

Six months ago you did not know each other. You did not know the nature of the world. Nor did you really know yourself.

It was mid-winter, in the dark emotional and financial aftermath of the holiday season that is mid-January, when things first began happening. Nothing note worthy at first, just little strange things happening. Fewer cats in the alleyways. Strange shapes seen in the park. Strange noises hear at night. But bigger than that, it seemed like the Hill's fixtures all decided to go on vacation at the same time. Family emergencies, business out of town, "a little time off," a half dozen different things but for three solid weeks people that you thought never even left the Hill were all gone. Mr. Wu left the front stoop of Detroit Dan's to "visit family in warmer climates." Or so >Janica< was told when she asked Lin. Delphi closed without warning, mail stacking up and deliveries missed. Daud Patel took a vacation. Bill Acker's stool was empty at O'Malley's and he left no word with the help; a few others, here and there, gone, leaving friends and family making empty excuses. Any one of them missing might have been noticeable but not note worthy. All of them, now that was something else.

Nature abhors a vacuum they say. You were not the only one to notice the missing bastions of the Hill.

Crime, always surprisingly low in the neighborhood but growing in the last few months, rose sharply. This was especially obvious to >Thomas< who, without anything better to do, started his own investigation. Secretly worried that the connection between the two events might be more sinister than it seemed.

Meanwhile >Janica< and Trinity were trying to shake off the winter blues in the usual way, party party party. Fake ID or flashing...smiles got them where they wanted to go, but they noticed the scene was not quite what it had been. There was a new unspoken tension, things just felt wrong. You got used to people coming and going, but some of the periphery of faces had changed. The same people were there but the faces were different, mostly the harder crowd that the girls didn't hang with so they paid little attention to it at first. They had changed, their actions a little wilder, their eyes a little redder, personalities a little harsher. No obvious reason why, other than talk of a new drug, Sparx, that promised a wondrous high.

Violent crime, arson, vandalism, the stresses of urban life that poorer neighborhoods faced seemed to have come to the Hill with a vengeance that weekend. Trinity and >Janica< were attacked by what seemed to be a gang of midget bikers, about three feet tall, clad all in leather, and wearing full helmets. The raspy voices gave the girls the creeps, >Janica<'s foot (and fist and elbow) gave the thugs something to think about. They never got a good look at their attackers, but >Janica< caught a glimpse of strangely yellow skin between sleeve and glove. Trinity got a good look at the emblems sewn on the back of their jackets and after a little felony web surfing came up with a name: "Vipers." A little more hacking and she had an MO, a few discreet queries on some local "black" boards and she had a place. Meanwhile >Janica< was in the Dojo, kicking targets about three feet high.

>Thomas< was pursuing his own line of reasoning, and accessing some of the same information in more personal, and occasionally more legitimate, ways. He was tracking the Sparx back to its source, an abandoned produce warehouse, long unused and not yet touched by the wave of gentrification on the Hill. Not a fighter, nor a vigilante, he just kept track of things, making records, getting ready to turn things over to the police

when the time came. Finally he decided that he had learned all he could, it was time to case the joint.

>Janica<'s plan was a little more rash, and a little more direct. When Trinity couldn't talk her out of it they became two. After all, midget bikers? How tough could they be? The girls saw the warehouse as a hangout; they had no idea what it really contained.

The girls 'assault' on the warehouse was strait forward and potentially fatal. Trinity roaring in on her bike, >Janica< leaping off into the fray. Might have taken them by surprise, if the residents had been human. The shock the girls got in seeing the "midgets" without their helmets on was enough to ruin their momentum and make them vulnerable to counter attack. A counter attack from short humanoid creatures with long arms and yellow-orange skin, covered in tattoos and piercing, and haircuts that would make Sid Vicious pale.

Cornered and surely destined for a fate worse than death the girls were saved by >Thomas< who burst on to the scene with gun drawn. Shaking off their shock the girls turned on the gang, and battle did ensue. A battle in which their opponents were revealed to be poor fighters, relying more on seemingly impossible tricks to attempt escape than actually attack now that the odd were only three to one.

The 'guy' that seemed to be the leader made to get away, into the back of the warehouse. >Thomas< took off after him with Trinity close behind as >Janica< left the last of the gang unconscious or beaten on the floor.

>Thomas< was closing fast, the gangster half way to the back of the warehouse, when the creature turned. Shouting something guttural, in a language even Trinity didn't recognize, it added a gesture that while not its middle finger had much of the same intent. The most notable exception, of course, being the gout of flame that shot forward at >Thomas< from its hand.

Trinity had not expected him to stop so fast, plowed into >Thomas<, knocking him down and coincidentally saving his life. The gout of fire touched a stack of crates nearby and the started to roar with flames as if doused in gasoline. The creature got away laughing as >Janica< arrived.

Sirens were approaching, and you all decided that discretion was the better part of valor. Later you met to compare notes on what you had seen. >Janica< produced a vial that once contained Sparx, something one of the creatures had snorted before becoming merely a blurry figure that quickly ran away. The News reported the fire, but said nothing of strange bodies or of a drug operation. >Thomas<'s contacts with the police turned up nothing more, there had been a lot of drugs found in the partially burned warehouse, along with lots of gang related paraphernalia, but no means of production.

It didn't seem to matter. The gang practically disappeared, the crime rates dropped, things seemed to return to normal. Sometime in early February the missing fixtures figures started turning up, one by one. Smiling at the strange coincidence that so many friends and neighbors had left town at the same time. Mr. Wu did seem to give >Janica< and Trinity a knowing smile, but then he almost always did.

The three of you have become friends. You know that world is more than what it seems. You have seen other, smaller things that indicate that as well. It's as if once you saw what you now believe to be magic the scales fell from your eyes. You have not seen anything conclusive yet, but odd stuff seems to abound around the Hill. Also, you have

decided that there was a lot more going on during those weeks in January than you know. Something big, of which your run-ins with the gang were just a tiny part.

You may not know everything. You may only suspect a great deal. You do know that the world around you is full of wonder and mystery and danger. More importantly, however, you believe that you can handle it; and if you can't, you can rely on your friends to help you. You know that you yourself are something special, something different. Deep down, unspoken even with your friends, in a small quiet place where you think about yourself, you have begun to believe the maybe, just maybe, you are a Hero. You have decided to start acting like it.