything, to have someone to go home to, for there to be the strong arms of another man to hold him. Instead there was only the hazy warmth of alcohol to drown that desire in. Another part of the husky itched though, a tingle at the back of his brain. It was a part of himself that John didn't make much use of any more, the part of him that had once controlled his power. It was the part

that allowed John to bend spatial perceptions, to warp the world around his body, and it was tingling now.

Someone out there in the snow was watching him.

What John did next, he did without thinking. It was almost an instinct. He took a step to the right, but shifted the world's perceptions so that he appeared to be in the same spot as he worked the key into the lock of his truck door.

There was a zip, a ping, and the glass of the door shattered as a bullet passed through where John's image was standing. "Shit!" John yelled as he dove to the side, scrambling around to the back of the truck as another shot of gunfire pinged into the truck's frame.

"Fuck, Fuck!" the husky yelled as he kept moving, but he warped the world to make it appear as if he were still crouching by the front of the truck. He scrambled to the other door, fumbling with the keys. Why hadn't he bought a new truck, one with automatic locks? His shotgun was in the passenger seat, and he could sense men racing towards him, focusing intently on his image in the falling snow.

John saw the men in snow white SWAT team uniforms as they raced out of the suddenly loud night. They had big guns, they had armor, and one viciously planted a heavy boot into the gate of his truck where he was supposed to be crouched. The passenger door opened, making heads turn as John grabbed his shotgun, and the husky let his power go wild. It washed out from him and slammed into the men, distorting the world around them into a nightmare. There were four of them, three canines of some sort and one feline slinking in behind him as John howled, "Come on you fuckers let's dance!" with anger, and fired back at them.

The banging report of his gun reverberated weirdly through the night, and each of John's attackers heard it differently. The dog furthest away thought it was right by his ear and he screamed in pain as the sound blew his eardrums out. Another much closer man didn't even hear it, but he felt the impact of the shot.

The canine fell, a load of buckshot blasted squarely into his protective vest. The man wouldn't die, he probably wouldn't even have a lead shot in him if the armor was good, but he sure as hell wasn't getting up again.

The landscape shifted around the soldiers into a confused mess as John growled and pumped the shotgun. Another soldier fell with a resounding boom as John unloaded his second round into his midsection. The remaining dog and cat rushed at him, or at least where they thought he was, shouting something in code into their helmet microphones as the world warped around them.

John swung the gun like a club, smashing it into the head of the dog as he ran by, knocking him out and maybe even cracking the man's skull. He fell into his old combat

stance, the moves coming easily to him even though it had been years since he had last used them in anything but a bar brawl.

The cat put more of a fight, closing his eyes and using his feline senses against the husky's power. He blocked John's blow, nearly spinning the shotgun out of the husky's paws even though it cost him a broken arm. The feline yowled and clawed at the husky with his good arm, but John smacked him hard in the face with the butt of the gun. "That all you idiots got?" The husky shouted, raising the gun above his head with a howl of rage to club the fallen cat unconscious.

There was the crack of a gunshot, and the shotgun left John's paw as pain jolted down the husky's right arm. It was the kind of pain John had felt only twice before in his life, when he had lost his eye and then his ear. The husky stumbled away from the fallen feline, clutching at his hand as the white powdery snow was splattered with red blood. He'd been shot right through the palm, and two of his fingers were gone, just gone.

John howled in rage and pain, and his arm felt icy cold and hot at the same time as he saw four more men rushing towards him. Two more felines, a horse, and a rabbit that was carrying a big rifle all came rushing out of the snowstorm. The pain and anger pushed John's power to the limit, and the husky warped the world around himself to a shocking degree. The cat and the rabbit fell to the ground when they got close, their bodies shaking as John's power assaulted them so hard that they had seizures. John howled as the other two men came at him screaming, and with a shout he shouldered checked the running tabby cat. Touch amplified the husky's distortions, and the cat fell, his body jerking as John's power overwhelmed him. John kicked him hard in the fork as he convulsed, blood spraying everywhere from the husky's paw.

The horse charged him, slamming a fist into the husky's face, hitting John squarely into the husky's good eye. The heavy right hook pushed the husky back, and John gasped in pain again as the horse kicked him hard on the shin. John felt the click as his leg bone cracked, and he fell heavily as it gave out. John reeled as he lay on the ground, stunned and bleeding everywhere, clutching his wrist to try and stop himself from bleeding to death. He could hear the crackle of the horse's radio over the wind. "God damn it Sarge!" The horse raised a paw to his ear, "What the hell was that! He's a wash out! How did he take the whole squad down?! Is he neutralized?!"

"Yes sir," the horse muttered. The last thing John's one eye saw was the horse's fist coming towards his face.

The door to the interrogation room opened and the sudden noise startled the husky. John jumped at the sound of so many voices, and the movement sent a bolt of agony up his arm and down his leg. John gasped and his vision swam, and he had to force himself to be utterly still too dull the pain.

A man in a black suit entered swiftly and shut the door with speed and the heavy click of a complicated lock. Before John had even stopped seeing black spots from the pain, the man had removed the cuffs from his left hand and sat down at the table. The dark suited Dalmatian who was suddenly sitting across the table stared at John with hard eyes. The sight of the man sent a chill down John's spine, and he wasn't sure whether the cold feeling was from fear or the pain.

John blinked, his mouth opening slowly. "Crick?" He breathed in a hoarse whisper. What in the world was Special Agent Crick of the Superbeing Affairs Department doing here? The man was in charge of a bureau of the FBI for gods sakes. There was no way he was involved with these people, was there? John tried to swallow, but the husky's throat had gone completely dry. If Crick was behind this, he was in far worse trouble than he had thought.

"Hello Breakdown," the Dalmatian said calmly, as he poured a glass of water and set it down in front of the husky.

John winced at the name, but he shakily gripped the glass, raised his paw, and sipped the water. It was still ice cold and hurt the husky's throat going down. He drank it all thirstily, and set the glass down. "Don't call me that." John said, his voice coming back some. "That's not who I am anymore."

"That's a shame." Agent Crick said coolly, as he refilled the glass. "Because that's the name they're charging you under." Silence hung in the air for a while as Agent Crick watched the husky drink again.

"What the hell are you doing here, Crick?" John whispered. "Are you the one who did this? Were those your men?" The husky wished he wasn't so hurt. He would love to pound the dog's smug face.

"No." Agent Crick said calmly, "and it's Director Crick, Breakdown. You can thank the Army Special Forces for today's excitement."

John nearly spat, "The god damn Army? Do you think I'm stupid? They don't do raids on American soil Crick!"

"They do now." Crick said calmly, "and it's Director, John. It's my title." The Dalmatian's eyes flashed as he leaned towards the wounded husky's face. "And you will use it, or I will leave you in this hell hole to die of your wounds and you'll never see the damn light of day again."

John blinked, his good paw feebly setting the glass of water down slowly. "Alright, Director," the husky muttered bitterly. "What the fuck do you want?"

"You, Breakdown," the director of Superhuman Affairs Department of the FBI said calmly, "and what you can do. You do remember your old life, yes?"

“Oh yes.” the husky said bitterly. Every damn day, he thought.

John's first robbery had almost happened without incident. In fact, if that bank guard hadn't walked into him at just the wrong moment, it would have happened without anybody noticing it at all.

It was all just a bad stroke of luck. Just as John was exiting the safe behind the bank manager, cloaked by his perception altering powers and with a big sack of cash in hand, a guard came around the corner from behind them and ran smack into John's back.

Touch was the one sensation John couldn't cloak himself from. All five senses of the person who walked into him freaked out as the husky's power tried to override the sensation of running into someone invisible, but the sense of touch was simply too solid for him to truly override. It really confused people who were unprepared for it though, and they often had a seizure.

John laughed as the ram that had bumped into him fell shrieking like a girl, causing the bank manager to turn, and for just a second the ferret saw John properly before the husky literally hit him in the face with his own bank's money. The blow sent the thin ferret tumbling to the ground in shock. The husky howled with laughter at the look on the banker's face, and let his power relax a bit so he could move faster. It meant people could see him, but his costume looked so colorfully bright and garish that it was painful to even look at, especially with the perception altering effects of his power.

John dashed down the security hallway and out into the lobby, which caused the crowd there to begin screaming. It was pretty natural now to assume that a brightly clothed man holding a sack with a dollar sign on it was a super criminal with some kind of dangerous power, and John grinned happily as they scattered out of his way.

The time for secrecy was over, and it didn't matter that he'd been found. He already had a sack filled to the brim with stacks of neatly wrapped 100 dollar bills. It was close to half a million in all. John had spent weeks making sure he would be hitting the right bank to make this worth the risk. No sense in doing this for nothing right?

There was a boom and whoosh of air as the hero Swiftwolf arrived, throwing open the front doors of the bank with enough force to make the room's air pressure change made everyone's ears pop. "Well, well the dashing hero! What, were you down the street waiting for your moment?" John shouted. His power amplified the sound, and John grinned at the way Swift just flicked his ears back while the rest of the bank was clapping paws over their ears at the force of the sound.

"You're new." The wolf said calmly as he stared at the husky. "Trying for the worst costume of the year award?"

John held his arms out, "What, you don't like tie dye? I know it's a break from the traditional spandex tights, but I gotta be me."

"So who are you, a color blind hippie?" Swiftwolf said, his paws flexing. John knew he was getting ready to charge, the only reason Swiftwolf hadn't already rushed him was because the husky was new and Swift didn't know what he could do. Or maybe he was in shock over the choice of John's outfit.

John had to admit his clothing was awful to behold. It was intentionally so. He'd gotten a fur tight muscle shirt and tight jeans that showed off his muscles and butt, and then given the whole thing a swirl of gaudy colors centered on his chest. A domino mask completed the disguise, dyed the same colors as his clothes. "Just trying to brighten things up a bit," John said with a waggle of his ears and a grin.

"Well you certainly did that. Neon is so your color." Swiftwolf quipped, the sarcasm making John smile as the wolf and husky slowly circled each other.

"Well fast colors for the fast hero. I wanted to impress." The husky grinned evilly, and John knew he looked evil too. His mask was in the same shape as the black fur on his face, a half mask that made him look like he was permanently glaring and angry. "But since you're not impressed, maybe I should turn it up a notch?" John narrowed his eyes, and the colors on his clothes began to spin, changing and swirling clockwise in a psychedelic display.

Swiftwolf tensed as the husky's costume began to change. The swirling colors looked hypnotic, and the wolf shielded his eyes quickly to prevent John's power from affecting him. Not that John could actually hypnotize someone like that, but the husky used that moment of distraction to run. He left his swirling image behind, a fading but psychedelic afterglow that seemed to rush Swiftwolf, while John himself dashed toward the door invisible and silent.

John was out the door when Swiftwolf rushed his image. He laughed as the wolf gasped in shock when he met no resistance at all from the husky's illusion and nearly ran into the wall behind him. John was most of the way into the street when Swiftwolf came rushing out the door looking for him, and the super-fast wolf had just enough luck that he crashed right into John's back. The husky barked and stumbled as Swiftwolf barreled past him, his power of distortion briefly faltering as he stumbled. Suddenly the wolf was on him again, grabbing him around the chest. The husky felt a thrill as strong arms grabbed him, picked him up, and began carrying him away.

"Time for you to get some fashion tips from the cops," Swiftwolf said into his ear as they ran, holding the husky against his chest, bag full of cash dangling from the husky's paw. The streets of St. Louis were rushing past them both in a blur.

"We're sorry, but the Swiftwolf taxi service is suffering a breakdown today!" John shouted over the wind as he put his paws on the wolf's chest, and pushed his power to the fullest. John's power made sure everyone in a block heard his words as the wolf rushed through the St. Louis streets, and the dog's distortion field sent the super-fast wolf careening out of control. Swiftwolf tried to control it, but John poured his power into the wolf, making Swiftwolf's senses dance and weave like crazy, trying to force Swiftwolf to let him go. In retrospect, John reflected that it had been a bad idea to make the man who was carrying you at a hundred miles an hour to lose his ability to see straight. Instead of getting free, John sent them hurtling head on into a very real taxi cab.

John saw the car coming, stopped using his power so the wolf would avoid it, and knew as he did it was too late. John saw the wolf's eyes widen in shock and the arms around him tense. As they rushed at the oncoming car, Swiftwolf turned his body to shield John, slamming into the car himself. The husky always remembered that.

Swiftwolf's powers protected John and the white wolf even though the impact crumpled the front of the taxi cab like a tin can. The white wolf dropped the husky, completely stunned by the crash, and John ran.

Swiftwolf stood up, tried to follow, and then sagged against the ruined taxicab as the world spun around him in a way that had nothing to do with John's power. As John dashed across the street, power pulsing around him, the street went crazy. Brakes squealed, cars swerved, and the road became one giant traffic accident. John got to the side of the road, ducked into a store, and switched his power off completely, leaving himself dressed in just a simple black t-shirt and blue jeans. Then he walked away slowly from the chaos, the bag of money invisible in his paws.

Swiftwolf looked around in confusion, trying to spot the psychedelic canine, but he couldn't see him anywhere.

The twenty car pile-up made the news that evening and earned John his super criminal nickname. "Breakdown"

"You want what?" John muttered at Crick. He tilted his head in confusion, but the movement nearly upset his balance. The husky settled back against the chair he was sitting in, as the interrogation room spun around him. There was a long silence as the pain from his wounds overrode his senses. Maybe this was how the people he messed up with his power felt.

"I want Breakdown." The words seemed far away, and John opened his eyes slowly. The Dalmatian's spotted fur made it hard to focus on him.

"What could you possibly want me for?" The husky whispered. "I'm a washed up super-criminal." The husky tried to straighten up some more. "You can't even get a conviction out of me anymore. I ran out the clock on all my old crimes years ago."

"Yes, you did. It's been nine years and five months since your last crime, barring the trumped up assault charges the Army is trying to hold you under. You never even made it to trial back in the old days, and after the incident with Maddox, no one bothered to try in you abstention. There aren't even any outstanding warrants on you anymore. You are free and clear as far as the law is concerned." The Dalmatian smirked slightly. "But I don't want you for a conviction. I want you because I can't convict you," the Dalmatian smirked at the suddenly worried look on the husky's face. "I want to offer you a job."

The husky grunted, the closest he could make to a laugh right now without passing out. "You can't be serious."

"Deadly so," the Dalmatian said calmly.

"You would never let a criminal become a SAD Agent. You've never even let a super hero become one." John said, coughing roughly. The pain made his vision swim again.

"No, I never have," the Dalmatian said with a grin. "Before now, every super being in America has come in one of two flavors. Heroes, who keep their secret identity hidden from me and the world for their own good, and criminals or villains whose identity ends up coming out only in court." The dog's smirk widened. "And now, finally, there's something new."

"Me," John said hoarsely.

"You," Crick said evenly. "A super-being whose name and identity is public knowledge, but who isn't a criminal. At least, not anymore anyway," the Dalmatian gave him an almost sinful smile. "How's it feel to be special, John Carby?"

John frowned, the black fur on his face mimicking his unhappy glare for once. It felt like a setup, and the husky did not like setups. That's how he'd ended up in Cloud Montana.

The plan had sounded like such a good one. The idea was for several super criminals to pool their resources, just like the Extraordinaries had done as heroes. The Crime Collective, a group of eight super criminals that had fought Swiftwolf for years pooled their resources and powers, and for a while they were succeeding. Over the course of a few months they had been hard at work confusing and distracting the heroes, especially Swiftwolf, coordinating their efforts like never before. With each crime they got more press, more money, and importantly stole more technology to boost their powers.

More than that, they were beginning to act as a group. They were becoming friends. Titanus, the stolid and immovable raccoon had become something of a leader too them, a rough and gruff mother figure. Buzzer and the wolf Living code were having a fling as the spaniel helped Code build some machine he had been working on. Even Mistress Hunt and Market Goblin were getting closer to admitting their feelings to each other, and they had evidently been going around and around for years. Hunt had tearfully admitted that she loved him to Breakdown one night when they both got roaring drunk, and the husky trusted her enough to admit he was gay. Even the youngest of the bunch had found a place. Zipzap had become something of a mascot for the Crime Collective, even if the pup was pretty lame as a gangster.

Eventually, they decided to hit the Parthenon Labs building in down town St. Louis. The lab had machines which would augment several of their powers. It was also a high profile target. Cutting edge technology a lot of money, advanced security systems they had all tried for it once in their careers. It was the gold standard of St. Louis criminal activity

It all fell apart when the blast went off.

"Why are you doing this?" Market Goblin shouted as lightning arced over the area. The ferret barely ducked an arc of lightning that leapt from a power line behind him and raced toward Living Code. The crushed and broken Parthenon Labs building smoked as Living Code raised his paws into the air in triumph, drawing in the electrical power of the city, of the state, of the whole world in fact. Living Code laughed a full throated and shrill laugh as his body wavered between solid matter and sparking electricity.

"To become a god you plebeian fool!" shouted the wolf his voice sparking, "Finally, after years of work I am near ascension!" The blue spandex clad wolf crackled with energy, the electricity crawling over his white fur as he floated in the air above the prone Swiftwolf. When the super-fast wolf had arrived, Living Code had used his machine combined with what they had come to steal to blast the hero, jump starting some kind of cascade inside Code's own body. The rest of the collective was just starting to ask what he had done when the wolf's bomb had exploded.

"You'll destroy the city," Lux shouted, "My scans are showing heavy distortions and electrical energy surges. You could cause the city to utterly collapse!" The small white mouse ducked behind a wall as Living Code raked her position with lightning with a casual wave of his paw.

"Not to mention the destruction of the entire global computer network and communication systems," growled Mistress Hunt, and the lithe calico cat clenched her fists. "My mother is in a hospital, you'll kill her!"

Breakdown shuddered as he felt his fur standing on end. There was the wail of police sirens in the distance as he forced himself to sit up. He looked at the wolf's smirking face,

"But you know all that don't you?" Breakdown said calmly, feeling strangely detached from the fight.

"Of course," said the wolf with a malicious grin as reporters began to flash pictures of the floating wolf. People were beginning to wonder where their hero was. Where was Swiftwolf? Breakdown tried not to think about his prone body below in the wreckage. Had he even survived the bomb?

ZipZap hadn't. God he was what sixteen? How could this happen? The poor kid, his power should have protected him, but he was missing half of his torso now. He could reflect inertia if he knew it was coming, but he hadn't expected Living Code to set off a bomb right next to him. He hadn't had enough time to react. Breakdown shuddered and looked away from the poor dog's body. Breakdown hoped ZipZap hadn't had time to feel it either.

Breakdown glanced around. Buzzer was kneeling nearby Living Code, crying and cradling her broken arm as she looked up at the wolf. Her fur was singed from the blow he'd dealt her when she'd tried to stop him as he set off the bomb.

Breakdown staggered to his feet, and his head swam painfully. He felt blood dripping down his face from his ear, which burned with pain. A momentary touch told him his ear was just a stump.

Titanis flexed her fingers, "What is this some kind of scam? Going to blackmail the city? What? Whatever it is, the Crime Collective wants in!"

Living code barked with laughter, "Foolish little girl." Lightning arced out from his paw smacking into the large raccoon woman's chest. Titanus screamed in pain, the normally invulnerable raccoon's fur burning as she fell to the ground shuddering in agony, "The collective was a joke. All of you simpering fools coming under my command thinking you had formed a team to defeat Swiftwolf once in for all, to commit your petty stupid crimes! Hardly! You were all a distraction, a red herring to make him look the other way, to make the Extraordinaries look the other way. You idiots were my pawns you've spent months distracting him, harrying him, tiring him as I worked. Now, my enemy is at my feet. My ascension to god hood is at hand! I'll finally rip the life from his body and become the god I was always meant to be!"

"Like Hell," Mistress Hunt said her psychic arrows forming and firing off like a rapid barrage. She wasn't playing around, they were meant to kill. They failed miserably however, either passing through Living Code's fluctuating form or being deflected by his arcing lightning. The wolf gave a malicious smirk, raised his paw, and fired a bolt of lightning. She wasn't fast enough to dodge, and when it hit her, Hunt screamed. The stench of smoking flesh filled the air and her body dropped to the ground.

"EVELYN!!!!" Market Goblin ran to her smoking corpse screaming. The ferret grabbed her shoulder, desperate for any hope of reviving her. Market held her tightly. Years of

fooling around, tempestuous dates, crime sprees, and double crosses ended there on the cracked flagstones.

"He's not playing around," Breakdown whispered to himself and he raised his paw, "Gloves off people! Take him out!" A burst of brilliant, psychedelic color ran from the husky's paws right at the wolf. The husky strained himself pushing his metal powers to hurt the wolf, "Have some seizures you jack ass!"

Living Code just giggled in amusement, "Idiot," he sneered and raised a paw.

Before lightening could hit him Breakdown felt familiar arms encircle his chest, a tight firm grip on his body making him gasp, and then a tug as the wind rushing by him, the world spinning. Then he was on solid ground again outside the city. Breakdown looked around at the rest of the Crime Collective. They were all there except Code and, he shuddered, the dead. Swiftwolf was standing in front of him, "Thanks John. You distracted him long enough for me to evacuate the area."

The wolf turned around and looked at the city a bright blue glow nearly blocking out the sunlight as sirens wailed and the city trembled. Fires were starting all across the city as the electrical grid overloaded. Breakdown looked at the white wolf in front of him, "Where are you going?"

"I have to stop him."

"No," Breakdown reached out a paw, "Please let us help. We helped him do this. Let me fix this."

Swiftwolf looked at him with a wry smile, "Breaks, after this lets you and me get a beer okay? You guys aren't heavy enough hitters. You want to help, get some civilians clear. Me, I'm the only one who can stop Aaron now."

"Aaron," Market Goblin looked up from Hunt's blackened body. "You know Living Code's name?" The ferret was mad with grief, and there was murder in his eyes.

"We're brothers," the wolf said coldly now, "I have to go. He needs to be stopped. Help out, stay here, run, I don't care. I'll look for you lot later. Right now I have to do something kind of important."

The white wolf zoomed away before anyone could say anything else. Breakdown was already reaching out a paw again, his eyes filling with tears. There was something in Swiftwolf's voice that filled Breakdown with dread. The husky felt the whisper on his lips and tried to hold in the words.

Then a flash, a brilliant glow that made everyone else turn away as a piercing light flooded the city. John stared into the glow, his mouth open as the light blinded him. A

loud boom echoed across the city as the glow vanished, and Breakdown could hear windows shattering across the city. John fell to his knees, the ground shuddering underneath him as the shockwave passed. John said it then, said the words he'd tried to tell Swiftwolf a dozen times. "I love you," Breakdown said, but no one heard it in the din.

"If I'm so special to you, Director Crick, then why did a dozen Green Berets jump me on my farm?" John's throat hurt, and his good leg was shaking now. At least now he could put his arms on the table for support. God, John thought, staring at the bandaged thing that had been his paw. Two fingers and a thumb remained, but a big chunk of his palm was missing. Even if the tunicate hadn't starved what was left of blood, too much was gone for the remaining fingers to be useable. He was going to end up with a stump after this.

"Are you going to pass out?" Crick said calmly. "You've lost a lot of blood there."

"Not yet." John swallowed again, head spinning. "But soon, so be quick."

"Good, because I only want to say this once," the Dalmatian said evenly. "They attacked you because they figured you'd be an easy target. An out of shape, out of practice, ex-super criminal who had given himself lung cancer sounded like a cake walk for their first target."

John grinned a bit through the pain. It was true. Ten years of constant smoking had not been a good idea. "You've been following me, Director?"

"Not exactly, I was following them." The Dalmatian said evenly.

The husky didn't look up from the table as he thought about that for a moment. He'd dropped off even the unceasingly ruthless radar of Jasper Crick. "What do you mean first target?" John asked, but Crick seemed to ignore him.

"The SAD needed to catch this military operation in action to get real proof it existed." The Dalmatian tapped his fingers on the table top as if thinking. "I expect they followed you home from Swift's funeral."

"Military action against a private citizen on American soil is treason, isn't it?" John whispered, as some of his older memories stirred.

"See? I knew you would understand. Your years as an army grunt are still with you I see." The Dalmatian said smugly. "They've been working outside the law and beyond their constitutional mandate for some time now. You're their first act of real treason though."

John winced a bit, his breathe ragged. "So why are you involved?" The husky said.

"Because they're in my territory," Crick said firmly. "A faction of the army has decided that super beings represent too large a threat to the country for it to be dealt by civilian law enforcement. They've decided to take them out without official approval, and that makes them my business." The dog watched John carefully. "They've also decided that people like you are just too valuable to waste by killing." The Dalmatian folded his hands in front of him. "So tell me, what kind of program would you call a secret group of captured villains who were forced to do the army's dirty work?"

"One hell of a problem for you," the husky muttered. "It'd be a damn suicide squad," John stopped, and the husky stared at the Dalmatian. "That's why they took me alive, but didn't care about how badly they shot me up." The husky tried to wave his injured paw, but couldn't lift it easily. "They just need me alive, not in any shape to work for them long term."

The Dalmatian just grinned, "I knew you would understand your position." He picked up and set his briefcase on the table. Inside was a slim diamond shaped device, a big syringe full of white liquid, and a stack of papers. "Of course your present condition will make my counter offer hard to make." The Dalmatian set the paper in front of John along with a pen. "So you're getting a signing bonus to fix all that." The dog said evenly.

John took a drag from his cigarette and blew a puff as he considered his glass of whiskey. The bar was smoky and lonely. It was late on a week night, and most people were just down for the count. That was how he wanted it right now. He just needed to be alone.

John would have continued like that until late in the morning, but an otter slipped up into the booth he occupied, uninvited and unexpected. He smiled at John, in a friendly way "Hello John."

John looked up and tried to focus, tilting his head to keep his muzzle out of the way. Even now he was still getting used to only having one good eye, and he wasn't sure he knew the otter. The otter seemed to know him though because he was grinning as he said, "You're a hard man to find you know."

"Maybe I like it that way," the husky said simply, looking back at his drink.

"Maybe so," said the otter, "I just thought I'd slap together a reason to see you."

That was a code phrase John knew well enough. He looked at the otter more closely, and said quietly, "Rigs?"

The otter nodded, "Frankie this time. Know why I am here?"

The husky shook his head, "Not in the slightest. Care to shove off? I'm trying to enjoy my whiskey."

Rigger looked about the empty bar, "Yes, I can see I'm really interrupting something important. Look I'm here because I have a job I thought you might be interested in."

John gave him a dirty look, "I'm not."

"You haven't even heard it," the otter looked hurt for a moment and then said, "Look I'll buy you the next round. Just tell me, why Clouds, Montana?"

"It isn't St. Louis," said John simply enough looking down at his glass.

"No it isn't," the otter nodded and then he looked at the husky's scarred face and missing eye. "Damn, so Maddox really did stab your eye out. I'd always assumed that was just a rumor. That why you came out here?"

"Maddox, Code, everything else," John sighed shaking his head, not wanting to remember his cowardice during the events of that day or after. Or seeing Zipzap and Mistress Hunt die, and then Swiftwolf running off into... No, he wouldn't think about it. He took deep swig of his booze.

"I know what Living Code did was bad," Rigger began to say.

John slammed his fist hard on the table and growled loudly, stopping the otter, "Bad? BAD?!? The fucker betrayed us." His voice grew quieter, trying to avoid catching the few patrons' attention, "He killed a kid, a good woman, and nearly torched a city. If Swiftwolf hadn't, if he hadn't..."

The husky stopped talking and looked at the otter as he tried to collect his thoughts. Rigger nodded slowly, "I know. I was in town actually. Lux filled me in on the details, but it's been a year Breaks. Code is gone, isn't it time to get back out there?"

"What's the point?" asked John morosely.

"You were good at it," Rigger said simply

"I'm done," said John, "don't come around again or else. Tell everyone to leave me be."

"John," Rigger's voice was more emotive more caring as he reached out a paw but before he could touch it the husky withdrew his paw.

"I'm done," John said, trying not to think about those strong arms grabbing him, holding him tight. A warm voice laughing and him joining in as they both enjoyed the thrill of the chase. There had been a joy in racing through the city and of being caught by those strong

arms. He couldn't think about it. John sighed and looked at the otter squarely in the muzzle, "I'm just done."

Rigger watched him for a moment, studying him. Then he glanced at the bottle of whiskey. "How many have you had John?"

The black and white husky just shrugged. Already half the bottle was gone.

"Well, at least let me share a drink with you." Rigger said, smiling slightly over his glasses. "For old times' sake, if nothing else."

"No," the husky muttered, looking down at his glass.

"Not even to toast the fallen?" The otter said quietly.

With a grunt, John motioned for another glass from the bartender, and poured Rigger a glass of the whiskey. They drank to ZipZap, and talked about how the boy never took anything seriously enough. How he always looked so silly in those gangster outfits he wore, not matter how expensive they were. How his parents had been crushed at his funeral.

They drank to Mistress Hunt, who they had both respected. Rigger told John how Market goblin had quit too, after burying Evelyn under her real name in their home town. He was in hiding somewhere, and Rigger hadn't been able to find him.

They talked briefly about Buzzer, who Rigger knew had escaped the mental ward the authorities had put her in. She was really messed up by Code's betrayal, since they had been sleeping together for months before hand, and the otter was sure she wasn't in the game anymore.

They did not talk about Swiftwolf. Rigger had almost toasted the hero along with the fallen criminals, and thought better of it when he saw John tense as they reached the topic of the white wolf.

Eventually, when John was so tipsy he was swaying slightly and he had forgotten entirely about his cigarette, Rigger asked, "You loved the game. Why leave it?"

John stared at the glowing tip of his cigarette. "There isn't anything left for me... Frankie." the husky added, eventually remembering the otter's false name.

"Nothing left? You used to love it John. You would plan the best stuff. That gig at the rock concert that hinged on you crossing the stage mid act with your power on so everybody had a trip? You can't tell me that doesn't still excite you." Rigger's smile was broad, and while he was a bit tipsy he had not started out drunk like the husky had.

"The thrill of the chase?" John sneered, "What's the point when I'm not going to be caught by him?"

"There are plenty of heroes to test yourself against. I should know." Rigger said evenly.

"I don't care, Rig. It isn't the same. It ain't... it weren't about the thrill." the husky stopped, swallowed, his head spinning. "I can't go back. If I did, it ain't gonna be him that grabs me at the end."

Rigger watched the man across from him, the way the dog ears drooped and he hung his head. "You mean Swiftwolf? Look John, he was a great guy, a fine opponent, but that's..." the otter squinted for a moment, his eyes narrowed at the way the husky swallowed a half full tumbler of whiskey. "But he was more than that to you wasn't he?"

John nodded, his head weaving as he did so. "I asked to help and he said no, said I wasn't big time enough." John was openly crying now, and Rigger was glad the husky had chosen a secluded corner of the bar. "He saved me, and then he said we should get a beer. He asked me out on a date, and then he went and died, and I loved him. I could a helped him..." the husky pressed a paw across his good eye, his voice breaking as he just sort of slumped forward on the table.

"Wait, you and Swiftwolf?" Rigger blinked in shock. John Carby, the infamous Breakdown, was gay? The otter swallowed a big gulp of his whiskey.

"No he, no... I never told him." John's voice was muffled as he pounded the table, his arm covering his face as he tried to hide his tears, but like a damn that's burst he couldn't stop them.

Rigger blinked again, shaking his head. He poured some more whiskey, drank it, and shivered as it burned down his throat. He'd never actually known someone who was gay. Except, he had all this time, hadn't he? Breakdown had been one of the better rogues, a man he really respected and enjoyed working with. He'd even come to Rigger's rescue once, busting the otter out of custody just before a trial. Breakdown was as true a friend as a man like Rigger could have. He'd loved the game, and now Rigger knew why he'd stayed in St. Louis. The otter stared at the empty glass. "So you were sweet on Swift?"

John looked up, seeming to realize what he was saying to the otter, the truth he was admitting. He looked down at his paws, but there was no way to hide the full story now, "Yes."

Rigger sat back and surveyed the black and white husky in that oddly aloof kind way the otter looked sometimes before he said, "You realize John that it is a little messed up to pine for a guy who brought you into the police."

John shrugged heavily and his head spun, "Frankie, let me tell you, if something works you don't question it. I mean hell he was the best out there. He was funny and always willing to laugh at my jokes."

"You're awful puns, you mean," the otter said with a grin, his whiskers spreading out.

"Them too, he could take a joke. He knew a well-crafted scheme when he saw one. He was kind too and just. He didn't play rough unless you threatened a bystander." The husky sighed. "He was better to me than most of the guys I ever dated, even if I never told him how I felt. He treated me as if he cared about me, even though we were always on opposite sides of the law."

"He had that quality," said Rigger with a smile remembering the few times he had taken on the super-fast wolf and then said more seriously, "But you're not to blame. Living Code was insane. There was a reason I never worked with the guy. He was always wound way to tight."

"I never told him," John said, "Don't you get it, Rigs? I never told him how I felt, and he saved me, and the city, and now he's gone. I can't go back to it."

The sheer heart ache in John's voice made Rigger bow his head avoiding his gaze. The pathos was palpable. John sounded the same way Rigger felt about her... The otter frowned. He couldn't think that. He had made his choice. He looked at John and the damage on the canine's face, "There are some great people out there. Maybe you should look for someone not super."

"With all this?" asked John pointing at his eye patch and ear stub. "Besides they wouldn't be Swift."

"You didn't even know his real name," countered Rigger.

"I don't know yours, and you're the only super I've ever told about all this." John paused and said, "Well besides Hunt, but she's been keeping secrets really well lately."

"She always did," Rigger nodded sagely and then looking at the husky closely, "Alright I guess I understand John, but don't shut your friends out. Me, Lux, and the rest, we can be there for you. The heroes have the Extraordinaries, why can't we have a few beers?"

"You can come." John took a deep breathe, "But no one else. I don't want anybody to know where I am, ever. You hear me?" The husky jabbed a finger at the smiling otter. "I, I ain't coming back. And I don't want to see the folks I'm leaving behind. Hunt's dead, Market ain't the kind of guy to understand this sort of thing, and..." the husky stopped, his one eye closing. "And I don't want be reminded. You can come, 'Frankie', because I know you'll be careful not to lead anybody to me. I'm making a break, my final one, even if I can't make peace with what happened."

The otter watched the scarred dog pour more booze, and pulled the cup away from him. "Why not?" Rigger said quietly.

"Because I helped cause it," Breakdown said softly, staring right at the otter. "I helped Code kill Zip and Hunt, and all those people. I made it so Swift had to die to stop him." The husky's voice was wracked with pain, "I helped kill Swift, and I ain't ever looking back."

"Signing bonus? So you seriously want me to work for you?" John was incredulous, and his outburst led to a wracking cough, the kind of cough someone with lung cancer fears, and someone who is leaking blood and has unset broken bones is going to regret.

The husky doubled forward in pain, shaking, and Crick waited for him to regain his composure. It took a while.

"Yes John, a job." the Dalmatian said finally. "The first of its kind. You will be the first official, openly super powered FBI agent. No lies or games over your identity or position. No secret army like the damn Pentagon wants. No secret assassins like the CIA keeps trying and failing to make. You won't even be assigned to the SAD. You'll be just a normal agent on the official FBI payroll without any special duties who just happens to have a super power." The Dalmatian's grin was devilish. "Not a program or a shadowed game of cloak and dagger, just an agent."

John watched the Dalmatian cautiously. "This is a trick. You have to have something up your sleeve."

"Of course I do," and now the Dalmatian sounded incredulous. "I intent to use you as a stick in the eye of every conspiracy to undermine the culture of super heroes that has grown here in America," Crick said coolly. "That I helped grow, in fact. You will be a thorn in the paw of every man who wants an army of supers under military control. I want you to become a normal agent so I can use you as an excuse to kill off secret programs like the one that attacked you today."

John laughed a bit, his chest shaking, "And you're gonna do it by getting yourself a pet super. Prove we're just normal people; prove nobody else knows how to deal with them but you." The husky grinned, and his facial markings made it a very evil look.

"Exactly," The dog said quietly, and his small thin smile and pleasant face was more evil than the husky's scowling face ever was.

"And you expect those army bastards to let you just walk me out of here as proof of their treason?" John said evenly.

"No, Breakdown. I expect you to sign your posting orders and escort your new Director safely out of hostile territory," the Dalmatian said with a smirk. Crick shifted slightly, his jacket falling open slightly to reveal the gun he had on his belt, "With my help of course."

"I ain't in any shape to stand up, much less fight my way past a couple dozen highly trained army specialists." John said bitterly.

"I know. I said there would be a signing bonus." The Dalmatian picked up the syringe, tapped it, and then picked up the little diamond shaped device, turned it over, and showed the husky the stylized Q on the other side.

"Oh god," John breathed as he recognized the thing. "Not one of those." This was going to hurt, a lot.

John's truck bounced on the rough road to his home. It was a shack out along the back of the horse ranch he rented from the Double U owners. The husky pulled alongside the shack, put the truck in park, and then leaned forward to light a cigarette. He hadn't been smoking much lately, but as he flicked his lighter he tensed. There was a light on inside his bedroom.

The husky turned his head, his one good eye staring at the light coming thru the drawn curtains. John adjusted his eye patch but he knew, knew, he'd turned the lights off before he left, which meant someone was inside his house. John's paw automatically reached for his shotgun which was tucked in the wheel well of his passenger seat.

Then John saw the motorcycle parked alongside the porch, and he relaxed, a grin spreading across his face. Carter was home early. The farm dog wasn't supposed to be back for another two days, and the idea he was back early made John's tail wag.

John put the cigarette away and leapt out his truck, grinning as he bounded up the steps and unlocked his front door. The husky's curled tail wagged as he fumbled with his keys in the cold Montana night. After losing his eye and ear John never thought he'd be with anybody else. He just stopped looking, but somehow Carter had found him.

They'd known each other nearly a year. It had started with a few one night stands in the local bar where he and the other closeted gay men of the area went to drink. Fervent glances in the smoky bar, and then stolen moments in the bathroom had led to a night of passion at John's place, and then another and another. John had been shocked that the young athletic dog had wanted him, and he certainly wanted the quiet, introverted canine. Carter never said much, he did things rather than talk about them. He was sure of himself and passionate, and John loved being underneath Carter and falling asleep beside him. They'd fallen into an easy understanding, and soon enough John asked him to move in with him.

Now, John had lived with the rugged younger dog for six months and he was finding he was actually happy like this. His life felt more complete than it had since he left his old life. Coming home to Carter felt right.

Carter wasn't Swiftwolf of course. John knew it was unfair to compare the young man to his memories of the hero. It helped that Carter was so different from Swift that John couldn't really measure them against each other. Carter wasn't glib or playful like the lightning fast wolf had been; he didn't make jokes or smile much. He was thoughtful in a quiet way, caring without making a show of it.

Carter was subdued but always receptive in bed. He had a few hang ups about being the bottom, but he always made sure John finished with him when he was on top. He also looked past John's disfigurements and saw him as normal, which meant more to the husky than John had realized. Things worked.

John knew the ranch boss suspected they were more than just friends, because the old bull running the Double U had asked in an offhand way how they were 'getting on' as the bull put it. John had answered 'Fine' and it was true. He and Carter were doing well.

Carter was a real farm dog, a young mutt who had worked ranches his whole life. John knew that kind of man well, he'd grown up in the country, and if he hadn't moved to St. Louis when he turned twenty John likely would have turned out exactly like the gruff, often silent dog. Men like Carter, masculine and quiet, had always been a draw for John.

Now, he and the farm dog lived a quiet life together in the husky's little shack whenever the dog wasn't doing work for hire on another ranch. John hoped the dog would get taken on full time at the Double U, but for now the farm dog was gone for a week or two every month, and the husky's heart leapt every time Carter got back.

John opened the door saying, "Hey Carter I didn't expect you..." stopped when he saw the housecat sitting on his couch in the gloom. The male tabby cat was young and thin, and was wearing a heavy motorcycle jacket. He had that wasted teenager look that so many young people in Montana had. He also jumped like John had just stepped on his tail. "Who are you?" John said carefully, as he sniffed the air. He could smell Carter in the other room, so whoever the cat was, Carter had let him in.

"Tommy," the tabby cat said in a hoarse whisper, and John could see the look of fear in the young, and if John was any judge at all, gay cat's eyes. His tail was a bottle brush and he was gripping the arm of the sofa hard enough his claws were showing. John stood there, heart pounding, his curled tail limp as his mind raced.

The husky was past the shame faced cat in two strides, and in the bedroom in four. In the bedroom, Carter was methodically packing a duffel bag laid out across the big double bed that practically filled the bedroom. A bed John had bought so they could both sleep comfortably together. John's heart sank when he saw all of Carter's things spread out on it now. "Carter?" The husky whispered.

"Hello John." The farm dog said without looking at him.

"What's going on?" John said quietly, even though he knew what was happening.

"I'm leaving John." Carter said simply.

"But why?" John almost whined, his one ear turning backwards as he moved forward, trying to get the dog to look at him, but Carter turned his head away from the husky as he put his clothes and things into the duffel.

"Because John." Carter said evenly, and there was no emotion in his voice. He didn't meet John's gaze and didn't touch him, even though the husky was an inch away from the farm dog.

"Why!" John demanded, and John was shocked by the look on the dog's face. Carter's normally stoic and emotionless face was full of angry resentment.

"Why? Why!" Carter slammed some CD's into his bag, "Because I'm not going to waste my life in this hole with you." Carter barked, raising his voice for the first time John could ever remember.

"Waste?" John whispered, "I.. I thought we had a good thing going here. We were happy, you were happy."

"No, I'm not." Carter said his voice deadpan calm again. "I've never been happy." He rolled up a pair of jeans and shoved them in the bag. "I've spent my whole life in this damn state wasting my time on farms. You were no different." The farm dog nearly spat the last word.

John blinked, his ear drooping along with his tail. "Wasting your time?" The husky said his voice weak.

"Don't act so surprised John." The dog said as he continued shoving his things into the duffel bag. "You know why I'm leaving. You know we weren't going to last."

"What are you talking about?" John stammered. "I thought that this was working. How can you just leave?"

"Don't be an idiot John." Carter said calmly. Even as John moved to his side, Carter refused to look at him. "There was never anything between us."

"What?" John sounded like Carter had slapped him.

"We were just fucking John. It was never more than that." Carter's voice had no emotion in it as he zipped the full bag closed. "Then you were a place to stay and nothing more. You never meant more than that."

"But, you were going to get hired onto the ranch." John's voice broke; his one eye watering as he stared at Carter. "We, we have a life here!"

"You call this a life?" Carter snapped. "Don't make me laugh. You used to live. You talk about it sometimes when you drink, the life you had in St. Louis. And now? Now you're back here, wasting your life, and I'm not going to be trapped here with you. Tommy and I are going to do what you won't." The dog grabbed his bag and started to push past the husky.

"Carter, I love you." John whimpered. "Please, please don't leave me." The husky reached out and grabbed the dog's arm.

Carter jerked away from him like John's touch burned. There was a look of disgust on his muzzle as he met John's gaze for the first time. "Well I don't love you," the farm dog growled.

Carter walked out of the bedroom, duffle bag banging into the wall as he went out. John saw the tabby cat looking at him for a moment in shock before following the dog out.

John stumbled backward, felt the bed hit the back of his knees, and fell back on to it. John sat there in shock as he listened to Carter's bike startup and rumble away into the night. The black and white husky looked down at his paws, the right side of his vision obscured by his muzzle. The husky closed his left eye, and he felt his ruined eye try and move in sympathy under his eye patch. John felt his chest heave as he finally breathed in, and he tried not to cry as he sat there alone in pain.

John opened his eyes, blinking in shock as he lay on the floor. The pain caused by Ms. Q's regeneration device was a terrible memory, a shadowy echo in his mind. Above him, Agent Crick stood impassively over him with his jacket off. John realized the Dalmatian had put it underneath his head like a pillow.

"Can you stand?" The Dalmatian asked, and John got shakily to his feet. "Good. Test your power, and then we'll go." The Dalmatian's words were clipped and short. They were, in fact, orders.

John looked at his paws, which were shaking. He flexed his fully healed and whole paws, fingers moving under his command, all ten of them tingling. Trembling, John reached up and pulled his eye patch off, and looked into the mirror at his two, clear blue eyes. John blinked in shock, both of his ears swiveling forward. The newly restored one was slightly floppy. "My ear too? Even my eye?"

"Ms. Q's device is very through. Even your lung cancer will be gone. You can thank me after the pain suppression drugs wear off and the body wracking agony sets in again. You have only four hours until you spend the most agonizing few days of your life recovering from what her machine did to you," the Dalmatian said coolly. "At which point we need to be well away from here, so move it, Agent Breakdown."

With a grin, the husky distorted the image in the mirror, warping the light around him so he and the director were invisible to everyone else. Crick walked to the door and opened it. John grinned, his paws balled into fists at the sounds of his military captors outside. This was going to be fun.

John stood in the trees and smoked nervously. He was only a few feet behind the headstone, looking up at the statue atop the small monument just visible through the trees. The husky wasn't standing where everyone else was out in front of the monument where the many wreaths and flowers had been laid. Instead he stood in the next row over, hidden in the trees, and watched the statue from a short distance to get some privacy. All the while the husky smoked, paws shaking as he waited.

He shouldn't be smoking any more, he knew that, but he couldn't help it today. The doctor had warned him about it only making things worse, but right now John was too tense, too nervous. He had a pocket full of empty packs, and another full of the butts. He was keeping them because he wasn't going to desecrate this place by throwing the butts on the ground.

The crowd in front of grave was now filled with just the normal people of St. Louis, rather than the political elites and heroes. While their clothing or importance did not match those who had come before, their tears were real though. The emotions were real. Ten years had no diminished the impact of the event.

As a city, St. Louis mourned Dustin Fleet, the man they had once known as Swiftwolf.

The husky blinked his one eye, wiping away a tear. He finally knew Swift's name. The fireman known as Dustin Fleet had vanished that horrible day in the rubble, and no one connected him with the fallen hero of the hour. Now ten years later the Extraordinaries had finally revealed his identity, after the death of his mother, who was evidently Dustin's last living relative. The ceremony had been touching, and John Carby had been shocked that he had been invited to attend. But then again, it had been Rigger who invited him.

The otter had kept his promise over the years and only visited infrequently to check in him, but this time the otter had surprised John in more ways than one. The husky had actually cried when Rigger's son gave the dedication to Swift's new gravestone. The young otter and his brother were St. Louis's new heroes, and it felt as though the torch had truly been passed, as though Swiftwolf, Dustin Fleet, was truly gone now.

John shivered slightly at the idea and took another drag of his cigarette. He hadn't been able to attend the funeral properly and sit with everyone. Like now, he had been forced to remain out of sight in the woods behind the small family cemetery with the rest of the super criminals who had come to pay respects. Even now, he couldn't approach the grave and lay a rose like he wanted to, because someone would recognize him as Breakdown for sure.

So John waited. The elites of the city came and went. The heroes and dignitaries, the firemen Dustin had worked with, and the police who had worked with Swiftwolf. Then the normal people passed by, and still John waited. He stood in the shadows, smoking to calm his nerves and waiting for his turn to mourn the man he loved.

It was after sunset, late in the evening when he finally had the cemetery to himself. The crowds had set their flowers and cards all around the base of the monument, but no one had actually put them on the statue itself. John stood in front of the monument, looking up at the stony face of Dustin "Swiftwolf" Fleet. The first man he'd truly loved. The only one he'd never told. The black and white husky took the rose he had been holding all day and set it gently against the little statue, so that the rose bloom rested against Swiftwolf's chest. "I miss you Dustin." John said quietly, having practiced the words in his head all day. "I wish you hadn't left me behind." The world was silent for a moment, as even the wind in the trees died. John closed his eyes

John tensed, his power tingling as someone focused their attention on him. Someone was behind him. John turned slowly, and saw a slight female spaniel in a bulky green sweater standing there, her arms crossed over her chest. Her long, wavy blond hair was hanging down over her face. She smiled weakly at him and gave him a tiny wave. "Hello John," she said quietly, and finally John recognized her.

"Buzzer?" John whispered in disbelief. No, it couldn't be Buzzer. She looked so different, so small. John pulled out a fresh cigarette and fumbled with his lighter.

"Not anymore. It's just Regina now." She said quietly. "Just like you, Breakdown." She paused for a moment, and said. "I'm sorry your eye forced you to stop." There was a hint of guilt in her voice.

"Wasn't the eye," the husky huffed quietly, taking a long drag on his fresh cigarette as he turned his head to hide the eye patch. "Or the ear. It wasn't worth it anymore. Not after what happened, not without him."

"I didn't know you cared about Aaron that much." Regina said quietly. "After what he did, I just couldn't do it anymore either. I couldn't even make my power work when I got out of the asylum."

John's hackles rose slightly, "I meant Dustin," the husky growled, breathing smoke down his nostrils.

She looked perplexed for a moment, her head tilted to the side in canine confusion. John noted the blotchy bruise around Buzzer's left eye, half hidden by fur and her long hair. "Dustin? Why would Swiftwolf..." she stopped, and realization seemed to dawn. "You and Swiftwolf?" She said with a slight gasp and a little revulsion. She put her paw to her mouth, biting her knuckle. "Oh John, I'm sorry I didn't... I didn't realize you were... that you two were..."

"We weren't." John said coldly, and he took a deep drag of his cigarette. "I never told him."

"Oh," Regina bowed her head. "I wished I had never told Aaron." The spaniel shifted her feet, and then she looked up again. "Have you been keeping well John?"

"I..." John opened his mouth to give the usual answer of yes; of course, I'm fine, and stopped. Standing here, by Dustin's grave, there was no room for lies. "No, I'm not." The husky said gruffly. "I ain't been well for ten years Regina. I been in hiding, giving myself cancer, and wishing I were dead." The husky took another long drag on the cigarette, "I shoulda been there for him. I should have saved Dustin, like he saved us both."

The spaniel shut her eyes and John regretted saying that. "I know. I just can't... I still can't believe it happened. Aaron..." Buzzer wiped her eyes, brushing the hair away from her face, her black eye easy to see now. "I thought he loved me. I thought we were going to have kids and everything. At least I've got George now." She said, with a smile so forced it hurt John to look at her. "I might have lost my power but I have him."

"Good old George give you that shiner?" The husky said quietly, flicking ash from his cigarette. "You better be careful you don't end up like me." John turned his head back to show off his eye patch.

Regina ducked her head, crossing her arms more tightly over her chest as her hair covered the bruise again. John didn't have to wonder why she wore long sleeves on a warm night like this. The marks would probably show through her light fur. "We all get what we deserve, John."

"Dustin didn't." John said, his voice finally breaking a little, his words plaintive now. "We all helped Code make sure Swiftwolf didn't get the life, or death, he deserved."

"I know." Regina said just as calmly. "That's why I deserve it." Even though the spaniel looked small and somehow broken, she said that with the old conviction John had remembered from the Buzzer of old.

There was a long silent moment as they stood by Dustin's grave. The husky thought about Carter, and how Buzzer had followed after Aaron Fleet with a puppy's enthusiasm. How callously Living Code had tried to kill her. How callously Carter had thrown him away.

"No," John whispered, "nobody deserves that. Even if we helped Aaron, we don't deserve that."

Regina wouldn't meet his one eyed gaze. The spaniel shuffled her feet and said quietly. "I'm sorry you're sick."

The husky shrugged slightly. "I did it to myself. Lung cancer is what you get when you smoke five packs a day for ten years." John Carby gave her a very weak smile, and the husky's black facial markings hid the sadness on his face. "Thank you anyways."

Regina nodded, her arms crossed tightly over her chest as she stuttered out, "I, I better be going. My husband didn't want me to come to the funeral, so I don't want to be gone too long." She hesitated, as if she were going to say something, and then turned away.

"Take better care of yourself Buzzer." John said quietly, taking a drag on his cigarette.

"You too, Breakdown." She said as she walked into the night.

John turned and sat down; leaning against the back of Swiftwolf's monument, where a little space was left that hadn't been filled with flowers and tokens. John stared up at the night sky, and the stars coming out over head and smoked quietly.

He couldn't stay forever, he would have to go back to the ranch tomorrow, to his empty little shack, and the empty little life he had exiled himself too. Maybe one day, something would force him to leave, something would make his life change, but right now he was going to spend at least one night by Dustin's side.