

Short (Back)Story: Extinguished Legacies

20 Years Ago...

Renata and Jorge Carillo stood 10 miles from Halcyon City's limit, waiting for the monster -- man? -- to finish dissolving the suburban McMansion whose backyard they were in. They were the youngest of City Command, the elite superheroes who protected, influenced, and were adored by Halcyon City's people, and their abilities were best used here, stopping Toxin from permanently scarring the ground he trod.

"So what's the plan, Eye?" Jorge said, using her hero name, as they always did when on duty. "I'm mostly useless here."

"Hm... I'm thinking, give me a sec." Eye took her moniker from the literal third-eye on her forehead -- about twice as large as her normal ones. When her surge happened, she'd thought she was getting an intense case of melanoma, but a day later the eye opened, fully formed. That had been two years ago, and the twins had been through tremendous upheaval since then, growing into who they thought they were meant to be. The third-eye flicked around wildly while the other two were closed in thought. "Okay, I got it. *Sleuth*," she emphasized, teasing him for taking a name incongruous with their dynamic.

She quickly outlined her plan, and Sleuth grinned.

Toxin and Nero were only distractions, and the younger members of City Command had been dispatched to deal with them. The twins and Energy would be more than enough for each, thought Maximilian. Despite his easy-going public image -- Million Max, here to save the day with a toothy smile and aw-shucks humility despite awesome power -- Maximilian hated the ritual hero-worship that went with the job. He'd easily redirected City News to follow Energy, given how flashy her powers were and the over-the-top performances Nero gave: that man had long ago realized the only way to capture the public imagination with a non-combative power was to be a villain. While the public focused on the sideshow, he and the rest of City Command were in a field on the other side of the city, miles away from the dense city center.

A field far too close to Halcyon Nuclear Power Plant for comfort.

A blur caught his eye, and Quantum materialized to his left. The air to his right tore in half, and out stepped Portal. Neither of them looked happy.

"We couldn't stop him, Maximilian. My portals ... I don't even know how to describe what his blasted machine did to them. It's as if he's a ghost," reported Portal, aghast at the failure of his previously unstoppable portal-jitsu.

Maximilian had observed the startling failures, despite the distance between him and the massive vehicle advancing inexorably through layer after layer of security barricades meant to

protect the power plant from marauding supervillains. He gestured at Quantum impatiently. "Well? What can you tell us?"

Quantum was tall, with crooked features; perhaps a few too many protons had punched him in the face. His expression wasn't dreamy, as it usually was during crisis scenarios, much to Maximilian's frustration. With an eye towards the future, Quantum was rarely fully present. Now, his black eyes glittered with an intensity neither of them had ever seen.

"The blue lights, they're surrounding him. I don't know how, but that truck is more blue than metal. He has even more than you, Max... Far more. Portal's blues abandoned him, unwilling to hurt their comrades. Even mine abandoned me when I tried to help. I've never seen anything like it." He paused, and took a shuddering breath. "He controls them, Max."

Maximilian stifled the shock he felt, keeping it from his face, and ignoring the confusion on Portal's. Quantum's words were often opaque to the others -- the blue lights were a secret kept from all but the two of them. And apparently Ragnarok, the government scientist turned supervillain whom they had *thought* was powerless. But what to do ...

"Understood. The two of you, tell Paragon that our powers won't work on his machine, and that he'll need to take the lead on this. Help him however you can, but don't directly engage. I'll see if I can buy us some time." He was, after all, the most powerful being on the planet.

Energy understood why Maximilian had sent her to deal with Nero, but she hated being sidelined while the others saved the world -- or, at least, the city. She would've made quick work of Nero's technological wonders but she'd been ordered to let him destroy the neighborhood he was in first and then take her time defeating him so the media would keep watching her. Paramount to their mission was never letting the public think there was any real danger, and seeing the vaunted, impregnable defenses of the power plant be flattened would ruin that. The updates she was getting through her earpiece were grim.

Besides, the docks here were mostly home to the criminal underworld like Nero himself. Letting him destroy it all was in the city's best interest: she'd heard that a few of the Council were eager to invest in the waterfront, if it could be cleaned up. The Heroes Fund would take care of any non-criminal inhabitants whose lives were uprooted, and they'd have a good story to tell, being saved by the beautiful and talented Energy, she told herself, so really, what was the harm?

The first of the robot spiders crawled out of the alley in front of her. It was immaculately decorated, with scary decals, glowing eyes, whirling lights, and some whirring, clicking, and hissing that were purely extraneous; none of Nero's creations needed to sound like they were steam-powered. But it made for a good show.

Energy sighed, glanced up to make sure the news chopper could see her, and then shouted "Is that all you've got, Nero? The good people of Halcyon City won't let you go any further!" She felt silly, shouting bold declarations instead of just taking care of business. But Maximilian had

taught her the value of showwomanship. Civilians got to feel like allos were there to serve, donations came rolling in, and nobody clamored for oversight. All in a day's work.

She could have destroyed the robot in an instant, sucking out its electricity and power supply, and then heating it enough to melt it. *Energy is a beautiful thing*, she thought, smiling at the double meaning for which she'd chosen her name. Instead, she took just enough power from it to mostly immobilize it, and flew forward like a very slow torpedo -- just slow enough to give the cameras a clear shot -- to punch it in its robot spider gut.

WHAM! The first punch knocked off the head, and she let her power leak to enhance the sound. Silently, she absorbed the rest of its energy, leaving only a metallic husk in place. Feeding it back enough electricity for the blinking lights, she delivered a series of exaggerated punches and kicks -- with a few *HIYAH!*s thrown in for good measure. Stepping back from the scrap metal, she looked towards the advancing spiders, made a *come-get-some* hand gesture, and leaped forward.

Sleuth quickly checked for stragglers, making sure that each path leading into a home later lead back out and away from the hazardous swath Toxin was carving as he took his sweet time walking straight through living rooms and garages on his way to the city, making slight detours to cut any nice cars in half. It had been quick work to scan through the paths in the area until he'd found what Eye requested: a fire hydrant close to yet just out of view of Toxin's trajectory. He wasn't a flashy hero -- that was his sister -- but he fancied that his human touch saved far more lives. Anyone he found, he'd point them on their way or leave them in place, if they were safe.

Eye hid near the fire hydrant, communicating with him telepathically to keep updated on Toxin's progress. Ironically, he thought to himself, he was her eyes. Once Toxin was a minute away from crashing through to the street where they'd trap him, Sleuth turned back, ready to be a target.

Okay, just count to 30 and he'll be here. Deep breaths. You won't get dissolved today, no sir.

Jorge? I've got you. Don't panic. She sent comforting vibes over their connection. It'd been a few years, but he always forgot that she was usually listening in during missions. Private thoughts weren't really private ... he was mercifully interrupted by Toxin breaking through the wall 15 yards away.

"Hey ugly! Your *rain* of terror ends here." He chuckled to himself, knowing that Toxin -- by all accounts not the brightest villain -- didn't get the joke. But he would. Any moment now. Toxin took a few steps forward, his face twisted in what was likely a smile (it was hard to tell, the sludge covering his body distorted the light despite being mostly translucent). A few more steps and ...

BOOM!

Eye opened the fire hydrant and used her powers to shape the water's path. Instead of spraying all over, she directed it in the fire hose of her mind's eye to douse Toxin, diluting his sludge and, judging by the screaming, subjecting him to extreme agony. Once the cries stopped, and he lay motionless on the ground, she twisted the valve shut and cut off the water.

“So do we just wait here for Maximilian to come get him?” she asked. Jorge shrugged. Neither of them relaxed -- the sludge was reforming around Toxin’s unconscious body faster than they’d anticipated.

Paragon stood on top of the power plant’s watch tower and listened, stone-faced, as Quantum and Portal filled him in on what had happened. Paragon was the least public of all the heroes, and had never been successfully photographed -- his gear gave off enough interference to make it impossible. As Quantum would say, in his endearing gibberish, the blue lights completely ignored him. He was purely human, and as such his weaponry would function as expected against Ragnarok, or so Quantum conjectured.

“Let Maximilian draw fire first. We need to see what it can do before I jump in guns blazing. *I am not invulnerable.*” His jab was unspoken, yet Portal flinched. If Ragnarok had noticed that either of them were attacking him, he hadn’t shown it. He didn’t even deploy a countermeasure against what were supposed to be two of the most powerful allos on the planet. Paragon had chosen his perch firmly within the defensive layers, safe from an errant bolt of whatever weaponry that thing had. Not that it had used any yet.

The three of them turned to watch as Million Max, invulnerable and all-powerful, flew at the vehicle. He seldom acted himself, preferring to make only token appearances for the media’s sake. This was an occasion to behold.

The beholding was decidedly disappointing. He unleashed his energy blasts at full power, only to have them sizzle out once they came within a few inches of the vehicle’s surface. Under sustained barrage, Paragon noticed the paint curling up on the side, but nothing more serious. Clearly deciding direct action was the way to go, Maximilian flew in front of the machine, wound up, and unleashed a punch into its grill.

He then shook out his hand, and the look of shock on his face was unmistakable. It had *hurt*. More than a decade had passed since anything *hurt* Million Max.

The massive vehicle slowed to a stop. The cockpit glass, previously darkened, lightened enough for Ragnarok’s face to be visible. He looked beyond delighted, as he shouted out “I know how hard it must be, to be you. Let me teach you something you’ve probably forgotten since you were a kid: getting run over is supposed to be unpleasant.” Maximilian looked up in shock, as the vehicle lurched forward, apparently unfazed, and ran him over.

A few seconds later, the three men -- mouths agape -- watched Maximilian push himself out of the impression he’d left in the ground. He flew up to them, bloody and looking extremely vulnerable.

“Paragon,” he gasped. “You’re our only hope.”

Paragon nodded, and steadied himself. Taking on the giant death machine from the front was not his style. But Maximilian was not prone to idle flattery, not once the cameras were off. He

checked his gauges, activated his flight suit, and took off, immediately dodging a plasma bolt fired from the machine. Ragnarok clearly had thought ahead.

He flew up high, trying to sweep a large arc across the sky, drawing fire and looking desperately for a blindspot in the weapons array. Finding none, he navigated straight overhead, and dropped a smoke bomb to give him some breathing room. After a moment's hesitation, the barrage of plasma bolts resumed, firing straight up into the cloud, assuming he would be making a frontal, aerial assault.

Instead, Paragon dropped back and down to ground level, keeping close behind the machine and hopefully in a blindspot. He took a moment to ready all systems, then darted around to the side of it. As soon as he was clear of the back, his suit let loose all the missiles he had, targeted at the underbelly and, fingers crossed, the axles. Once the explosions started, he was back in the air, retreating to a safe distance -- but not safe enough.

A plasma bolt ripped through his vanguard and another fizzled out against his back, missing his flesh by millimeters and compromising his flight. Ripping off the melted piece on his arm, he queried the system about the damage. *Flight Capacity: 60%*. Damn it, he thought. With only 60 percent, he wouldn't be able to get high enough. A portal opened in front of him, offering him a way back to safety, behind the defenses of the power plant. He took it.

A disoriented moment later, he took stock of Ragnarok's vehicle. Looking down, it had stopped in its tracks, and was now shooting plasma bolts seemingly at random. "That's brought us some time. We need to call in the National Guard to come get this thing, if your powers can't do anything to it. I don't really dare get closer to it, I can't pull that trick again and a lucky shot will take me out of the sky."

"No," Maximilian said sharply. "No National Guard yet. You still have guns, no? Portal can send your bullets where they need to be, we'll crack him open and drag him out."

Both men nodded assent. Paragon readied his guns, and Portal opened a small hole, connecting the space in front of them to a patch 6-inches across aimed squarely at Ragnarok's cockpit. Bullets flew, magically disappearing from in front of them and distantly audible as they crashed into the reinforced glass. When both clips emptied, Paragon reloaded and paused to see what the effect had been.

Ragnarok's face was visible behind the now cracked glass. He grinned, unfazed by the sudden hail of bullets. He waved saucily, and appeared to press a button. From above, Maximilian gasped -- for the second time, most unlike him -- as the top of the vehicle hissed and launched forward, separating from the main chassis with a rocket engine on the back. The tip of the smaller section hit the portal and came through, forcing the gap wide as Portal staggered backwards, taken aback by the feeling of his powers involuntarily expanding the portal. The launched vehicle thundered past the trio, successfully bypassing the remaining defenses and shooting straight for the reactor core, between the cooling towers.

Eye and Sleuth watched as Toxin's eyes slammed open, and his screams started anew. Eye instinctively began reaching towards the fire hydrant once more, but stopped as she realized he wasn't getting up.

"Wait, what..." she said, trailing off as Toxin's skin started bubbling underneath his own sludge. Bubbling just like the terrain he'd left in his wake, melted and dissolved. "Oh shit, we've got to help him! He melting himself!"

"No! It's a trick, Eye, there's no way."

She ignored him, and tried to open up the hydrant valve, only to find that her third eye wasn't responding to her. She tried harder, and realized she couldn't feel anything else. Not even Sleuth's familiar mind nearby.

"Jorge! I can't sense you anymore! I can't open it either."

Sleuth briefly focused, testing his own abilities.

Nothing happened.

They both leaped towards the hydrant, struggling to operate it with just their hands. By the time they got the water flowing, Toxin was no more.

Energy hated having to perform for the cameras, but she had to admit that physically engaging with the robots was kinda fun. Something about punching them with fists full of fire was more satisfying than simply willing them to be a pile of molten metal.

Her next punch was decidedly *not* full of fire. It bounced off the inert metal of the robot she'd already immobilized, and damn did it *hurt*. *What the ...* she began thinking, cut off by the realization that more spiders were around her and she needed to deal with them. She reached out to steal their electricity, but nothing happened.

Shit.

She made a tactical retreat, trying to buy time while figuring out what happened. As they got closer -- damn, they were faster than she'd realized, now that she wasn't using any borrowed energy -- she decided living was more important than looking calm for the cameras. Whatever weird illness she had, the public would understand. They loved her after all, and sometimes the drama of letting the villain win temporarily was worth it.

She turned and ran, but the spiders were faster.

Far above, the City News reporters looked on in horror, forgetting the primetime restrictions on profanity. They watched as she was torn apart, her screams echoing in their minds long after they stopped.