

FICTION: FIRST PLACE

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A Hero's Lesson

They didn't call you a superhero when you first started. You didn't claim to be one, either. You didn't have a costume, a sponsor, training, or anything adjacent to that. You were just a kid. A kid who had just seen your *entire* world knocked down. So in a moment of childish stupor, a tenacious sight, you were determined to believe that you could fix it. All of it.

The first emergence of your powers wasn't some huge grand triumphal moment. Moving stone, rocks, steel-- doesn't matter if you don't know anything about how to stack things up so that they don't fall. Doesn't matter when you have no education in architectural design. The first few attempts were hopeless, they just crashed right back down again. That was your first lesson.

Even when you got good at what you did, they didn't call you a superhero. You still didn't have a costume, children didn't ask for a picture when you walked by. But you had something else, something that could change everything. An architectural diagram. You started to show up to the aftermath of battles and tribulations. Piece by piece, in the quiet night, you would put humpty dumpty back together again.

Though, something didn't feel right. Really, you couldn't do much if you didn't have the blueprints to the original buildings. If the city planners didn't let you have them. So instead of sighting and quarreling over it, you gave in. In your apartment complex, you hunched over a sewing machine, sighing as you stitched together a costume. It was bright; colorful. It should do the trick of grabbing the attention of the cameras on the scene afterward, as you try to fix what's broken.

"Look!" They said, "Someone's putting the houses back together!" And as you suspected, the effect was instantaneous. The moment you had the public's eye, there were requests for interviews, think pieces-- each and everything giving you a platform to ask for the help you needed. To help those who were just like you. That was your second lesson.

You didn't call yourself a superhero. Just a guy who wanted to help. You didn't even come up with the name. You weren't ever really good at those things anyway. But once you had the attention, you got offers from managers and sponsors. One, a blonde with perfect hair, introduced herself as "just Sandy". I told her I had no money, but she simply nodded. "That's ok." She responded, smiling wide. "All I need is for you to take on some gigs and give me a cut."

Sandy set you up. She got you the costume people would know you for, making it bolder, better. She gave you the name, and even managed all of the PR and set up interviews. Your reluctant fame skyrocketed, and soon you were seeing yourself on

billboards. Soon enough, you had access to hundreds of city plans, blueprints. Just like you wanted. After enough attacks happened, you learned them well enough to hardly

need to reference them. After a few years, you could rebuild a tower in a matter of minutes, cities in days.

As your understanding evolved, so did your abilities. You could read the entire layout of a building from just lightly tapping it with your pinkie. Then, just from the ruins that were left behind. Soon enough, just your own hands on the metal. The gigs were simple--just fixing up hero bases after they'd gotten wrecked in attacks. Feel good work that paid well. With the help of many people, you can do more. That was your third lesson.

But then, the problem arose. It seemed silly, small. But it wasn't. It started with the homeless thing. You were in between projects and itching to use your skills more. It was like you were addicted, you *had* to use them. So, you started creating homes for the homeless, it seemed like a perfect, good project. And it was, for the first few weeks. But then came the backlash. City dwellers crying foul, saying they hadn't agreed to an enormous den of undesirables in their backyards. There were protests, white suburban moms holding up signs about drug dealers and rapists, criminals.

In the end, it wasn't your choice. Eventually the city mandated that you deconstruct your shelter, or they would do it the hard way. It was the same story in every area you tried to build shelters in afterwards.

"Can't we just buy the land to build the houses on?" You asked Sandy one day, your skin itching. "No. There are laws. You would need the approval of the mayor to start a project." You huff. "Why?" Sandy stares at you. "Well, there are already too many empty houses around." You open your mouth to reply, but nothing comes out. She proceeds to tell you that you don't have that much money. Not with you giving it away every year. Just think of the effect on the market-. This is not why you fired Sandy. But it *was* the first time you thought of it.

When you started to use your platform to talk about this problem, demanding permission to build, public opinion started to turn against you. Exasperation turned to hostility when you started to reshape the landscape to be softer to the unhoused. When you created caves in parks where people could find shelter, or made every bench large enough and soft enough so that everyone could sleep.

But like all things, there came consequences. Laws passed, all regulating the alternations you had made. You started to get fined with everything you altered. Firing Sandy didn't help. Your good reputation was always as much her work as yours, but after what she said about--you couldn't. You learned not to read the scathing opinion pieces on you. It was the hardest lesson yet.

But then it really hit the fan. You were asked to rebuild a base. It was a simple decision. You found out that they had been building drones and firing them on civilians. That at the base, the tech would be building surveillance technology to monitor every person in the country. Being able to fire on them as soon as suspicious activity is spotted. It made you rethink every base you had built in the past.

“No.” You told them. “But you already signed your contract-” Instead of dignifying that with an answer, you transmuted the entire area into the rockiest terrain you could. Making it impossible to build on. Every trick you knew to make the land easier to build on, you reversed it. “I said no.”

Stopping the construction of the stadium was the next kicker. You were called insane by the heroes ordered to remove you from the scene. “They evicted hundreds of families for this! Those were people's homes. It’s *disgusting*. And for what, entertainment?” No matter what you said, the outcome was the same. You spent 48 hours deconstructing every single thing they tried to build on their ill gotten land. The heroes were sent again. You were never the best at fighting. You got knocked out quick.

They don’t call you a superhero now. Behind bars, you glance over what has been said about you. How the world's most beloved hero fell. You read speculation about evil, greed, madness. All things you’ve read about “villains”, it makes you wonder about people. If maybe you had misjudged them, too.

It’s alright, you tell yourself when the sting fades away. It was the second lesson afterall. More than anything, you need people to be talking. And for all the bitterness in the words you read, you realize grimly that people will *never stop*.

Once you’ve thought things through, you decide that you’re ready. The steel of your cell melts away. Afterall, no prison can contain you. Not earth or stone, not obsidian or steel. They cannot withstand your will.

Your legacy as the world’s greatest supervillain begins with a left turn down the hallway, right to where the other villains are kept.