

All That a Villain Wants

There are some things you can't explain. Certain unique experiences carve lessons and morals into the stone of one's memories. If there's one thing Ellison Evans knows more than anyone, it's that being a villain is villainous. Both Ellison and his cat are presently perched at the window of a small apartment on Corbin Street, scowling at the evil in the world.

Unfortunately for the two of them, there isn't much evil to scowl at in *this* city.

Crime is common and rebellion is natural; most cities have seen their fair share of bank robberies and stolen cars. Criminals are frowned upon but expected.

It's not like Ellison Evans would know much about any of that, though. Having been born in a city where no crime goes unseen, or even goes, Ellison couldn't begin to tell you what an "average crime rate" is.

A city with virtually no crime sounds like true paradise: unreal and impossible. In reality, it's a city with a group of superhumans: *The Defender-Alliance*. Residents of the city think that they live in paradise, but Ellison Evans knows more than anyone else that paradise is *not* a city with a group of superheroes. Good isn't always what it seems, villainy isn't always obvious on the surface.

Seated on the windowsill in his small apartment, Ellison and the cat watch the busy city, picturesque in the window. The pair observes the streets, bustling with small children and their parents, sauntering through *paradise* with a skip in their steps. All the while, the man and his cat cynically eye the red capes hanging from their shoulders and the black masks framing their eyes.

In most cities, seeing hundreds, thousands, of people dressed up as superheroes would be a curious thing. In *this* city, the selling of graphic T-Shirts was prohibited. Why buy a shirt when you can buy a *Defender-Alliance* cape?

Ellison Evans has never, and will never, buy a cape. He can just barely tolerate the sight of full-grown men skipping through halls with capes flying behind them.

Cynical as Ellison and the cat are, their intentions are truly innocent. All Ellison wants to do today is curl up in bed with the cat. On a regular day, this harmless request would be no problem.

To Ellison's dismay, this is not a normal day.

Today is National *Defender-Alliance* Day.

This morning, when Ellison rolled out of bed and paced to the window, a deep groan fell out of his mouth.

"Cat," he had said, turning to face the creature sitting atop his bedside table, "why would anyone want to wear a spandex jumpsuit for fun?" The cat tilted its small head and then let out a little screeching *meow*. "Yes, cat. I quite agree," Ellison muttered, shaking his head incredulously.

The national holiday is celebrated with three times the usual amount of cosplayers on the streets. There's a celebratory gathering of about a thousand people dressed as *Captain Quake*, *The Invisible Eye*, *The Invincible Guardian* or *Challenger Witch*. Most popular is the black and red costume of *The Defender*. Ellison's gentle strokes down the cat's back become increasingly aggressive.

He and *The Defender* have a history all right.

Usually, unwanted memories of his past stay in the very back of his brain where he wants them. Today, every person dressed as *The Defender* triggers an old memory that he does not want to relive.

So, a few seconds later, he and the cat are out the door and on the street. Fresh fall air blows onto their faces, chilling them both to the bone. Uncomfortable, but a distraction. Yet, the street isn't the best place to be on *Defender-Alliance* Day—especially not for Ellison. Red capes flash in his vision, black masks, and emerald green skirts. Ellison's scowl deepens as he passes a couple, both dressed as *The Defender*, their arms linked as they prance through the crowd. So completely oblivious to the flawed society they live in that Ellison cringes, his teeth clenching together.

Ellison knows that superheroes don't solve all the problems in the city. Nothing considered "criminal" ever happens here, but there's always a price for paradise. An expensive one, at that. Ellison Evans knows that more than *almost* everyone.

Years ago, when he was nothing but a young reporter, he visited "criminals" who had done nothing more than walk into a store through the exit side. The *Defenders* claimed they committed treason or robbery. Those people, still rotting in jail cells, were the *almost*.

On the street, Ellison sees a huge poster board with a big crossed-out "*I*" on it. "*I*" for *The Insurgency*. Anger boils in his stomach and he clenches his fists under the cat.

The Insurgency had been a group of rebels who attempted to ridicule and turn people against *The Defender Alliance*. They were a formidable enemy, a force to be reckoned with. The most interesting part about *The Insurgency*, besides the fact that

they had been defeated years ago, is that they had been normal citizens. Normal citizens who wanted to get rid of the monarchy that *The Defender Alliance* had become.

It feels like just yesterday he was standing out on the street, a fresh-faced reporter. He found the truth of *The Defender's* sketchy business. Crime in this city is rare, so how do these heroes find someone to rid the world of every day? He published his findings and paid the price for spreading the truth; years in jail gave him plenty of time to scheme and plan.

Ellison Evans knows all about *The Insurgency*.

He knows that they used to rob banks to afford the ads they pasted around the city. He knows they spray painted their symbol on banks and schools. He knows because he used to be part of *The Insurgency*.

Ellison knows because he was the group's notorious, loyal, and *especially* villainous leader and founder. The day he walked out of jail was the beginning of an era of rebellion against the "heroes."

That era ended years ago. *The Insurgency* was caught, his partners were arrested, he managed to escape, and the cat was lucky enough to be adopted. What's passed is past.

A gust of wind brushes against Ellison's face, sending his train of thought into oblivion. His head jerks up to the sight of a man dressed in the classic costume of the most famous hero. Swinging above the crowd from a construction crane, the man is holding a sign that says "*no one is powerless.*" Ironical, considering he is not suspended by an otherworldly force.

Ellison shakes his head, his eyebrows drawn up in disbelief. Ellison Evans knows the differences between powerful and powerless, the difference between this man and *The Defender*. Ellison knows that these people are living not in paradise, but in a place where anything that they do could be twisted into an act of treason or villainy.

Ellison remembers that feeling of surety, confidence in every action he took on the last *Insurgency* mission, years ago. With the specialized tech they had, the *Alliance* had never caught them. Why would they on that day? He didn't even consider it. Ellison had a black bag of cash dangling from his shoulder, a handful of it tucked into his jacket pocket. They would use the money to post ads around the city, hoping to spread the truth. He pulled the red spray paint from the outstretched hand of one of his partners and pointed it at the nearest wall, the large "I" symbol coming to life before his eyes. It was then that he heard the telltale *bang* of someone breaking down a door.

Ellison remembers the strike of terror and doubt that had flashed through him.

"No, no- it can't be..." he had thought.

Of course, it was *The Defender Alliance*. They had barged in, immediately dragging *The Insurgency* outside into a mob of paparazzi.

It was *The Defender* who pulled out a kicking, squirming Ellison. Upon breaking into the crowd, the hero had lifted off the ground, soaring into the air whilst holding Ellison up by his shirt collar like a trophy. The villain plunged into a cold bath of loathing while the hero soaked in hot satisfaction. The crowd screamed. What more could a desperate, misled city ask for?

That day, he managed to escape when none of his friends had. Ellison grudgingly ended his rebellion. He spent lonely hours in a nearly empty room, watching

solemnly as the rest of *The Insurgency* was put behind bars. He watched as people expressed how glad they were that the group was gone. He didn't want to be hated- that was never his goal. All he wanted was change. That is what *The Insurgency* had fought for. Really, that's all a villain ever wants.

Amidst the hate and war, Ellison briefly lost the vision and the passion. A depressing job and a solemn life suddenly became all he could see in his future. But today, watching people praise *The Defenders* like gods ignited a flame in him again. It had been years since that last bank robbery, years since he last attempted rebellion. *The Alliance* cannot reign forever.

Ellison's mind races as superheroes surround him. Capes twirl and flutter past him and his mind races. Wasn't stopping and giving up disproving his point? He was letting *The Defenders* render him powerless, letting them take away his opinions. Suddenly there's a bang from somewhere to his left.

His head swivels towards the sound, his eyes reaching for the source. His tongue clamps down hard on his tongue as he sees the reenactment happening across the street. Blood fills his mouth as a cosplayer dressed in *The Insurgency* suit is hoisted into the air by none other than *The Defender* himself.

Ellison, in shock and disgust, tastes the familiar iron-tainted jolt of shame and guilt. Or, maybe that's just blood. As he watches *The Defender* hold up an actor version of himself, Ellison swallows the taste in his mouth, leaving only an aftertaste of pure ambition. Maybe *The Insurgency's* ideals didn't have to fade. If only there was a better way to make people see the flaws that Ellison sees.

As Ellison stands in the middle of a swarm of people dressed as superheroes, he feels more villainous than ever. While the rest rush around in celebration of this group, he thinks of taking down *The Defender Alliance*. If they all believe it, shouldn't he?

Doubt can have a spider web of effects if one only lets it sit in their head for a long enough time. No one knows that better than Ellison Evans. He sweeps the thought out of his mind, turning to face a parade float of superheroes. Watching the masked and suited figures look down upon the screaming crowd like gods sends something thrumming through his blood. An electric current of renewed excitement runs to his head.

Then, Ellison turns to the newspaper rack in a store behind him, snatching a paper off. As he paces back to his apartment, the Cat still meowing in his arms, he flips the pages of the paper back. He flips past hundreds of pictures of *The Defenders* and images of "villains" behind prison bars.

Then, finally,

"Empty slot."

Back in his apartment, Ellison Evans, former supervillain, pulls out a pen and a pad of paper and stares at them. The cat sits patiently on his desk next to him, occasionally screeching or scratching Ellison's hand. Ellison only stops momentarily to glare at him, leaving his train of thought to mutter, dazed,

"Cat, sit still. I need to concentrate. Being a villain is hard."

Ellison freezes and looks up at the cat. The cat blinks and goes back to licking itself as Ellison scribbles down something important. A carving that is emerging through a blank piece of stone in his mind. A moral to remember.

“Maybe being a villain isn’t so villainous after all...”