



PLAYING FOR  
**KEEPS**



**MURVERSE  
COMICS**

**ISSUE  
1**

**TERROR  
FROM  
ABOVE!**



# Playing For Keeps

Vol. 1 Issue 1

By Mur Lafferty

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# Chapter 1

The supervillain attacked at the most inconvenient place and time: right on Keepsie's walk to work. She looked into the sky at the costumed combatants and groaned.

"Why did they have to do this on a Thursday?"

Crowds gathered on the sidewalk to stare up at the battle, clearly ignorant of the danger. Not to mention ignorant that they were making her later.

"Oh my God, it's White Lightning!" screamed a woman directly in Keepsie's way, pointing at the sky.

Despite herself, Keepsie looked up. She'd heard of the Academy's newest hero, but hadn't seen him yet.

The sinister laugh of some villain and the deep voice of the hero rang out above the excited crowd. A loud crunch of breaking glass and bending metal sounded above them as someone was thrown through a building. Keepsie guiltily hoped it was one of those damn holier-than-thou superheroes from the Academy hitting a skyscraper.

She held up her hand to block the sun. "Another building to repair."

Another crunch, and several people screamed. Keepsie stumbled as people slammed into her, desperate to get out of the way.

Keepsie had been watching to see if the hero would get out of the building. She grunted in alarm when a massive object ran into her. Her breath whooshed out and instead of falling underneath whatever had hit her, she was airborne, wedged painfully in a strong grip. She winced when she realized she was now five feet from one of the more prominent supervillains.

Up close, her abductor's commanding presence was even more frightening than on television; he was seven feet tall, bald, and handsome in a Harley-Davidson riding kind of way. He had a monocle implanted where his right eye should have been, and circuitry glowed under his skin around his neck and jaw line. She had seen pictures, but had never seen him up close: Doodad, Master of Machines. Although he looked as if he could punch out an elephant, she had never heard of Doodad participating in a physical fight. His power was in his brain, and his skill to bend machines to his will.

Doodad's flying crab machine had plucked Keepsie painfully from the sidewalk. When the news had shown pictures of the machine, Keepsie had giggled, reminded of the Jetsons' little hover car. Now, flying above Seventh City wedged in its one claw, it didn't seem so cute. Although the claw pinched

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her bruised ribs, she clung to it and forced herself not to look down. It wasn't as if she could fly.

On the whole, the villains didn't scare Keepsie, but heights terrified her. Doodad wouldn't drop her; he wasn't into blind terrorist acts like dropping innocents to watch them splatter. He always had a reason for his actions unlike some of the more homicidal villains like Seismic Stan. The wind pulled tears from her eyes and she gulped. At least, he'd always had reasons for his actions in the past.

Keepsie screwed her eyes shut as they gained altitude. Where the hell were the heroes that he'd been fighting? Her stomach turned at the unfamiliar wish for a hero. Or maybe that was the altitude.

Almost as an answer to her question, a booming voice said, "Put her down!"

And then he came; his glorious blonde hair perfectly styled and unruffled by the wind. He had apparently had time to restyle after freeing himself from the building Doodad had thrown him into. The hero filled out a black leotard and tights, his costume completed with a black cape fashioned with white lightning bolts covering it. A black mask covered his eyes, but allowed his blonde hair and chiseled jaw to show in true superhero glory. This must be the rookie, White Lightning. He flew, tall and proud over the rooftops, straight for Keepsie and Doodad.

Keepsie gritted her teeth. *Be careful what you wish for. Why did it have to be the rookie?* She could have stomached being rescued by the veteran heroine, Pallas.

"Let her go, Doodad! You'll get nothing this way!" White Lightning said, his booming voice hurting Keepsie's ears.

"Tell them at the Academy, tell *her*, that if you want to see this woman alive, you'll send me Timson by midnight!" Doodad shouted back.

Midnight? Who would open the bar?

"You'd never drop her, you have too much to lose!" shouted the newcomer. He hovered about thirty feet from the flying crab machine. Keepsie's feet kicked in the breeze and she was thankful she'd worn boots today.

"Lose, what do I have to lose? Family? Job? People that I love? I had none of those to begin with," Doodad said.

The hero scowled at him, and something caught Keepsie's eye over the skyline. A news helicopter buzzed toward them, camera pointing right at Keepsie and her captor.

"Shit," she said.

"We don't negotiate with villains!" White Lightning said.

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*Good. Go for the textbook response. That'll convince him.* This guy was an idiot. Was every other hero busy at the moment?

As the shouting match continued, a low whirring sound caught Keepsie's attention. The claw gripped her somewhat tighter, and she squirmed.

The hero raised his hands to the cloudless October sky and Keepsie realized too late what was about to happen. The lightning bolt snaked down and slammed into the machine, filling Keepsie's nostrils with ozone and eyes with blinding light. A millisecond later came the deafening crack and Doodad's machine faltered in midair.

The rubber-padded claw squeezed tighter and tighter, causing Keepsie to cry out in pain and struggle against it, despite their altitude. Then it opened.

She fell.

## Chapter 2

Keepsie had always hoped that she would be heroic in a situation such as this, but her hopes that she would at least act dignified died when she screamed and didn't stop. She screwed her eyes shut as her stomach dropped away from her. In the abject terror that flooded her body, she still wondered in a moment of clarity whether her will was in order.

She stopped falling with a jolt, and a loud cheer rose from the street. Shamefully she clutched the hero's heavily muscled arms, but her fingers slipped over the spandex. They flew higher, to Keepsie's dismay, and circled the Jameson building, the tallest building in the city.

"Please let me down," she said, but the wind whisked her words away.

White Lightning waved at the news helicopter. Keepsie hoped it wouldn't see her. She clutched the hero's one arm and shuddered. Her mouth filled with nauseated bile. She hadn't been this close to a hero since she'd applied at the Academy ten years ago. She had never been in a damsel-in-distress situation before. She didn't think she liked it.

The hero turned toward the street and they finally started their descent.

This couldn't be over fast enough. He finally deposited her lightly on the sidewalk, and she looked up at her disgustingly glorious savior.

"Thank you," she managed to say.

A frown creased his blemish-free forehead. "Are you all right, miss? Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head and brushed her messy brown hair from her face. "I'm fine. You're new, aren't you?"

"White Lightning, Seventh City's newest hero." He smiled widely, reminding Keepsie of the high school quarterback who tried to get her into the backseat of his car.

"Flight and lightning control. Neat. No wonder they're happy to have you," she said.

He beamed. "I would like to hope so."

An awkward pause hung in the air between them, Keepsie realizing too late that he was hoping for another thanks. The crowd pushed closer, eager to touch his cape, get a picture, anything.

"Well, thanks again, and--"

"You're welcome, ma'am," he said, speaking loudly for the benefit of the

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crowd. "Incidentally," he added, "what's your name?"

"Keepsie."

"That's an interesting name. Is it Indian?"

Keepsie fought the desire to look pointedly at her very white skin. "Uh, no, it was a nickname given to me when I got my power when I was fourteen. I'm Third Wave."

His eyes narrowed. "Third Wave pseudonyms. Hero names are illegal, ma'am. Only registered heroes may have them," he whispered, and leaped into the air, flying toward Doodad's retreating vehicle, which was floundering through the sky and belching black smoke.

People cheered and waved at White Lightning, some women screaming that they loved him. Keepsie's adrenaline left her. She was cold with shame and anger. The news crew would be here soon; she pushed her way through the crowd and actually snarled when a starry-eyed woman asked her what White Lightning was *really* like.

The short walk to the bar failed to calm her down. "Hero names are illegal," she said, imitating White Lightning's deep voice. "Fuck you." Her voice sounded muffled to her own ears. She hoped the hero hadn't damaged her hearing.

Keepsie thrust her hands into her jacket pockets and sped up, hoping her deliveryman would wait on her. Her breath caught in her throat when her hand closed around an unfamiliar object.

It was a heavy metal sphere, about the size of a golf ball. Realizing that Doodad had slipped it into her pocket, she stuffed it back. She'd examine it later.

Her legs still shook with reaction as she approached the delivery truck waiting outside the stairs to her basement bar. Carl stood at the bottom of the stairs and peered through the window.

"Sorry I'm late, Carl," Keepsie called down to him.

He looked up and waved at her. "Oh don't worry nothing about it, I just got here myself 'cause traffic wasn't moving hardly at all," He climbed the stairs. "I think it was another one of those hero battles slowed things down." He handed her the clipboard and slid the door up on his truck.

"Yeah, I know. I got caught up in it myself. I had to get..." she made herself to say the word, "rescued." She scanned the purchase order and didn't look at Carl.

"You shitting me?" Carl said, wheeling his loaded hand truck to the stairs. "You OK?"

"Of course," she said, sniffing. "The city's newest, egotistical hero, White Lightning, personally rescued me from certain death and insulted me in

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the process.” She slid past him on the stairs and opened the unlocked door.

Carl stopped the hand truck midway down the steps to stare at her. “Did you say ‘White Lightning?’”

She grinned up at him. “Yep. He flew away so fast I didn’t have a chance to tell him he named himself after mountain corn squeezins.”

Keepsie went inside and turned on the lights, Carl’s laughter still booming on the stairs.

\* \* \*

Unlike most bars, which depended on a Saturday rush, Thursday’s were Keepsie’s busiest night of the week. Her bar was popular with the locals; although it didn’t have the usual hero memorabilia covering the walls like a lot of Seventh City’s bars did, it did have the best bar food in the city. It was also the cleanest, with the best service in town. These made it a hopping place of business normally, but tonight was special. It was Third Wave Thursday.

Keepsie didn’t put up any banners and she didn’t have any specials, but it was an unspoken truth that the third generation of people with strange superhuman powers, named the Third Wave, gathered to drink together on Thursday. It was their night of solidarity.

Her staff had closed the bar in perfect condition, as always, the night before. The various little victories Third Wave citizens could claim were precious, and she appreciated each of her staff’s talents. Keepsie’s talent was not one that she could get paid for, which had always bugged her, but she was happy to hire a chef with super-cooking ability and a waitress with the inability to drop a bar tray.

She had little to do to open except check Carl’s delivery and sign his invoice. She readied the kitchen for the chef and then checked the clock: good. Michelle, her assistant manager and closest friend, wouldn’t be there for another five minutes at least, and the rest of the staff wouldn’t get there for fifteen minutes after that.

She didn’t relish telling Michelle about the afternoon.

She sat at the bar and pulled the ball out of her pocket. It was made of a dull metal and seamless like a large ball bearing. She rolled it around in her hands, listening for any noises inside. She heard nothing.

Why had Doodad dropped an oversized BB into her pocket?

The front door opened and Michelle walked in. Effortlessly beautiful as always, Michelle exuded the passion of her Jamaican father and the temper of her Irish mother.

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“Hey lady, did you hear the news?” Michelle said, her dark eyes shining with excitement. She brushed past Keepsie and hung her coat and purse on a hook behind the bar.

Talking to Carl about the attack had been easy; he wasn't her friend, someone she saw daily, someone who knew the same people she did. He also wasn't someone who saw the villains as rock stars. Michelle's interest bordered on illegal, but a bill that Third Wavers had called the “Hero Worship Bill,” which would make villain sympathizing a crime, had yet to get out of committee.

Keepsie bit her lip and slipped the ball into her pocket. She followed Michelle into the kitchen.

“I didn't hear the news,” Keepsie said truthfully. “But-“

“Doodad fought this new hero guy, even grabbed a hostage!” Michelle could hardly contain her glee. “Then the hero rescued her and made Doodad crash.”

“Do you think Doodad's hurt?” Keepsie said, knowing which part of the story Michelle wanted to focus on.

“There's no word yet, but they took him away in an Academy ambulance, so I think he's still alive. They usually take them away in a regular ambulance if they're dead.”

The villain Seismic Stan had died five years before in a battle with Pallas, the city's oldest hero. But Keepsie didn't remember an ambulance.

“Guess you didn't get my message?” Michelle asked.

“No, what was it?”

“I left it on your cell's voice mail, telling you to take another way into work because the news was all about the reindeer games going on with Doodad,” she said, tying an apron around her waist. “You must have been on the phone.”

Keepsie gritted her teeth. “No, my cell phone just sucks. Thanks, though. Listen, I-“

“So did you see any action?”

“Yes, actually, Doodad-“

“Oh man, you saw him?”

“Michelle!”

Her friend finally stopped talking. Michelle was not someone who was offended when you told her to lower her voice or stop interrupting. She smiled expectantly.

Keepsie suddenly found it difficult to talk. “I was the hostage.”

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“Holy shit! Are you OK?”

Keepsie busied herself with stocking the already-stocked pint-glass tray. “Yeah. I mean, I got the shit scared out of me, I was nearly electrocuted, the hero humiliated me, I think my hearing is damaged and I may have cracked a rib.” She lifted her shirt to view the blossoming bruises on her torso. “The good news is that Carl got caught in traffic too, so I wasn’t too late to meet him.”

“Jesus. Why you?”

Keepsie lowered her shirt and sighed. “He planted something on me. I don’t know what it is.” She pulled the ball out of her pocket and showed it to Michelle.

“Why would he- oh,” Michelle said, her eyes growing wide. “He wants you to keep it.”

Keepsie nodded. “My thought too. But who does he want me to keep it from? And does he really think I’ll give it back to him after this afternoon?”

“I guess he does,” Michelle said thoughtfully. “He’s hot, but he’s also smart. He probably wants it back at some point. And he probably thinks he can get it.”

“Well, he’s in the Academy jails now, so he’s not coming for it any time soon. That’s a relief.”

“Poor guy,” Michelle said.

Keepsie glared at her. “Can I get some sympathy for at least a second before you go all Stockholm Syndrome on me and are sorer for the villain than his hostage?”

Michelle hugged her gently, mindful of her ribs. “I do love you, lady. But I still wouldn’t kick Doodad out of bed for eating crackers.”

Keepsie laughed at last. “Fine, fine. This guy wants to screw up the city, scare people, take hostages, and you want to reward him with sex.”

“Someone needs to reward him for giving the heroes hell,” Michelle said. “And I volunteer to take one for the team. Two, if he’s up for it.”

The door opened and other staff began to arrive, and Keepsie composed herself. She slipped into the kitchen and dropped the ball into the Lost and Found box that sat beside the supply closet. It would be out of the way there. And safe.

Keepsie didn’t have a power that would help her tend bar, or cook, or fight crime. Her power was quite passive, but it served to be useful to her. Anything she owned, she kept. It was that simple. No one could take anything she owned away from her. And if they tried, they abandoned quickly their desire to steal.

She had never considered it might be useful to someone else. She had

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been unable to get a job in security because no one trusted her enough to give her all of their belongings. The items in question had to belong to her, and no one would trust her without her official hero license. Doodad had given her his metal golf ball, clearly for her to protect from anyone else.

Why did he think she was going to give it back to him?

\* \* \*

When the bar opened at five o'clock, it filled quickly. She greeted the regulars by name.

Her patrons talked about Doodad's attack. People had heard about it but apparently no one had seen the televised news. Keepsie said a quiet prayer of thanks.

As she tended bar, Keepsie kept out of the discussions.

"The heroes are a menace to the city. Hell, arson doesn't even do as much damage to property as one of those hero battles," said Geoffrey, a florist.

Vincent, Keepsie's busboy, dishwasher, cleaning crew -and anything else that had to do with dirt - bussed a table and nodded to him, his black hair falling into his eyes.

"What are our cops doing these days, anyway? Unemployment is up because the cops don't have anything to do," said Stella, a human resources director. "And the damn villains can't be that hard to catch. Hell, heroes do it."

"What you do when a villain shows up is wait for the damn hero to save your ass," Barry said. He was First Wave, a generation ahead of most of Keepsie's patrons. He'd come into his strange power late in life after an accident had severed his legs; only then had he realized he could regrow his limbs. He stared into his daiquiri. "Face it, no one has powers to match the villains except for the heroes."

"And no one talks about this, but I remember. Did anyone notice how we never had villains until we had heroes? If the goddamn government hadn't messed with that drug, we wouldn't be living in a city where you can get a building dropped on you," said Len "Goddamn Government" Wise.

The bell above the door tinkled, and Keepsie looked up. She smiled and waved as her two favorite regulars, Peter Ross and Ian Smith, walked in.

Peter was a tall man in his thirties and dressed in a way that hinted that he still got his fashion tips from his mother. He took a seat at the bar beside Samantha, a newcomer to Third Wave Thursdays. Ian, a pudgy man with stringy blond hair, loved arguing with Samantha more than he loved poking fun at stuffy Peter. He eagerly grabbed the seat on her left.

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Samantha was older, Keepsie guessed around 45, and had gray streaks in her red hair. She and Ian launched immediately into a heated discussion about whether the Academy should have to pay for property damage. Keepsie grinned; they hadn't even said hello to each other.

Peter motioned to Keepsie, who finished pouring a beer for a man who looked uncomfortably out of place. "What can I get you, Peter?"

"Tanqueray and tonic, please." Peter said. He lowered his voice. "Are you all right, Keepsie?"

Keepsie blanched. "What are you talking about?"

"I went home early today because of the hero battle; my company's building was damaged. I saw the news."

"I'm fine. Can we talk about it later?" Keepsie said, and went to make his drink. She avoided his concerned gaze as she poured the gin. Ian and Samantha were arguing loud enough to distract her from her embarrassment.

"I'm telling you, Sam," Ian said, slapping his hand on the bar. "They're flying around, busting up buildings and shit, hurting civilians, and then they have the audacity to expect us to give them our tax money so they can go on and do it again tomorrow!"

Samantha remained calm. "I'm not saying that they deserve worship, but the recent villain attacks are far and above anyone's ability to deal with except for the Academy. No one knows where they came from, but they are definitely a force to be reckoned with." She took a sip of her beer.

"Ian's right, Samantha," Peter said. "I had one of the heroes thrown into my building today. He took out one wall of windows and injured ten of my coworkers. You won't see that on the news."

"Holy shit, man, are you OK?" Ian asked.

Peter smiled thinly. "I don't rank a window office." He cleared his throat and glanced at Keepsie.

"The Academy will make sure the injured are taken care of, and they also cover the building repairs," Samantha said.

"And what if someone dies, can they bring them back to life?" Ian said. "Can they regrow someone's severed arm?" He raised his beer to Barry, a couple of seats down, who grinned and toasted him back.

Samantha raised her hands, giving up the argument. "You've got me. I don't think they have any heroes that can do that yet."

"And what about that hostage Doodad took?" Ian said. He grinned as Michelle walked by with a tray of empty pint glasses. "I'll bet you wish it was you up there, huh?"

Michelle laughed. "No, sadly. But man I'd give anything to meet

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Doodad.”

Peter stared at Michelle for a moment, his jaw slack. He recovered quickly. "Doodad snapped her up off the street and carried her away, but, as the news tells it, White Lightning saved her." Keepsie glanced up; he wasn't looking at her. "I don't think she was hurt."

Ian, not catching on, groaned. "White Lightning? Who the fuck is that? A new one?"

"So it seems. But from my office, it more looked like White Lightning attacked Doodad while he held the hostage, causing the villain to drop her. She nearly hit the ground before he caught her."

Michelle handed Keepsie a check and a credit card. "She's a little bruised but she's OK, right Keepsie?"

Ian gaped. "You?"

Keepsie glared at Michelle. "Thanks a lot."

"Whoops, I figured you'd told them."

"You OK?" Ian asked.

"Do I look hurt?" Keepsie said.

"That's not what I meant," he said.

Keepsie grimaced. "I'm... fine. A little bruised, and I'll probably never fly again, but," her voice took on a sarcastic edge, "I got to meet a *real hero!*"

Samantha smiled, but most of the others looked concerned.

Michelle finished the credit card transaction for Keepsie. "Well, they were bound to find out anyway. And they would have been pissed if you hadn't told them." She took the slip and card and headed back to her customers. Keepsie sighed and watched her go.

Ian snickered. "What, is Michelle mad you got to meet Doodad and she didn't?"

Keepsie forced a grin. "Actually, I think she is."

Peter still looked concerned. "Keepsie, did anything else happen?"

Keepsie dropped her head and fiddled with the bar rag. "He was a real bastard. The hero, I mean. I mentioned to him - well, he figured out I was Third Wave. And after he let me down he pretty much treated me like crap."

"Fucking heroes, think they're better than all of us." Ian clenched and unclenched his fists rhythmically. He took a deep breath and relaxed. "He's just an asshole, man. A flying asshole."

The image of White Lightning, buff and ripped in his tight costume, with a sphincter sitting atop his shoulders, made Keepsie laugh.

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The night wore on and Keepsie kept busy, trying not to relive her afternoon's adventure any more than necessary. She gave a few more details to Peter, Ian and Samantha, but left out the bit about Doodad planting something on her.

"So I said that the villains clearly come from Washington DC," Barry's companion said as Keepsie handed Barry another banana daiquiri. She didn't recognize the man, and she eavesdropped as she made change for Barry's ten.

"What makes you think that?" asked Barry.

The man's voice slurred slightly, but his eyes were bright. "They're making them in Washington to battle the terrorists, and the experiment went wrong!"

Barry shook his head. "So, why do the villains come here where the heroes are? Wouldn't it be easier to go somewhere that doesn't have heroes?"

His companion lapsed into a brief silence. "They're from Washington, I tell you," he said, and dug into the burger Michelle sat in front of him.

"What do you think, Keepsie?" asked Barry as she set the man's beer down.

Keepsie opened her mouth to answer, but froze when something on the staircase outside caught her eye. Barry followed her gaze and swore loudly.

All conversation in the bar ceased as every eye turned to stare at the tall, glorious visitors. The heroes stopped as they got inside the door and looked around, frowning.

White Lightning (Corn Squeezins, Keepsie thought, and smiled slightly) lead the group inside and stared at Keepsie. The Crane joined him. He was a man around forty years old with white wings and the power to stretch any part of his body. He had been the dreamboat of the Academy, but Keepsie guessed that would end as soon as White Lightning became more popular. The other was an Academy scientist; shorter and older, she wore slacks and a lab coat with the Academy insignia on the breast pocket. Her short brown hair neither flowed nor gleamed.

"Dr. Timson, it's been a long time," Keepsie said, after a moment of silence.

"Laura, we're here to make sure you're all right. The Academy is obligated to pay the medical bills of anyone hurt during a powered altercation."

They didn't look like they were there to check on her. Why would she need muscle for that?

"Took you long enough," Keepsie said. She checked the clock on the wall. "The attack was at least six hours ago."

"We were just concerned, Laura. White Lightning had to file his report;

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he didn't have your full name. It took some time to find you."

Keepsie laughed. "The Academy is right across the street from here. The sign for my bar, 'Keepsie's Bar,' is right outside."

"Yes, you are called Keepsie now, aren't you?"

"You knew that when I applied at the Academy, Doctor."

"Secret identities are for heroes, Laura."

An annoyed rumble passed through the bar. Keepsie chewed on her lower lip a moment, then said, "I guess you'll have to go arresting every Christopher called Chris and every Michelle called Shelley. I didn't know that nicknames were illegal."

"Very well, *Keepsie*," Timson said, "We came for another reason; we need to talk. Do you have an office?" She looked around.

"This is a bar."

Dr. Timson sighed and stepped forward to close the distance. The patrons of the bar made no pretence of their eavesdropping. "We need your help. The villain Doodad has stolen an object of some importance from the Academy. After hearing about his attack earlier today, I think that Doodad targeted you specifically. We think he planted the device on you for, ah, safe keeping, so to speak. We need it back."

Keepsie grinned, delighted. "You want the help of a Third Wave power? I never thought I'd see the day. That's awesome!"

Dr. Timson smiled back, looking relieved. She took a step forward, "Yes, very much so, your talent would be of great help right now."

Keepsie leaned forward, still smiling. "No."

Tension in the bar increased. Keepsie squirmed inwardly, there was no backing down now. Not in front of her customers and friends.

The heroes glanced at each other, but only the doctor spoke. "White Lightning said you might react this way."

White Lightning met Keepsie's eyes without flinching.

"He's smarter than I gave him credit for. What did you think my reaction would be, doctor?"

"Well, I expected you to want to serve your city. You seemed quite dedicated to that, once."

"You know, you people just don't get it. You say you want to educate people with powers, to teach them to use their power for good, to help people. Maybe the Third Wavers can't fly or shoot laser beams, but we've still got powers no one else has. And you wanted us to register those powers so you could track them."

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Timson opened her mouth, but Keepsie continued. “You gave us hope that we’d be heroes once we registered. That one day we’d put on a costume, serve the public, be worshiped. But Third Wavers are just not powerful enough for you. No hero license for us. But when you realize you need us, you come asking for help in the name of goodness, or God, or country.”

She paused, enjoying the looks on the heroes’ faces. “Well screw that. You have people who can talk to animals or run faster than cheetahs or call lightning to hit people and deafen their hostages. You don’t need me.”

“Hell yeah!” shouted Ian, pounding his empty glass on the bar. Everyone took up his cheer.

Timson stood impassively.

When the noise had died down, Timson spoke in a tight voice. “Keepsie, I don’t think you understand. We need you. We need that piece you’re protecting.”

“Hey Ian,” Keepsie said. He grinned. “Suddenly they need me. Would you come if they ever needed you?”

Ian made a face. “Maybe to keep the city’s janitors busy.”

“What did they say when you applied at the Academy to obtain a hero’s license?” she asked.

Ian didn’t meet her eyes, the shame apparent on his face, but he spoke clearly. “After they tested my power they told me that I was disgusting and unsanitary and clearly couldn’t fight for the city, simply on the basis that the clean-up costs would be monumental. They said they would never need something so foul. But they gave me my very own hero name. ‘Feculent Boy.’”

“Wonderful. Flattering,” Keepsie said, facing Timson. “And you, yourself, told me my power was so weak it could never be of any use to anyone. You need to be careful what you tell the young and impressionable, doctor, it may come back to bite you.”

White Lightning’s face reddened and Keepsie felt giddy at the risk she’d taken. Years of bitterness, pouring out of her. It felt good. She didn’t think he would attack her, but lightning in a basement bar would be bad for business.

Timson looked at Ian. Her lip curled and she swallowed, saying, “Not everyone has what it takes to be a hero.” She tried to continue, but boos and hisses from the bar patrons drowned her out.

“You are extremely lucky that you just ended up with a bitter man instead of someone truly evil, Timson,” Keepsie dropped the honorific purposefully. “Ian is a good man. And he’s the most powerful Third Waver I know. And you guys dumped him in the gutter.

“So let’s get down to business.” Keepsie leaned forward on the bar. “What will you give me for doing this favor for you? My own license? Money?”

Playing for Keeps ~ Mur Lafferty

The respect *they* get?” She waved her hand at the heroes.

Timson cleared her throat. “There is the greater good to think about-” she began, and the bar boomed her loudly again.

Keepsie laughed. “Does White Lightning use his powers for the greater good, or does he get money from my taxes so he can protect everyone?”

“Including you!” White Lightning said. “I saved your sorry life today!”

Keepsie snorted. “And now I owe you? Does everyone in Seventh City owe you? No. We pay our taxes and that pays your salary. And really,” she added, looking his perfectly shaped body up and down, “I really can’t respect anyone who names himself after moonshine.”

Her audience laughed and White Lightning clenched his fists.

“I offered you my services once,” Keepsie said to Timson. “You said no. I moved on. No takebacks. Now, are you going to order a drink or am I going to have to ask you to leave?”

“Keepsie, the object belongs to us,” Timson said. “You can’t keep it.”

Keepsie slammed her hand flat on the bar. “That is where you are one hundred percent wrong, Dr. Timson. You said it yourself, keeping something safe is the only thing I do well, and if keeping it makes life tough for you, then I will be proud to keep it. Thanks to my ‘useless’ talent, there is no way you can take it.”

The heroes stood uncomfortably as she stepped out from behind the bar, walked over the door, and put the CLOSED sign in the window. She opened the door and waited.

“There are ways we can make you give it to us,” White Lightning growled.

“No, there aren’t.”

“Kinda losing your ‘hero’ routine there, aren’t you, dude?” Ian said. He got off his bar stool and started rolling up his sleeves. Peter put his hand on Ian’s arm as White Lightning stepped forward.

“Try it, little man,” he said.

“Don’t,” Peter said. After a pause, Ian sat down again. Dr. Timson put her hand out as well to stop White Lightning. She gave Keepsie a long look and then motioned the heroes to leave.

Keepsie had only heard such applause in her dreams.

## Credits

Mur Lafferty: Author

Paul Fischer: Layout and design

Rich Sigfrit: Web Monkey

Chris Miller & KJ Johnson: Producers/hosts of Stories Of the Third Wave

Jared Axelrod: PDF cover and hero insignia designs

JR Blackwell: Book cover design

JC Hutchins: Logo designs

Jamie Jordan: Production

Natalie Metzger: Art and pie

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