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Untitled

Jayden Page

Justin tossed his keys on the counter as he strolled into his apartment, kicking the door closed behind him. The door shuddered as it connected with the frame, but there was no corresponding click. Some part of him knew that he needed to get that fixed, but he hadn't been able to muster up the enthusiasm to call someone. Besides, it wasn't like he was afraid of a robbery; the last guy who tried took one look around the place and ended up leaving ten credits behind on the couch out of pity. If his mother could've seen where he was now, she would've just shook her head- disappointed but not surprised- and reminded him that he should've studied harder in school.

He let out a sigh of exhaustion and relief as he flopped down on his ragged couch, the cushions deflating as his weight hit them. Just as his thoughts began to drift off into blackness, his face pressed into the rough surface of his couch, there was an abrupt, splintering *crack*, like the sound of a gunshot. He jerked awake, flying off his couch in a hazy panic.

His door was gone.

That was no understatement; it wasn't open, and it wasn't even knocked over on the floor. It was in a million shattered splinters scattered across his dirty kitchen tile. In its place stood a man who looked to be at least seven-foot by the roughest estimations, garbed in a full suite of glittering, golden-bronze armor that looked like it came straight from a swords-and-horses/steampunk crossover convention. But that wasn't the worst part; he was holding a sledgehammer in his right hand, and it had a rocket-booster attached to the head.

Yeah. A goddamn rocket.

“What the...” Justin managed, completely frozen in place. The helmeted man stepped forward, his armor hissing and clicking as he did so. Justin couldn’t help but notice the sparking tesla-coil strapped to the giant’s back, brilliant bolts of azure energy running over the device in waves.

“Steady, friend!” The man shouted, his booming voice echoing around in his helmet. “You’re in danger!”

“You’re damn right!” Justin said, scrambling away from the intruder. “What the hell are you doing in my house? That was my freakin’ *door*, man!”

“Apologies!” The steampunk knight said, brandishing his hammer in both hands. “I knocked on your door several times, but I received no answer! I destroyed it to save time!”

“What the *hell*, man?!”

“There’s no time, friend! Murderers and villains are on their way to slaughter us both!”

“*Us?*” Justin wailed, his back literally hitting the wall. “What do you mean *us*? Why do the murderers and villains want *me?*”

“You’ve offered me safe harbor! They’ll surely want your head!” The knight explained, smashing his breastplate with his gauntlet as if that would help emphasize his point.

“I haven’t offered you anything! Get out of my house!”

“Fear not, my pure-hearted friend! You’ve chosen the side of justice, and the power of the universe rides on our shoulders! Now let’s not dilly-dally any...” Before the knight could finish, another man came through the doorway; he looked like a punk rocker, if punk rockers were actually threatening. He held a clockwork revolver in one hand and a knife in the other, the barrel of the pistol aimed directly at the knight’s head. Justin attempted to cry out a warning, but the sharp *crack* of the gun drowned out his voice. The bullet struck the knight’s helmet with a metallic ring, and the giant stumbled slightly. But he didn’t fall.

The thug let out a wordless snarl, readjusting his aim slightly. “Why won’t you just *die*, you stupid mother-” The knight whirled around, leading with his hammer, the rocket roaring with blue flames. The hammer’s head struck the thug square in the chest, and the man flew backwards so fast that Justin barely saw him move. The thug shot straight out of the apartment and collided with the drywall of the hallway, shattering both it and his body simultaneously.

“Hi-ho!” The knight chuckled heartily, slamming the butt of his hammer into the tile, cracking it. “That’s our cue, buddy-old-pal-old-friend!”

“No, it’s not! It’s not *our* anything!” Justin said, getting to his feet and advancing on the knight. “You literally just killed a guy in my-”

He was interrupted when the knight suddenly rushed forward, scooped him with one arm as if he were a rambunctious child, and then slung him over his shoulder. Justin screamed. The knight leapt over the couch and kept going, colliding with the window.

And then he kept going. Justin kept screaming.

He could still feel himself falling, despite being slung over another man’s shoulder like a sack of rotting potatoes, but the sensation didn’t last long. He vaguely realized that he was going to die, and then the entire world shuddered as the knight’s boots struck the concrete. The knight carefully set Justin down on his trembling feet, letting out a guffaw at his expression. “You look like you’ve just seen the World Eater, friend!”

“Y-You just jumped out a fifth story window.” Justin stuttered, glancing back up at his now broken apartment window. It looked a lot farther than it had felt. “Who the hell are you?”

“Salantis.” The man replied proudly, puffing out his armored chest. “My friends call me Sal. Or they *would*, if any of them were still alive. Ha!”

“Alright, Salantis.” Justin said slowly, not wanting to somehow set off the maniac. “I’m just gonna’ go, alright? I’m gonna’ walk past you and back into my apartment, where I’m going to go back to sleep and never think about you again.”

“Not so fast, friend!” Salantis said, clapping a metal hand on his shoulder. It hurt. A lot. “We have much work to do! Justice does not rest for the wicked! Now, tell me- what are your powers?”

Justin blinked. “Powers?”

“Yes! Telepathy, perhaps? Pyromancy? Has your genius intellect surpassed human levels? Or can you mutate your body, becoming an unstoppable abomination born of rage and bloodlust? Quickly, now! Spit it out!”

“Uh...” Justin said, slightly embarrassed despite himself. “I, uh... don’t have any powers.”

“What?!” Salantis cried, smacking himself upside the helmet. “So, you truly are as weak as you seem?!”

“I’m just lithe.” Justin mumbled, self-consciously feeling his bicep.

“Oh! Don’t fret.” Salantis said, clapping him on the shoulder again. It still hurt. “You have purpose in this world yet. Your loyal presence and undying friendship shall invigorate me in the coming conflicts. Knowing that a great friend of mine is watching, I will fight on with the strength of one hundred men. Huzzah!”

“Oh. That’s good.” Justin said, unsure what to do at this point. “I guess.”

“Say, my unfortunately sized friend,” Salantis said. “How about we celebrate our impending victory by feasting at a nearby ramen shop? It’s on me!”

“Uh...” Justin said, setting a hand to his uncomfortably empty stomach. The only thing he had eaten all day was a bag of croutons and a juice box, but at the same time, there was only one ramen shop nearby, and it was horrible. Even by ramen standards. “Do we *have* to eat ramen? There’s a pretty good café downtown that-”

“No! Ramen!”

Justin sighed. He couldn't begin to guess what brought on Salantis's sudden obsession with ramen, but honestly it was the least weird thing the giant had done since they met. "I guess I could go for some ramen-"

"Too late!" Salantis suddenly roared, somehow managing to be even louder than his regular speaking voice. "You've wasted too much time gibber-jabbering! We've got company!" As he spoke, Justin noticed a black van covered in gaudy, neon-colored graffiti, the blues and pinks clashing against each other jarringly. Loud electro-scratch music buzzed from beyond the vehicle's metal hide, the reverberation of the bass causing it to tremble as it moved; the door slid open, revealing several more leather-garbed maniacs, all of them armed to the teeth.

The last thug to jump from the van was perhaps the most unusual; she was the only member of her party to be completely devoid of leather. She was a pretty thing, dressed in a ragged schoolgirl's uniform, complete with a frilly skirt and a ribbon at her collar. Her long, messy hair was dyed in a myriad of vibrant, garish colors, as if someone had dipped her in a tie-dye vat. She would've been perfect, had her flesh not been laced in jagged, stitched-up scars. She gave the knight a manic grin, skipping towards him and waving the spiked baseball bat in her hand around haphazardly.

"Who the hell is that girl?" Justin asked the knight, his eyes going wide.

"That's no girl." Sal replied, his normally boisterous, cheery voice gone solemn. "Not anymore, anyway. That's Killian- a murderer and renowned pervert who was slain years ago. Unfortunately, the gates of death could not hold his villainy. He steals the bodies of beautiful women, transmuting them to fit his twisted fantasies. He's indeed a monster, but he's not one to go out in the field."

Killian sauntered right up to Salantis, hefting up her bat. "Hello, boys! Bad news delivery!" She beamed the knight's helmet with the business-end of the weapon, causing Salantis's armor to reverberate like a bell. She broke out into hysterical laughter, twirling around like a psychotic ballerina.

"I'm surprised you came to face me yourself, perverted bastard," Sal said, no worse for wear despite his head being used for batting practice. "You've never been so brave before.

You're a fool if he thinks the King will forgive an attack on his Fist." Sal said, tightening his grip on his hammer.

"Oh, don't be like that," Killian said, rolling her eyes. "You struck first, and you'll strike again. And you're crazy if you think we're just gonna' sit back and watch everything crumble."

"Wait," Justin squeaked, suddenly realizing how deep in crap he was. "The King? As in the mob-boss? *That* King?" He debated just making a break for it right there, but Killian's men had guns. To be honest, he probably couldn't outrun Killian or Salantis either. Or anything, really.

"Do not fear, friend." Sal said, not turning from his staring contest with Killian. "The lying, cowardly media of this city has undoubtedly skewed your perception of the King. He does not love crime. He only controls it, keeping perverts and villains like Killian at bay. Honor, justice, peace- those are the glorious ideals the King stands by!"

"Don't listen to this pompous moron, hun." Killian replied. "He's the bad guy here. Him and the King are just lackeys for the President and Halcyon Group. I mean, just look at this place; it's a dump. Everyone is miserable. You can practically *smell* the depression in the air. The King helps the Royals up in Grantham drain everything this city has, pumping it straight into their pockets. The rich need to start hurtin', and they need hurt bad."

"Fool!" Sal said. "Bastard! Villain! Do you want Halcyon soldiers crawling the streets, the abominable Watchmen hunting innocents as they make merry? Do you wish Hell upon us?!"

"We're already in Hell, Sal." Killian said. "Might as well drag them down with us."

Salantis's head turned ever so slightly in Justin's direction.

"Uh..." Justin said, scratching his head. He wasn't sure how his opinion mattered in the least. He was just a food-stand worker. There was literally nothing his allegiance could change. But... still. The pricks up in Grantham certainly weren't the good guys. They were greedy, narcissistic, and uncaring. But at the same time, all he really knew about Killian was that they were some demonic pervert who liked sewing body parts together. So it didn't really matter who

was the real villain. He sure as hell wasn't siding with *that* asshole. He let out a sigh. "Whatever. I'm still with you, Sal."

"Yes!" Sal cried, giving him a golden thumbs-up. "I never doubted your friendship, friend! My Hammer of Justice will destroy these dastardly cowards, and then we shall feast on heaping bowls of ramen!"

Whatever Killian was, she was fast. Inhumanly fast. She had barely finished her last syllable before she was standing in front of him, her manic grin stretching unnaturally wide across her pretty face. Justin barely had time to process what he was seeing before her scarred hand lashed out, her fingers closing around his throat. He sputtered and gasped, clawing at her hand as her grip slowly tightened, crushing his windpipe.

"Don't just let her kill you!" Sal shouted at him from where he watched a couple feet away, doing nothing. "She's a schoolgirl! You're a man, aren't you? You're a warrior! Fight back! Defend yourself!"

Well. This was it. He was going to die, all because he was too weak to fight off a killer cheerleader. Sure, she probably had some sort of demonic strength backing her up. But it was still embarrassing. *Mom*, he thought, closing his eyes. *I'm sorry I didn't do something better with my life. You tried. I love you. Aldus, you still owe me fifty credits. My vengeful ghost will collect.*

There was a faint hissing sound which turned to a roar as Salantis's hammer exploded to life, the blue flame leaving a trail of light as it moved. The pressure around his throat was gone in an instant as Killian went flying, bouncing against the street like a skipping stone on the surface of a pond. Justin collapsed to the ground, coughing and gasping for air.

"You're lucky I was here, friend." Salantis said. "You truly are the weakest, saddest man I have ever known."

"Bastard." Justin rasped, his neck still throbbing in agony. His vision was beginning to clear as his lungs fed his starving brain oxygen, and he looked around, trying to find where Killian had landed. She was getting up. Right before his eyes, her limbs realigned themselves, snapping back into place. Her freaky, mis-matched eyes met his own, and she grinned, grabbing

her left arm and casually popping it back into its socket. “Ouch.” She said, walking towards her deranged van as if nothing had happened.

“The enemy rises to fight again!” Salantis announced, as if Justin was a blind moron and that wasn’t already obvious.

“Alright,” Killian said. “Looks like you killed me. Congrats.” She climbed into the van, perching up on the seat nearest the door. “Anyway, I’ve got dinner in an hour. So, I’m outta’ here. Oh, and whoever shoots one of these assholes gets a kiss. Bye!” She waved at Sal and then slid the door shut. The van’s tires skidded against the street as the driver went into fifth gear, and the vehicle sped away.

“A kiss?!” One of the thugs exclaimed, looking to his companions excitedly. “A kiss from Miss Killian?!”

“Come on, boys!” The lead thug said, raising his rifle. “Let’s kill this guy!”

“Aha!” Salantis laughed, revving the rocket on his hammer. “Finally, foes who fight with a true, just motivation!”

“*What?*” Justin sputtered. “How is *that* a just motivation?”

“They’re willing to die for love!” Salantis replied. “It is the most beautiful motivation of all! Now for my final attack- Unyielding Inferno Charge!”

Justin dove to the ground as the gangsters opened fire, the air alight with the sound of thunder and fiery light as the gunfire rained down. The knight took the bullets in stride. He charged forward, his bellowing laughter nearly drowning out the sound of bullets striking his armor. Justin watched in awe as Salantis ran through the hail of lead and insults, closing the distance between himself and the gangsters with unbelievable speed.

He collapsed about six feet from his first target, his gargantuan hammer falling from his grip and clattering to the ground. The knight’s knees struck the stone soon after, his armor emitting a worrisome black smoke. The thugs began to run out of ammo, so many discarded their guns, taking to bashing Sal with pipes and other makeshift weapons.

Just as Justin had accepted all hope was lost, Salantis pried open a panel on his gauntlet, twisting a dial underneath with all he had. “My true final attack,” he screamed, throwing his helmeted face to the heavens. “Ultimate Judgement Cry of Thunder!”

The voltage discharging from the coil suddenly increased in intensity, arcs of bluish electricity erupting from the machine. The entire scene lasted less than thirty seconds, before the tesla coil went dark as abruptly as it had gone wild. All the gangsters crumpled simultaneously. Salantis thrust his gauntleted fist into the sky, letting out a howl of triumph, and then promptly fell over.

“Salantis?” he asked, doing his best to shake the man awake. He couldn’t even get him to budge. He was like a boulder. “Salantis? Hey, asshole. Wake up.”

“My friend...” Sal croaked, turning his head to look up at him. “I have been slain.”

Justin swallowed back tears. He had just met this guy. Why did he want to start bawling? “Really?”

Sal cackled. “No, I lied to you. You’re so easily fooled. Gullible and weak. You would make a terrible knight.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“But,” The knight said, setting a hand on his forearm. “You are an excellent friend. And your morale support is unmatched.”

“Gee... thanks.”

“Say, Cheerleader Man,” Salantis said, his hand shuddering and then going limp. “I failed in my mission. Our enemies won the day, their plan still in action. And Killian escaped.”

“I’m guessing that’s... bad?”

“Certainly. But you know what my father always said. If you live long enough to recharge your suit of invincible armor, you will fight another day. And feast upon another bowl

of delicious ramen.” He paused, and then laughed again. “Say, Cheerleader Man. Do you wish to feast upon ramen with me? To celebrate not dying once again?”

Justin shrugged. “Got nothing else to do.”