

THE
MEISTER
OF
DECIMEN
CITY

BRENNNA RANEY

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TO THE PEOPLE WHO CAN NEVER FIT THE NARRATIVE.

LOVE YOU.







DINOSAURS ON MAIN STREET

Rex made a list of her obligations from most pressing to least pressing, with *deal with the dinosaurs* at the top. It was a stress-managing exercise her high school counselor had suggested. It hadn't worked then, and it wasn't working now.

The TV over her workbench screeched, and she looked up. The news was still showing live helicopter footage of the dinosaurs tearing down Main Street. As a velociraptor-looking thing—someone in the lab was watching too much *Jurassic Park*—crashed through a line of abandoned cars, the Lightning zapped onto the scene. Rex winced as the superhero punched the raptor in the face, electric flickers bursting from the impact, and reporters broke into happy hysterics.

The *ding* of the lab door made her jump, but it was just Flora striding in with a jet-black hair swish.

A pair of metal eyes hovered after her, a robotic voice calling, "I couldn't keep her out, Doctor." Despite having written the subroutine for Aya to say exactly that, Rex didn't find it funny.

"When you said you were working on the dinosaur project, I thought you were researching how the dinosaurs died, not unleashing a dinosaur-themed apocalypse," Flora said.

"This wasn't intentional," Rex hissed, moving to the end of the workbench to flip through her notes. "They shouldn't have gotten out."

Flora adjusted her glasses and rested her other hand on her hip. “You need to deal with this before the Lightning traces them back to the source and beats your face in with her taser-fist of death.”

“I’m trying!” Rex tossed the notes away. “What *did* kill the dinosaurs? The same thing would work now, right?”

“Climate change?”

“Shall I run simulations on potential asteroid impacts?” Aya offered. The two eyes bobbed next to each other over the workbench, a trick with magnets that had been hell to work out but looked really cool. Still, Aya’s two staring eyes was getting to Rex in a way that one staring camera never had. She snatched up the to-do list and scribbled *give Aya eyelids* at the bottom.

Screams erupted on the television as a news chopper dipped too low and a variety of dinosaurs with some truly impressive back legs leaped high enough to catch one of the helicopter’s ski-looking thingies in its jaws.

“I don’t remember making so many,” Rex muttered as she rushed to the chemical zone to mix a hasty genetic destabilizer, pausing only to shove goggles over her buzzed, blonde head and cover her freckled hands with a snap of gloves.

“You got clone-happy.” Flora followed her past the line of red tape on the floor with quick little steps in her pencil skirt. Rex wondered how she was still so intimidated by professional dress after seeing Flora in it almost every day for five years. “I warned you. The whole city warned you. It’s in point three of the latest truce agreement—”

“The clone clause—yes, I know.” Rex didn’t have genetic material to form the base of the destabilizer at the home lab. It was all in the Peak Street facility, which they shouldn’t have been able to escape from if her lab techs had followed her damn instructions.

Rex dropped into a chair and ran her hands over her face, pushing the goggles up. “I’m just going to take the Exo-suit and go punch dinos with ‘Ning.” The hero couldn’t zap her if they were fighting side-by-side, right?

Shit. She was so screwed.

“I will call up the mecha,” Aya said, cueing the hum of moving floor panels.

“You can’t Voltron your way out of every problem,” Flora said.

“But I can Voltron my way out of this problem.” Rex was already stepping around the hollow robot rising out of the floor—mostly used for wrangling hostile test subjects from the bottom of the ocean and breaking safes that she had forgotten the combinations to.

“Hey,” Flora put a hand on her arm before she could slide it into the myoelectric sleeve. “If the Lightning tries to fight you, don’t stick around. There’s no shame in running away.”

“There’s so much shame in running away.”

“There’s more shame in getting your ass kicked by a superhero. And frankly, I don’t think you need more brain damage.”

“A real friend would support me.” Rex strapped herself into the suit’s harness and straightened her spine for the neural uplink.

“I try. Call me later to let me know you’re alive.”



Punching dinosaurs wasn’t as satisfying as Rex had hoped. In practice, it was basically animal abuse.

No basically about it, she thought as a feathery thing went down with a squawk. She tried to reassure herself that knocking them out to be re-contained was better than letting a SWAT team shoot them. The area had been evacuated, so she didn’t see a reason to put them down, anyway.

When she showed up, the Lightning met her eyes, sort of—her yellow costume covered her whole body, including her face, and Rex’s suit had robot eyes that didn’t line up with the pilot’s. Then she nodded once and turned her back, which Rex took as silent acceptance of their team-up. It was probably for the best that her robot eyes didn’t line up—that yellow costume was really tight, and Rex had trouble keeping her eyes up when they were face-to-face for any length of time.

The Lightning was a bright streak in her peripheral vision, zipping from building to building using her Static Cling and tasing the crap out of the dinos too fast for the Exo-suit. That left Rex to deal with the heavy hitters, who had no business being so bloodthirsty considering their build and metabolism, but she figured it was a fitting punishment for making the Lightning take time out of her day. For a strong-and-silent-type hero, 'Ning could be fantastically passive aggressive.

Regardless, they made as efficient a team as they always did when a common enemy—or a Rex fuck-up; honestly, it was usually a Rex fuck-up—made them temporary allies. The local news stations were the only ones who still found it surprising. Rex could already see the headlines: “The Lightning and the Meister: Dawn of a New Age of Cooperation?” As though they hadn’t run something similar half a dozen times already.

'Ning didn't stick around after the last stegosaur crashed to the asphalt and the police closed in. She never did. Apparently, sexy-fine superheroes were wasted on cleanup, but it was all right to let a perpetually pseudo-probationary super genius take responsibility for the stampeding dinosaurs she'd accidentally released.

Rex opened her phone screen inside the Exo-suit to shoot Flora a *still alive* text and groaned. She had a dozen missed messages that Aya had helpfully labeled: *Mayor—urgent*.



The one perk of meeting with Mayor Vicker so often was that his staff always bought Rex dinner. This time, she ordered a burger without cheese, but they delivered one with cheese anyway. And not the kind of cheese she could peel off, no—the kind that seeped into every crevice in the patty and made it bleed yellow. She used half the stack of paper napkins to wipe it off and wrapped it up so the smell couldn't escape.

“—and there's nothing I can do about it. You signed the document,” the mayor was saying.

Rex had lost track of the conversation while removing the fungal cancer that some worldwide conspiracy deemed worthy of calling food. She glanced across the conference table to note Mayor Vicker's usual tight expression as he either berated her or explained a legal issue. His assistant sat next to him with a colorfully tabbed planner forgotten in his hands and a look of distaste as he watched Rex's growing pile of cheese napkins.

"Are you paying attention? I'm telling you, Ms. Anderson, it's out of my hands. We're talking about federal law."

"What's out of your hands?" Rex asked. She had a sudden epiphany: *They're called landing skids.* Why did they use those things, anyway? Why not put all helicopters on wheels?

The mayor gave her a disappointed frown. "Ms. Anderson, you violated point three of your truce agreement—"

"The clone clause—I know." She winced as the first bite of decontaminated burger hit her tongue. Could she actually taste it, or was her brain just reminding her of the gelatinous orange waste that had been smeared all over her food?

"For Christ's sake, just eat it! You wiped it off. Stop being so dramatic about it," the mayor burst out.

Yeah, and if someone took a shit all over his burger, she was sure he'd just wipe it off and forget about the particulates of fecal matter mashed into the meat.

"The security measures I have in place are ironclad if they're followed," Rex said, lowering the burger in surrender. "I'll oversee it myself this time. So, wherever my dinosaurs are being held, I'm eager to plead my case to regain custody."

"You're worried about the *dinosaurs*?"

"They're the big losers here. I've been tasered by 'Ning before. It isn't fun."

The assistant—Hammond? Hansen?—raised an eyebrow. "You want the city to release the horde of dinosaurs back to the mad scientist who set them loose on Main Street?"

“This didn’t happen because I’m mad,” Rex protested, pointing at the assistant. “It happened because my lab techs are incompetent.”

“A *horde* of dinosaurs,” the assistant sneered.

“I really didn’t think I’d made so many.”

“Regardless, you did,” the mayor cut in, rubbing his forehead. “Which is an unambiguous violation of the truce you signed. National news sources have already picked up the story. This can’t be swept under the rug.”

Rex didn’t like the direction this was going. “That Oversight stuff is optional at the local level, right?”

Mayor Vicker gave her a thin-lipped look and his forehead wrinkled all the way to his hairline—wherever that was. His hair was thinning in such an even gradient that the top of his head looked more like a swatch of grayscale than a separable head and forehead. “Listen, Rex.”

She swallowed. This wouldn’t be good.

“The people like you for some reason. They’re used to you, at least. God knows most villains don’t generate half the local goodwill you’ve managed. I mean, a choice between you and someone like Last Dance—”

There was a pit of despair behind Rex, bottomless, the back legs of her chair sitting right on its edge, and all she could taste was cheese cheese cheese.

“—*there’s* a real villain. No doubt New York opted for Oversight with a please and thank you.”

“I’m not a villain,” she corrected, ignoring the shivers dormant in her spine. “I’m chaotic neutral at worst.”

“The polls aren’t so clear on that.” The mayor’s fist clenched. “The polls *are* clear that the people of Decimen prefer to opt out of the Superbeings Oversight Contingencies—you have the Lightning to thank for that, by the way.”

Rex rolled her eyes. God forbid the government interfere with Decimen City’s special child.

“But in cases where a superbeing demonstrates they cannot or will not cooperate with local efforts to mediate, the national ordinance is clear.”

“I’m not a superbeing,” Rex tried.

“If your IQ didn’t qualify you, your past actions would,” the mayor said gently.

“If you’d broken the law any less outrageously, you’d be in jail by now,” Hamboy added helpfully.

“Ning’s dragged me to jail three times, not counting the time she locked me in a cell to sweat out that zombie bite. You mean prison.”

“Rex, please,” Mayor Vicker said. “I’m afraid I have to act this time. It’s the law.”

Rex leaned back with a sinking feeling. She’d read through the tiers of Oversight outlined in the Contingencies, from check-ins to imprisonment. She’d known she qualified—if public opinion ever swayed that way. That it was happening now because she’d shot herself in the foot instead of having anything to do with public opinion seemed stupidly fitting.

That God-awful taste returned to her tongue. “Lay it out for me.”

The mayor gave a sympathetic grimace and had his assistant call in a lawyer.



Fun fact: Superbeings Oversight, while small and specialized, was technically a branch of the military. Since the threat tier she best fit required direct oversight, the government was essentially assigning Rex a team of babysitters with military training. They’d be in her home, her databases, her Peak Street labs—anywhere she might get it into her head to cause some mayhem.

As if she ever started something for the purpose of causing mayhem.

Granted, her introduction to the public scene had involved a cobbled-together death ray that Ning had barely managed to short out in time, so it was hardly shocking—ha—that they’d bumped her up a few tiers.

She strode out of city hall in a nightmarish mood, the papers the lawyer had given her clenched in her hands. Her Exo-suit was slumped next to the bike rack at the bottom of the stairs, secured to the rail by a bike lock.

No one could make it work without Rex's DNA and brain waves, but she wouldn't put it past anyone in this city to throw it in the back of a truck and set it up in their living room.

She shoved the papers into the suit and jumped as the Lightning zipped onto the stone balustrade beside her.

"You need to get your life together," the superhero said.

"Holy shit. You talk," was what fell out of Rex's mouth.

Expressionless through the yellow mask, 'Ning cocked her head. "You've heard me talk."

"Yeah, but only to say things like 'You've gone too far this time, Meister,' or 'These aliens will destroy hero and villain alike unless we work together.'" She didn't have Flora there to tell her to breathe. Also, the Lightning was standing very close in a well-fitted bodysuit; there went those magnets trying to pull Rex's eyes down.

'Ning shook her head in that slow way that Rex got from friends and strangers alike and sat on the balustrade with her legs dangling.

"And *I* need to get my life together?" Rex continued. "What about you? What kind of hero still hasn't touched base with Superbeings Oversight? I thought that was responsible superhero-ing. Vivid Blue did it. Isn't she the hero's hero? The One True Hero? Leader of the Protectors-of-the-World-which-usually-just-means-New-York?"

'Ning folded her arms, which—wow, that made it worse. "I have a well-balanced life as my secret identity and the full support of my community as my alias. I think I'm doing fine."

"Brag much?" Rex tried to ignore the excited calls of some passersby who'd stopped to take pictures of 'Ning. "Do you even have a tragic backstory? Even small-timers have something better than got-powers-in-an-electrical-storm. You go up against villains with more fleshed-out backstories than yours. It's not right."

"I'm serious, Rex. There are enough real villains in my life without having to wonder if the Meister has been too quiet lately."

Rex squinted. "Is this a shakedown?"

“It’s an offer. Half the times you start something world-ending it’s because you’re responding to a real problem. I’m saying you can call on me *before* you take things too far.”

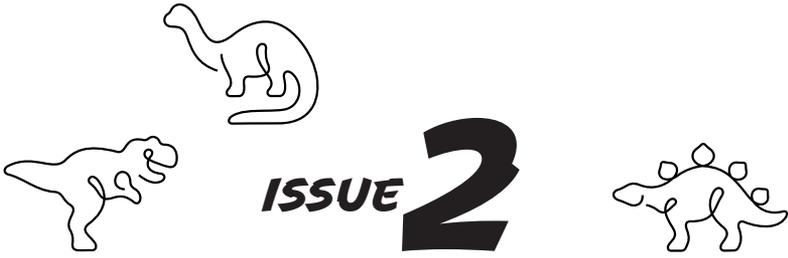
“So, you’ll punch world hunger in the face?”

“Is that what the dinosaurs were for?”

God, Rex hated her.

“Just think about it. If a superhero has to keep you in check, take it as a hint. You’re probably doing something wrong.” She stood. “And get your life together.”

Rex flinched as the Lightning zapped away, searing a yellow streak across her field of vision. She rubbed the spots out of her eyes and groaned into her hands. Then she shoved the bike lock into the mecha and strapped herself in to go see Animal Control about her dinosaurs.



DINOSAURS AT THE POUND

The next day, the headline of the state *Gazette* was “Jurassic Age Returns to Decimen City” with a street-level photograph of a triceratops flipping a car while smaller raptors spilled past it. There was also a story on the front page of the *Metro Times*, overshadowed only by the latest throw-down between Vivid Blue and Last Dance—Blue saved the factory workers who had been press-ganged into building who-knows-what, but Last Dance got away.

The *Decimen City Circular* hadn’t bothered with a story, acknowledging the episode only in its reporting of the traffic interruptions with phrases like *because of the dinosaurs*. Rex forcefully ignored the sound of slicing scissors across the lab as Flora cut articles from the pile of newspapers on her desk for framing on the Wall of Infamy, which she’d started either out of pride or as a weird effort to shame Rex into thinking before she scienced.

The *Metro Times* lay on the workbench in front of Rex, the dinosaur story already cut out and the picture of Vivid Blue, lavender cape billowing as she led liberated workers out of the factory, drawing her eyes like a train wreck. Rex pushed the paper to the floor. It helped, but her heartbeats still felt heavy. “Do I have a crush on the Lightning?”

“You’ve never been attracted to a woman before,” Flora said without looking up.

“She’s *really* hot though.”

“No argument here.”

“Am I having a gay crisis?”

“Why does it have to be a crisis? Maybe you’re just having a gay.” Flora’s scissors gave a long rip, making Rex wince. “You *can* notice someone’s hotness without being attracted to them. I can tell when a man is attractive. It doesn’t mean I’d date one.”

“But I feel nervous every time I’m around her.”

“Are you sure that’s not because she keeps beating you up?”

“That’s almost always my fault.”

“That’s a dollar.”

Rex huffed. “What? That doesn’t count.”

“It counts. Dollar in the jar.”

Rex grumbled, but she dug a dollar out of her wallet and crossed the room to stuff it into the mason jar on Flora’s desk with the taped-on label, *Self-Deprecation Jar*. “What are you gonna buy when this is full?”

“Something that’s good for self-esteem.” The scissors gave another rip. “By the way, I’m getting you an interview with the *Circular* to talk about the dinosaurs.”

Still settling back at her workbench, Rex jolted up. “Why?”

“To get a story out there that isn’t ‘crazy person makes dinosaurs just because.’ We have to build a platform to appeal Oversight’s decision. Unless you want houseguests with permission to shoot you for the rest of your life.”

The nausea was getting old. Rex dropped her chin onto her blueprints and nudged the fallen newspaper further away with her toe. “How do you tell the difference between a real crush and a friend crush?”

“If you can’t tell the difference, I don’t know how to explain it to you.”

“I can tell them apart when they stop,” Rex said sullenly. Without raising her head, she pulled the wrinkled to-do list closer and eyed the second item on the list: break up with Dillon. She cringed. Maybe that could wait until tomorrow.

Flora sighed. “You’ve got to stop dating people you’re not attracted to. It’s confusing your emotional compass.”

Rex grumbled unintelligibly. If she did that, she might never date anyone.

A ping came from Flora's computer, and she—thank God—set her scissors aside to give it her attention. "Hm. The Oversight Committee has organized your surveillance team. We can expect them later this evening." That was fast. "I'm going to ask if they need any help with accommodations or transportation."

"We have to pick them up from the airport now?"

"The more cooperative we are, the better our position will be when we appeal." Flora's attention returned to the screen. "It looks like they've been organized by the list of locations you gave the lawyer, with two quartered here at home." She glanced up. "I should have been part of that conversation, by the way."

Flora was, after all, her lawyer. Rex was a dumbass. "Sorry, I didn't think of it."

Flora *hmm*ed. "They wanted to set guards at the old lab facility on Everglade, but I let them know it's been defuncted and zoned as a dumping ground for toxic waste since the incident with the mice."

Rex nodded solemnly and did not mention that Everglade was still powered and stocked. You never knew when you might need a safehouse.

"We should have Aya run background checks, starting with the two who will be living with us: Grant Underwood and Lewis Stone." Flora leaned back in her chair and glanced around the lab. "Where is Aya, by the way?"

Rex was careful not to tense up. "Charging." She nodded toward the shallow cup on a shelf where the metal eyes lay dormant.

"Doesn't she charge the eyes at night?" Flora's posture had straightened minutely. She looked across the room at Rex with a neutral expression. "You look tired."

It took effort not to fix her slouch. "Anxious. Didn't sleep much." True, but misleading.

Last night, after talking over the bad news with Flora, Rex had paced in her room for an hour or so. Then she'd snuck back downstairs barefoot

and in pajamas, taken the handle of their least-classy, whipped cream vodka from the freezer, and gone down to the lab.

It was a tight window—only seven or eight hours until Flora would be back in the kitchen for breakfast. She and Aya worked quickly, with occasional pauses to take a swig, transferring her most sensitive projects to private servers, neutralizing chemical agents, moving cultures to basement levels with higher security, digitalizing sketches, blueprints, and old records, and burning the paper copies.

The bulk of the time, however, had gone into some major rewiring in the lower levels. As convenient as it was to have the whole house integrated into one system, Rex hadn't planned for her home to be infiltrated and her whole life brought under the authority of strangers. The long rows of servers under the house needed to be inaccessible to anyone but her. The pair of eyes made a nice avatar, but those servers were Aya's real body.

Flora was glaring outright now, eyes magnified by her glasses. "We're cooperating fully with Oversight so we can get them out of our lives faster, remember?"

Rex nodded, going for casual. "Mm-hm."

Flora's chair squeaked as she pushed herself back. "Goddammit, Rex, if you're already pushing—"

"Just cleaning house." At this point, maintaining the lie would be an insult to Flora. "There were a lot of bad ideas lying around here. I have you to tell me when to scrap something, but that's not good enough if someone steals them."

Flora didn't look pacified. "It's not enough in any case, if the Oversight decision means anything."

Rex grunted, unsure if she meant it as acknowledgment or dismissal.

She'd ended last night sitting on the floor of the freezing sublevel, leaning against one of Aya's supercomputers, the handle of vodka half empty by her hip.

"Don't disable the weapons system," she'd told the metal eyes hovering over her lap.

“Ms. Shay said—”

“Yeah, but—don’t disable it.” Through the fog of exhaustion and alcohol, she’d acknowledged that her new babysitters would undoubtedly examine the security system and deem the laser guns in the walls unacceptable. “Well, okay. We’ll remove what they want. But don’t disable the knockout gas. It’s wide-dispersal, untargeted. We can make the argument that it doesn’t put them at a disadvantage if anyone in the house becomes a threat.”

“But you are inoculated against the knockout gas in the home system.”

Rex had nodded and taken another small mouthful of vodka, deciding it would have to be the last if she didn’t want to be drunk at breakfast with Flora. “Yeah. But they don’t know that.”



Rex had enough time to handle the dinosaurs’ move to their new facilities before the Oversight team arrived. As per her agreement with Animal Control yesterday, she’d rushed the conversion of their habitats at Peak Street overnight, bringing the security up to a level that the most bumbling technician couldn’t sabotage.

Her guilt returned as she inspected the upgraded space and wondered how she’d come up with the guidelines in the first place, considering dinosaurs were long extinct. She should probably be filtering the air more thoroughly to simulate ancient-Earth conditions—unless she’d engineered the clones with today’s atmosphere in mind. She’d have to revisit her notes.

When she arrived at the dinosaurs’ temporary housing—kennels for very big dogs, she guessed—a cacophony of squawks, rumbles, and screeches greeted her past the heavy containment doors. Two jump-suited Animal Control workers tossed food through the bars with faces frozen in a look of lost patience.

Before Rex could blurt out an apology from self-preservation instinct alone, there was a sudden volume increase and the dinosaurs crowded against the bars, calling and stepping on each other. Two winged micro-

raptors scrambled up the back of a waist-high deinonychus to cling to the metal mesh at her eye level, squawking as the deinonychus rattled their perch with a head bash and a thick-clawed foot. She hoped that was a happy greeting and not related to her part in stopping their rampage.

Animal Control waved her back toward the lobby. When the doors closed behind them, cutting the noise in half, one said without preamble, “I hope none of the big ones are gonna eat each other, because we put them all in Montgomery Stadium behind big-ass blast doors. When are you getting them out of there?”

This wasn’t the first time Rex needed someone willing to handle large, hostile animals. She called the closest circus company, and they actually sounded flattered to be chosen.

As her lab techs supervised the transfer, she finally got all her apologies out to Animal Control. They listened stoically, and by the time her dinosaurs were sleeping off the tranqs in new habitats, they were leaving with a wave and the grudging forgiveness everyone in Decimen seemed willing to grant her.

When Rex got home, Flora told her the surveillance team was on their way to do an assessment of the house. The two of them stood on the front steps to receive a full military convoy like a pair of dignitaries. Or maybe like a pair of traitors waiting for extradition. For the first time in a while, Rex felt underdressed in her usual sweatpants and T-shirt. At least she hadn’t had to worry about bedhead since she sacrificed her hair to the almighty electric buzzer of lab safety.

The team consisted of one squad of nine soldiers and an officer—maybe a lieutenant?—who had the squarest jaw Rex had ever seen and looked at her like an assistant principal who’d pinned her as the problem child he would be putting in their place this semester. Rex forgot all their names except for the two Flora had said would be living with them. Typical of her luck, they were the two biggest men in the gaggle.

Flora must have recognized that Rex was getting panicky because she started questioning Lieutenant Quinten. Flora probably said his name

because she knew Rex hadn't caught it about the limitations on their government-mandated invasion of privacy. And there were limitations, apparently. After the home inspection, they wouldn't be allowed in her private rooms, or Flora's, although there would be scheduled searches. She also had some leeway in public—she could eat at a restaurant without a soldier sitting at the table, for example, as long as one waited outside.

The outline of her remaining freedoms helped Rex relax enough to leave Flora to iron out the details while she hovered around the pair of soldiers examining her security system.

The blond one—Paul? Percy? Something with a P—marveled at the laser guns' tracking program, and they talked excitedly about coding for weapons systems even as he dismantled it.

Flora had mentioned that the surveillance team was selected partially based on their scientific backgrounds. They would bring in experts to scrutinize her projects more closely—or as close to experts as they could get, since Rex was Rex—but Oversight didn't want the on-site surveillance to be totally ignorant of what she was doing. She hadn't considered that those measures might mean that she could have conversations about work with her babysitters.

"I don't think we should take out all the hardware, since your whole house is basically a gun," the blond guy said. "I wouldn't be surprised if this mess is load bearing."

She snorted a surprised laugh.

"Let's just take out key components," he continued, addressing both Rex and his fellow soldier. "We'll make an inventory of what's confiscated so you can get it back or get compensated for it when you're done being grounded by America."

Rex found her stress level significantly lifted by the interaction, which said something about how tightly wound she'd been. She wished this guy was one of the two living with her. Alas, it wasn't to be.

Knowing her lab would be next in the inspection, Rex left Aya to watch the soldiers and headed downstairs for a last look over of the space. She'd

been as thorough as she could last night, but she'd still only had one night and no opportunity to move anything off-site.

The *ding* of the lab door made her jump.

One of the soldiers had stepped inside—one of the big ones. Lewis Stone, she was pretty sure. She'd only gotten a cursory look at him in the hand-shaking line. He was, again, large. Tall, heavy, clearly muscled but not cut—like a football player with a belly. His hair, light brown and barely darker than his skin, was in a short afro; maybe it was as long as he was allowed to keep it. Did Oversight have rules like that? Everyone in the squad had conservative haircuts, but they weren't uniform. His gaze found her in the middle of the lab, and his eyes narrowed.

At five-foot-eight, Rex didn't often have to deal with people looming over her, but when they did, she despised it. She tracked his approach from the corner of her eye, her back straightening. He knew what he was doing—he had to. Stepping close enough to make her look up but still far enough back that telling him to stop wasn't worth the risk of him refusing. She reminded herself of the lab's secondary exit so she wouldn't back away or flip her shit about him standing between her and the door.

Rex regretted not installing speakers to go with the cameras throughout the house. Though Aya was fully integrated into the home system, she would've felt less alone if Aya's voice could join her.

"There are cameras in every room. Aya is always watching." Did she sound rattled? No. She was doing fine.

A sneer rolled across his face and was replaced by a blank look. "You shouldn't be in here before the inspection's done," he said, sounding bored. His eyes never left her.

"No one told me. Unless it's in writing somewhere, literally no notification was given. If they can bump me up tiers for that they might as well lock me away now."

Again, that little pull of disgust at his mouth. "Get back upstairs."

Rex made herself walk past him, then in front of him until they reached the next landing. Like hell was she going to do the you-go-first dance and

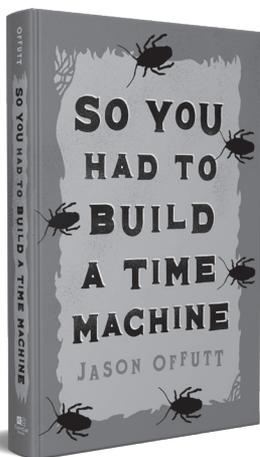
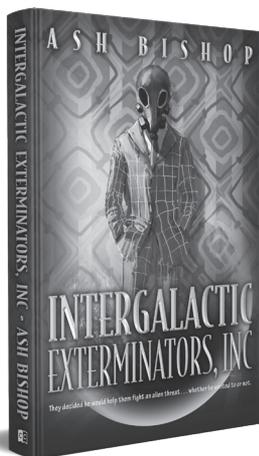
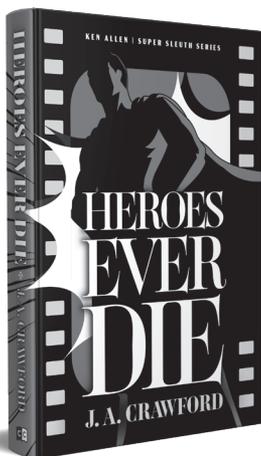
give him the chance to make her bend. She gave him a polite but cold, “You can ask Aya if you need anything while you’re here,” before they parted. When she was alone, she noticed how fast her heart was racing. Noticing that triggered her hands to shake.

After ensuring that she was alone, she leaned against a wall and took deep breaths, collecting herself. That pit was behind her again, right where the wall met the floor. She took a final, deep breath and drew herself up to return to Flora and Lieutenant Quinten.

That wasn't so bad. She could do this, easy. It wasn't like it was the first time she'd had to live with someone she didn't trust.

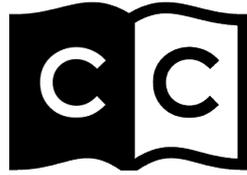


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Rex would rather stay out of it and deal with the dinosaurs that keep calling her Mom, but she can't ignore that she was somewhat responsible for Last Dance's villainy. She'd kept a very disorganized lab. And he was such a nosy brother. She failed to help him back then, but maybe if she stops him now—and keeps the heroes fooled—she can finally set things right.



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