

“Put your hands up. I want your money, not your lives—but if you to make a move I won’t think twice.”

It was something right out of a movie or perhaps a song. For Avia Goldstein, it was a growing part of her life. Never from this angle before though. She was normally showing up a few moments later to thwart the attack as her developing alter ego, the spritely Miss Golem.

Her date, not knowing her identity, moved between her and the scared looking man. Everyone but her was shaking. “Stay behind me, Avia.”

She tried not to laugh as his voice wavered. Perhaps that was too cruel, he was trying to be heroic. Just because she had been in this situation a dozen times over did not make his effort any lesser, just foolish. She knew a bullet was no threat to her, but she supposed he did not.

“I mean it,” their attacker stammered. “I’ll shoot.” He clicked the hammer back on what looked to be a nine-mil pistol and her instincts took over. Pulling at the brick on either side of the alleyway, she hardened her arms and jumped forward. There was a bang. A gasp. Then the man hit the pavement gasping for breath.

Avia kept pulling at the bricks, hardening the rest of her just in case he had a knife. Her body shrank as the essence of manufactured stone seeped into her body. Her skin turned a ruddy brown as it became rough like sandpaper. She felt her feet sink into the asphalt as she became more and more dense. Her shapely legs hardened, her stone flesh sculpting into a subtle bulge of muscle. When she spoke, the sound was distorted, shrill. Like the song of a siren.

“I’m going to be nice since I’m on a date,” she growled. “So, if you can get up, you can walk away.”

The man whimpered and remained balled on the ground. She picked up his pistol and slid the clip out. It was empty. She cupped the muzzle with one hand and pulled the slide back with the other. There was no bullet in the chamber either. Suddenly irritated that there had been no danger, no reason to

reveal herself, she crushed the firearm in her grasp and dropped the twisted scrap to the ground.

“You okay?” She looked at her date who was white as a sheet under his scruffy beard. He shook his head as he stumbled backwards and then booked it once he reached the corner. Avia sighed and called the police. How had Valentine's Day ended up like this?

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Years Later...

As she stepped off the gangway into the airport proper, Avia was every inch a celebrity trying to travel incognito. She pushed her sunglasses up her pointed nose and made a beeline for the bathroom. Standing at the mirror, she glanced around to make sure no one was around before closing her eyes. Taking a long drawn out breath, she communed with the cement that the massive building consisted of.

Collecting essence from the stone around her had become a calming ritual over the last year. She knew full well it was a coping mechanism to deal with what was becoming an identity crisis that she had to face at some point. It had been so much easier to be just Avia and nothing else. Now, she had to balance between the demands being both Av.Gold and Miss Golem placed on her.

One one hand, the rising international modeling sensation Av.Gold was tall, curvy, and every inch the definition of conventionally sexy. On the other, Miss Golem was the lithe, pixie-esc hero of New Delphi known for keeping crime off the streets around Wrexil College. They were both her and yet, neither of them were.

How long had it been since she felt at home in her own skin? The Av.Gold brand had outgrown anything she could have expected ever since some big-name actress had worn one of her dresses and her Instagram had blown up. It had only been a couple months, but it felt like a lifetime. Her professional life had become this snarl that everyone was watching her untangle. Even on a personal level, dealing with the influx of attention was almost as overwhelming as facing down the dastardly Prof. Danger or the looming meeting with the recently revived Greatest Soldier at the Hall of Heroes.

She had begun striving to look ordinary by channeling just enough of her ability that she settled on somewhere in the middle. Somewhere ordinary.

Satisfied with her disguise, she headed down to baggage claim. She avoided the escalators and people movers, as the motorized platforms would have been unable to deal with her weight. Not that taking the stairs was any less of a problem. The welded steel plates that connected the tiers of the airport would likely not hold her up. It was looking like she was going to have to take an elevator.

Since she decided to always be half transformed, elevators had become awkward for Avia. As the car descended towards the ground floor, she could hear the cable protesting. Others in the elevator with her seemed nervous about the sound, the small crowd starting to fidget. She tried to not notice their reactions, to not feel guilty that she was the cause of this distress, but being a hero meant helping people. With a sigh, she closed her eyes and focused on loosening her grasp on the cement she just had picked up.

As the shuddering grew worse, she released her hold on the stone within. In a wave, she felt her body relax back to the her the world knew as Av.Gold. Her bust and hips pushed out against her baggy travel clothes. Hems of shirts and pants alike rose as her height returned to the six-foot-plus normal. Her sneakers got uncomfortably tight. She knew from experience her pallid complexion had just flooded with color. She just hoped the people around her would not notice what she had become in the span of a breath.

A ding lead to the door opening. She hurried to step out which is when someone gasped. She turned on reflex, brushing her dark hair out of her face. A woman with a toddler was staring at her.

“Mommy, that lady’s undies are showing!”

Heat spread over her face as Avia realized where the waistband of her pants was. It must have slid while she was transformed and then pushed the rest of the way down when her butt returned to normal. Blushing furiously, she hiked up her pants and hurried away. Her haste attracted attention from the

male portion of the population as her body shook with each rapid step. Someone was bound to notice her. Stupid. She was so stupid for trying to blend in and not just wearing the right clothes for being herself instead. There was nothing more she wanted than to get to get out of here and to her room.

Fortunately her bags were already rolling around the carousel when she arrived. Only when she reached for them, other hands got there first. Nearing her limit, she turned to yell only to find herself facing a tall woman with a reddish-brown complexion. She was garbed in an outfit that was somewhere between jumpsuit and military fatigues, the black fabric complemented by bright orange piping and lightning bolt patches.

She had a roguish smile on her strong-jawed face, her full lips raised to one side. An orange lightning bolt tattoo was splashed over her left eye, which itself was a black dot in a sea of white. Her mass of poofy hair was pulled back under a wide band and faded from black to orange. Avia had a feeling she had seen her before.

“Welcome to Champion City, Miss G.” Her voice carried an accent born of learning English abroad and Avia had a flash of realization. This was Rookie Hero of the Year, Naomi Bolt from South Africa. All of sudden she remembered the lightning user was apparently her handler for the duration of her stay in the city.

“Just Avia, please. Anything else feels...weird.”

Naomi raised an eyebrow but then smiled. “Well, you can call me Naomi then. I trust your flight was comfortable?”

“As comfortable as coach can be,” she said before catching movement in the glass over the other woman’s shoulder. There was a horde of people with cameras moving towards them. It seemed her arrival had finally attracted attention. “Is it possible we can skip the pleasantries?”

She responded to Naomi’s confused head tilt and slightly hurt expression with a jerk over her shoulder at the pack of paparazzi no doubt hoping to get a shot of her not dressed up.

“Ah, yes, let’s. There’s a car just outside.”

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The first twenty minutes of the drive were uneventful. The limo was cavernous, especially after flying coach, and its two bench seats was intensely comfortable. Her conversation with Naomi was mostly small talk that tapered off. Their driver zoomed along the highway in silence.

She turned her attention outside and stared off into the distance. Champion City was tall and winding, full of bright and loud and so many cars. Once a small town, it had grown up considerably since the war and the establishment of a superhero order. Considered to be the most modern city in the country, the inventions of Heart Industries were evident as far as the eye could see.

“You will want to transform when we arrive,” Naomi said as they got off the highway. “There will be lots of press and while my identity might be public, I know your...complicated situation makes that a challenge. I would hate for the world to find out who you are before you feel like you can handle that.”

“Are we not going to the hotel first?”

“You missed the memo since you were in the air, but the meeting got moved up. Some foreign dignitary’s schedule had a last minute change so we all had to jump to get things started early.”

“Ah, right. Then I’ll need some amount of stone.”

“To absorb? I have something I think you’ll enjoy.” Naomi turned and clicked the locks on a briefcase. She pulled something out and tossed it to Avia. It was hunk of eliat. The blue-green stone seemed to shimmer in her grasp as her body unconsciously pulled at it. The familiar tingle of her transformation spread over the back of her hands and down her arms as the supermodel her was partially replaced by the smaller superhero version.

“I know you like to wear your homeland’s stone for formal occasions, so I took the liberties of securing a chunk from a copper mine back home.”

“How...did you know that?” She asked, putting the chunk of rock on the seat next to her and

letting her arms return to normal. Her hands were sore after transforming so many times in an hour, it was a feeling she had forgotten.

“It’s in your file, the one I built after doing recon on you.”

“You..wait, what?”

“I did your background investigation,” Naomi said with a hand wave and a mischievous smile. “It is easy for someone like me to access digital records quickly after all.” She winked, sending off a spark of orange lightning.

“Is that why you’re my liaison?”

“Correct, I know you better than anyone else at the Hall. Besides we have good chemistry. I know because we’ve spoke several times already, actually.” She passed her hand over her face and there was a flash as her features changed into those of the hunky new barista at the cafe near Avia’s studio.

“That’s certainly a handy trick,” Avia said with a soft whistle. “Are you actually shape shifting? That seems like a stretch of your powerset.”

“No,” there was another flash and her features shifted back. “It’s a perception thing. I can alter what your nerves see through the static field around me.”

“That’s...actually kind of powerful.”

Naomi rubbed the back of her neck. “I suppose so, but it really only works in situations like with the cafe, where you are already not paying the most attention.”

“I guess that makes sense, a person on auto-pilot isn’t thinking about whom they are speaking with.”

“Indeed. Anyway, suit up because we’re here.”

Avia picked up the rock once more and noticed Naomi was watching intently. Knowing that she had Naomi’s rapt attention, she actually relished the feeling of becoming one with the Israeli rock. The

rippling sensation of power as her body grew denser and stronger was intoxicating in a way it had not been in years. Even as she shrank, it felt like she was growing in other ways as a part of her, one that had lain dormant since dating grew difficult, began to stir. It made sense another hero would be able to deal with her being two people. Maybe that was what she had been missing, but was this really the time to think about that? Maybe it was the best time, better to think about that than the horde of people waiting to be seen with her.

“Hey, you ready?”

“Almost,” Avia responded as the stone crept up her scalp and rendered her bald. The green sheen of the eliat gave her an alien appearance. She did not normally go full cowl, opting instead for a mask, but she wanted to look as different as possible. “Okay, let’s go.”

Opening the limo door, the duo was hit with a wave of sound and light so intense it was almost a tide. Cameras flashed and there was a lot of shouting. People wearing replicas of her mask or shirts emblazoned with the jagged fist she left as a calling card were pressing against temporary barricades. There were a fair share of fans there to see Naomi as well, judging by many in the crowd were sporting ball caps and shirts with orange lightning bolts.

Avia clenched. The car sank a little on its suspension as she grew heavier. Even with all of her public appearance training as Av.Gold, this initial moment always verged on terrifying. She would take a fist fight any day over this. Intimidated, she shrank back in the limo as she felt shards of crystal begin to form on her elbows and shoulders. There was a touch on her hip. A glance to her left found Naomi smiling as she waved.

“I’m right here with you,” she said between clenched teeth, a wink setting off sparks both from her eye and, curiously, in Avia’s chest. It was like experiencing a cool breeze. Just what was she feeling all of a sudden? Was this really attraction? Now?

Renewed shouts pulled her attention back to the moment. Feeling bolder, Avia nodded and

together, they stepped into the crowd.

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It was not until later that Avia got to thank Naomi for her support. They were sitting around in what was her suite for the week. An open bottle of Moscato chilled on the counter as they killed time before a public function Av.Gold was supposed to be attending. She had changed into casual clothes, a pair of oversized basketball shorts and a soft, gray t-shirt that broke up her form a bit so she did not look nearly so busty. She was never sure how successful the endeavor was, it always felt like her big boobs were noticeable anytime she was not Miss Golem.

“Happy to help,” Naomi said from the half bar as she poured herself a second glass. The lightning user was still in the same fatigues-like cat-suit with pouches and pockets galore. “My handler did the same for me on my first trip. It gets easier once you’re cleared and can use the less visible methods to travel.”

Avia looked down into her glass as she swirled her wine. It was her third and she could feel it starting to go to her head, but it was also the only thing keeping her from running away from the situation. She felt like the meet and greet at the Hall of Heroes could have gone much better and she sort of just wanted to go lie down to forget about it.

“I’m really not sure how that went. I don’t get why I’m so bad at talking to people as Miss Golem.”

“I think it went well. I mean, everyone thinks you’re a teen hero since you were so awkward, but aside from that...”

“You’d think all the years of modeling training or art critique would have prepared me for all this a bit more.”

“It is a different kind of environment. You just have to smile and look pretty, right?”

“Well, actually it feels like I’m more like a stereotypical model as a superhero-” she began, but



Naomi waved her hands.

“That’s not quite what I meant. As a hero you’re as much a symbol as you are a person and that’s much more than just being sexy. I know you’re not just some arm candy. You design things for people to wear, but isn’t that your passion? Don’t you want to talk about your ideas and influences when at fashion events?”

“I guess I never thought about it like that. I do feel much more confident when talking to the press about fashion than what it means to be a heroine.”

“See? Don’t get so down on yourself, I know you’re a great person, with a lot to contribute, and I can’t wait to work with you more.”

“Speaking of working together, what’s the story with you being around me all week? Are you supposed to be my bodyguard while I’m in town or something?”

“Something like that, yeah,” Naomi leaned back against the raised counter and took a drink.

“Are you staying here with me then?” Avia asked looking up from her glass.

Naomi gagged on her drink and Avia realized what she had said. She sat up straight in the arm chair and stammered an apology, even as her heart fluttered at the idea of getting to spend more time with Naomi.

“It’s okay, I just, um, you had been rather reserved all afternoon—and even during my observations—so you saying that took me off guard, but, yes, I will be staying with you for the duration of your stay. Champion City is my second home after all. So don’t hesitate to ask me about--”

“What’s your favorite place to grab a bite to eat?” Avia said, shifting her feet under her butt as she leaned forward.

She noticed after the fact that she pushed her boobs together, making their curves rise in the shirt. Naomi glanced down, blushed and then looked away. Something about the badass looking heroine being flustered was endearing. She had this air of always being prepared, so to think she had not

anticipated this interaction gave Avia a sense of boldness.

“Um, aren’t we going to a reception in a bit?” Naomi seemed confused and, at the same time, amused. “Won’t there be food to eat there?”

“I mean for after,” Avia felt herself getting up, the wine convincing her to move. “I want to see what the most modern city in the country has to offer.”

“Oh, then yeah. I know I great place.”

“Excellent,” she said as she leaned against the counter next to her companion. “Just what I wanted to hear. It’s a date then.” She was not flustered this time when she realized what she had said. Naomi however, seemed a bit conflicted. She licked her lips as her eyes flicked between Avia’s chest and face. With an audible gulp, she stepped away and swallowed down the rest of her glass.

“Did you just say...a date?” She said, turning around.

“Yeah, a date,” Avia said with a smile. “We’ll talk about our pasts over dessert or something. See if there’s any common ground.”

“Why? To what end?”

“Because I...well, I like you.”

“Like me? You just met me.”

“Yeah,” Avia put her hand to her face and laughed even as she began to blush. “You’re right...it’s probably the wine talking. I’m going to go take a shower and get ready...”

“No, wait, I...I suppose it’s only fair that you get to ask me questions about my past since I dug into yours.”

“Oh. Yeah, that makes sense. That’s...that’s totally what I meant.” Avia scrunched her mouth up and her eyebrows down, as if trying to swallow something sour. She nodded numbly as the enormity of what she had just done finally hit her. She shrugged and ambled off.

“Avia...” Naomi began, but she had already closed the door to her room. How could she have been so stupid twice in one day? She turned the shower on, spinning the knob as far towards hot as she could. Gripping the marble countertop, she let herself drop into the chill transformation. Her clothes slowly grew too large. The shirt’s collar slid down one shoulder as the shorts dropped around her ankles. Steam steadily filled the room as what was likely near-boiling water crashed against the tile. She stepped into the cascade, but felt nothing. Not even the pitter-patter of water breaking over her skin.

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“Yeah, I’m so fortunate that the Heroes Association could fit me in at the last minute--and with such a top level heroine!”

Avia was completely wrapped up in being Av.Gold as a group of people stood around her and Naomi. She smiled, she bubbled, and her outfit could not have been more on point if she were a pyramid.

A tight corseted dress pulled her already absurd build into a realm that was almost cartoonish. Beneath that, she was wearing two bras to further accentuate her bust and cleavage. They must have looked like they were bigger than her head judging from how everyone’s eyes seemed glued to a space below her face.

She had done her hair up in a complex crown of braids. Taming the curls while not making it look like she had spent five hours under a hair dryer. A brush of powder and glitter on her neck and chest softened her complexion as dark colors outlines her lips and eyes. She felt like a wreck, but dammit she was going to be a sexy wreck.

Conversation with Naomi had been brief and businesslike since her tisbury confession. Avia could tell she wanted to talk about it, but Av.Gold had no time for something that was going to make her eyeliner run so she kept changing the topic when it came up.

At least the lightning superheroine had the sense to change into something more formal. Granted, that formal attire was a black suit with orange accents, but Avia was not complaining. Naomi looked amazing in a suit and the ever-present consistency spoke volumes about her commitment to her superhero identity being part of her. It was almost enviable.

“So what are you in town for?” Asked a man in a turtleneck sweater with a carefully groomed beard.

“I have a meeting about a purchase this week and there is also a fashion show which my newest dress line is being debuted at. I LOVE it when I can do two things at the same time.” Not meaning to, she caught Naomi’s eye as she said it. Her companion opened her mouth as if gasping and then pursed her lips.

Someone else in the circle of people spoke up. “So what made you want to be a bodyguard, Miss Bolt?”

“Naomi, please, and there’s a certain satisfaction in working closely with someone. Getting to know them and their habits. Being able to fit into their schedule, to adapt to their idiosyncrasies, it’s the perfect training for undercover work.”

“I can’t imagine you’re a big fan of fashion, too busy being heroic and all, so what made you pick Av.Gold as your mark?”

Naomi’s eye sparked, like it had shorted out in indignation at the implications of that question. “I was simply assigned this task. Nothing more.”

Avia slumped like she had taken a body blow, but grinned and waved it away when someone asked if she was okay.

“That might have been my answer before,” Naomi continued. “But there’s something about my client that I’ve begun to find intriguing. Her passion for clothing is astounding. Did you know she spent nearly six hours getting ready for this?”

The circle of people laughed.

“But more than that, she’s earnest and hardworking. I get the feeling she’s the kind of person for whom all this glitz is a little overwhelming sometimes.”

Several people all started to speak at the same time when there was a loud bang. Smoke filled the room as the sound of gunfire bounced between the ceiling and floor. The lights went out and the room got very dark as only the skyline lit the hall.

“Attention, party goers! We are The Rat Pack and we’d like you to put all your shiny things in our bags. Quickly now, we’ve not got all day.” Men in rat-styled trilbys, wearing dark goggles and bandanas over their faces moved through the crowd. One hand held a pillow case. The other, a TMP. They began to gather people in the middle of the room.

Naomi pulled Avia to the ground and under the draping of a table. At first, she was shocked. Then she realized it was actual bodyguard behavior. With the black heroine laying on top of her, Avia could feel just how built she was under those well-tailored clothes. This was definitely not the time for those thoughts though.

“We going to do something about these guys?” Avia whispered.

“I am not sure that’s a great idea. There’s a lot of people here.”

“If they’re all in the middle of the room, I can probably protect them. Besides, I think they guys are using night vision goggles.”

“Oh, I get you. That’s great.”

They peered out from under the table. All of the other guests were in a press on the dance floor. Avia closed her eyes and pulled on the building. Shrinking against Naomi sent a shudder down her spine that she could swear was reciprocated as the other heroine gasped. Something about this transformation felt different. Even as she reached what she considered her maximum saturation, she kept pulling on the stone around her.

“Miss G, you’re growing…”

Indeed she was. With soft pops, she was swelling larger. The subtle curve of muscles became more distinct, until she looked almost like a Renaissance statue. Her sense of stone was so strong she could almost grab hold of the steel in the building’s frame. Her body throbbed from head to toe. She was vibrating with power in a way she had no idea she could. Was this a desire to protect Naomi? Whatever the reason, she had never been happier to be a hero.

“Let’s do this!”

Knocking the table up on its side got the attention of The Rat Pack. She shielded Naomi as the lighting user bolted the ceiling bringing the lights back on in a flash. Rushing the group of thieves, she swept two off their feet before getting between them and the crowd. Blots of orange light hit two more, sending them flying and leaving only a few on their feet. The crackle of energy between Naomi’s outstretched hands filled the room as she stalked towards them. Still throbbing, Avia continued to steadily grow larger, her body becoming a barrier. As the bandits turned to fire on the crowd to keep Naomi at bay, she and them both realized how big she had gotten. They dropped their weapons and ran.

“You know, Miss G, we make a pretty good team.”

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“And now a follow up on an earlier report. We have the identity of the two heroines that stopped a party robbery in Zantoth tower this evening. First is Naomi Bolt, the acclaimed Rookie Hero of the Year. This is her twentieth act of superheroism since coming to the states and Champion City is glad to have her. The other was up-and-comer Miss Golem of West Delphi. We spoke with Miss Golem at the scene.”

Avia groaned and turned in the booth to look at the TV over the diner bar. Naomi grabbed her hand.

“Miss, what would you say to the rumors that are now circulating about you being the fashion icon

Av.Gold? She was not among those captured, yet she was on the guest list of the party.”

“I’m sure Av.Gold’s security staff did their best to keep her out of harm’s way.” Avia squeezed Naomi’s hand.

“Security staff? As in Naomi Bolt? Who responded to the incident moments after it began.”

“Yes, the very same.”

“Are you meaning to tell me The Bolt secured her client, called for backup, and responded before the thieves escaped and no one saw Av.Gold leaving the building? I find that preposterous.”

“And I find you insufferable.” The camera panned up to Naomi floating in midair, a Rat Pack under each arm. “Miss Golem is my partner and I would not go anywhere without her.”

“Ugh, I can’t believe I said that,” Naomi said from behind her other hand.

“I mean, it’s retroactively the truth, right?” Avia said glancing over to look her in the face.

“That remains to be seen,” Naomi said with a smile. “But, I certainly don’t feel like it’s a lie.”