

A book cover for 'Anti Heroes'. The background is a close-up photograph of a woman with long, dark hair. Her right eye is a striking, unnatural red color, while her left eye is partially obscured by her hair. She has red lipstick and is wearing a white, lace-trimmed top and a pearl necklace. The title 'Anti Heroes' is written vertically on the left side in a white, distressed, hand-painted font against a black background.

Anti Heroes

NEW GIRL

**LOUISE BOHMER &
K. H. KOEHLER**

ANTI-HEROES

Book I

NEW GIRL

By

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ANTIHEROES

Book I

NEW GIRL

Serena Swanson knew the first day at a new school was apt to suck on a cosmic level, but she had no idea that someone would set the lunchroom on fire.

The problem had begun in first period Algebra, which was fitting somehow, seeing how nothing good had ever come out of Algebra. Being the new girl, she had picked a seat a little behind the exact middle of the class. That was important, she reasoned, since sitting in the front told the world that you were a suck-up who would be shooting her hand up in the air every three-point-five seconds and trying to win brownie points with the teacher, and sitting too far in the back just pegged you as a troublemaker.

Since this was her first day, she was hoping for blessed anonymity.

Of course, that didn't happen.

She was down in her seat for no more than three minutes before Mr. Washington singled her out. "Miss Swanson, would you like to stand up and tell the class a bit about yourself?"

In that moment, Serena decided that Sky City High had a *massive* mean streak running through it. "I'd rather not," she said as politely as possible. Several of the suck-ups in the front snickered at that, the troublemakers muttered solemnly among themselves in the back, and the ones in the middle—the fans of blessed anonymity like herself—pretended to look elsewhere. She had a feeling this was the beginning of trouble.

Serena wasn't necessarily afraid of trouble. But in a place like Sky City High, trouble took on a whole new meaning. Maybe if her mom hadn't died in that car crash six months ago, maybe if she'd had even one relative that Serena knew was still alive, she might have wound up in a place like Seattle, Portland or Minneapolis. She could have even been happy in a little, anonymous backwoods town in Nebraska or Iowa.

But no. Her mom's only friend Macy lived in Sky City, home of the nation's Superheroes, and Aunt Macy had been the only one to contact her after the funeral and offer her a place to stay. So, of course, Serena wound up in the one place she hated more than any other—the one place she neither wanted nor needed to be.

She knew even without asking that there were at least three Supers in the class—most of them the suck-ups down in the front. She could feel them as they gave off their own particular psychic

vibrations. The blonde girl who looked like she worked out was their leader. That Serena knew instinctively, like the way she could guess when the phone was going to ring a few seconds before it did, or what the winning lottery numbers would be that night.

The sandy-haired boy sitting to her right was her unofficial right-hand-man, and were he not biting back a snigger at Serena's expense, she might have thought he was cute. She knew a few things about the brown-haired boy with the bright blond streaks sitting on the girl's left: he was rich, too cute for his own good, and very, very closeted.

"Miss Swanson...?"

Suppressing the need to run screaming from the room, Serena got to her feet and tried to ignore the blonde girl, who was rolling her eyes.

damn, she's brave

She scanned the faces of the Supers down in the front, wondering where the ambient, semi-sarcastic thought had come from, then realized the thought had originated from behind her, from the back of the class. She glanced over one shoulder, letting her internal radar guide her, and realized it had radiated from a boy at the back who was using a pocketknife to clean his fingernails.

He was a bit too tall and a bit too rangy, and his dark hair was a bit too shaggy, and his clothes a bit too scruffy and out of date, but the moment she looked at him, he looked up as if he had sensed her. He had beautiful eyes, she noted, a honey-brown so pale they looked amber. For one half second they looked sad and a little vulnerable, then she made the mistake of trying to probe his thoughts, and they darkened and turned angry and remote.

The shaggy, out-of-date boy lashed psychically out at her, as if sensing her mental invasion, and Serena nearly lurched on her feet. He didn't look like much, but she was suddenly convinced that he was a powerful magick-wielder, whether he knew it or not. Powerful...and very, very angry. She thought how that was usually the perfect cocktail for a very good Supervillain.

She immediately turned away from him and faced Mr. Washington. She said in a rush, "I've lived in all different places, but Sky City seems nice. Thank you." She probably sounded like an idiot, but the last thing she needed, or wanted, was any attention. She sat down as gracefully as possible and lowered her head while the girl down in front sniggered and elbowed her second-in-command.

After class let out, she could feel the Supers tracking her out the door. She kept her head down and hurried out into the hallway that was filling up with students rushing to their next class.

that old bitch Mrs. Hennessey gave me a D she wouldn't know a preposition if it bit her ass

where the hell's Jason probably doing that cheerleader in the girl's bathroom

shit if I don't get a fix soon I don't know what I'll do what time is it how long before

Serena squeezed her eyes shut and looked down at the photocopied map in her hand, trying to concentrate on where her English class was instead of letting the bombardment of hundreds of ambient high school thoughts filter into her brain. She'd been more upset than she'd thought in Algebra, and she realized that at some point she'd dropped her mental shields.

In the crush of students, a girl slammed into her shoulder. It was like hitting a brick wall. The impact knocked Serena halfway across the hall, and as she slammed into a bank of lockers, she secretly—mostly subconsciously—shifted the molecular structure of the metal just a little so it felt more like bumping a mattress. The impact bounced her back into the middle of the hallway, but she stopped herself before she could crash into the blonde Super girl from Algebra.

The girl gave her a deadly look and said, quite loudly, "Freak."

The boy with the blond streaks flanking her on her left said to the sandy-haired boy on her right, "Hey, Harrison, you wanna hold my dick?"

Harrison snickered. *"I'd rather not,"* he said in clear imitation of her earlier. Both boys grinned at her before racing off toward the gymnasium.

The blonde girl continued to glare. *christ another geek there goes the neighborhood*

"Excuse me?" Serena said without thinking and stood up straighter as a wave of anger pulsed through her body.

The blonde girl looked momentarily surprised by her reaction. "What did you say, you little shrimp?"

"Nothing." Serena was about to sneak away when the boy from Algebra slipped in between them like a referee.

"Amber," said the boy in a friendly manner, "you dropped something back there."

Amber looked annoyed. "And what's that, freak?"

"Your manners."

Amber pursed her lips. "Keep walking that line, batboy, and I'm gonna lock you in your own locker." Tossing the boy a perilous look, she headed off toward the gymnasium, following the lead of her two minions.

Serena expected the boy from Algebra to turn and say something to her, maybe share a joke at Amber's expense, but he surprised her by lowering his head as she had earlier and just hurrying on toward the computer labs, his arms full of textbooks with papers and comic books sticking untidily out of them.

Thankfully, she didn't have Amber in English, though she did have the boy from Algebra in Biology—the one Amber had called "batboy." She wondered what they meant. He didn't look like an alien bat or vampire or anything weird like that, and she'd *seen* those in the past. He sat at the back with the other troublemakers, which Serena had finally decided to study up on a bit, since it seemed she might be joining them soon.

"Batboy" sat in the middle of his little entourage, with an enormous quarterback-type on his right who was doodling on his notebook and saying little and a petite blonde girl sitting on his left. The blonde girl was so small and pretty and utterly different than the two boys that Serena had trouble believing they were a cohesive unit, at least until she saw the big boy pass a note familiarly to her.

Serena decided that the cliques at Sky City High were some of the oddest she'd ever seen. Thankfully, their Biology teacher, Mrs. Burks, didn't ask her to stand up and make a fool of herself.

She hoped that was a good sign that things were looking up for her, and by the time the period was over, she was even starting to feel a little less like everyone was staring at her. She'd even been good at shielding the other students' thoughts. Then lunch happened, and Serena's life went to hell and didn't come back.

The Sky City High cafeteria was long and dim, made of cinderblock walls painted a uniform prison green so Serena felt like an inmate. Kids swarmed everywhere, kicking vending machines, talking on cell phones, texting, or just looking like they were having nicotine fits. She immediately looked for the boy from Algebra and Biology but he was nowhere to be found, although she did spot Amber and her two minions.

The Supers were sitting at what she figured was the "popular" table, strategically located in the center of the lunchroom. She made a mental note to avoid that table for the remainder of the year.

There were two lines, one for students to purchase special catered lunches, and another for the free school lunch. Serena discreetly got in line for the free school lunch, got her blue ticket from the concierge lady—who, thankfully, didn't give her more than a vapid once-over—and got in line.

She shielded tight and tried to look invisible as the line moved at the speed of continental drift toward the lunch bar. She could smell something vaguely like fish sticks and mac n' cheese, and her stomach growled in response. She wished she hadn't skipped the toast and cereal that Aunt Macy had tried to feed her before she left for school this morning. If she wasn't so hungry, she could have snuck outside and found a place to hide until lunch period was over.

As she reached the food bar and was served by a series of angry looking lunch ladies outfitted in green scrubs like surgeons, she realized the food didn't look exactly palatable. The fish sticks looked dry and could probably double as weapons, and the mac n' cheese had a suspicious orange glow about it. But then, it had been the same way back in her old city. It was almost a comfort to know that a school that catered to Supers had exactly the same crummy cafeteria food as a regular high school.

Carrying her tray at arm's length, the mysterious orange mac n' cheese quivering, she tried to decide on the right seating arrangement. She knew it was vitally important she choose the right table, just as she chose the right place to sit in class. If she accidently fell in with the *World of Warcraft* geeks, she'd regret it for the rest of the school year.

there she is

she's kind of hawt

Serena immediately turned toward the ambient thoughts, worrying her lips. She knew she was shielding, so there was no reason she should be hearing anything, and yet, sure enough, there was the boy from Algebra, the magick-wielder. Batboy. He was sitting on a bench against the back wall with his two friends.

Batboy's big friend was eating out of a massive lunch bag, his concentration entirely on the contents of his oversized sub, but the blonde girl was playing with a green apple, tossing it in the air and catching it, and watching her. One of the thoughts had come from her, and Serena was suddenly afraid it might have been the hawt comment.

The moment Serena looked over, batboy looked up from whatever he was scribbling in a notebook and gave her a defensive look, as if she had somehow invaded his personal space just by looking at him. Shit, she thought, he was just as aware of her magick as she was of his. That was it.

And the more she thought about it, the more "grey" his magick felt, not unlike her own. The question remained whether he was aware that she could sense his thoughts and grey magick, or if he was just some idiot savant with a lot of power and no awareness of it. Serena snorted. Well, either way, she was getting just a little tired of his attitude. It wasn't like it was *her* fault that his thoughts were so loud they kept penetrating her shields.

The stress of a new school, Amber, everything just amplified her already overwrought thoughts, and Serena walked up to him and said, point blank, "If you don't like me listening to your thoughts, dumbass, then don't think so loud!"

The boy looked startled by her outburst. The big kid next to him laughed through his hoagie sandwich and elbowed him. "Hey, you got an admirer, Jinx."

"Shut up!" Jinx, a.k.a., batboy, said and shoved at him, which did absolutely nothing except make Jinx lurch back on the bench a bit. It was like the big kid was made of lead.

The big boy just grinned at her a little goofily, some lettuce stuck in his front teeth. "Hi. I'm Isaac and this is my sister, Nikki," he mumbled, indicating the petite blonde beside him who was so small, blonde and cute, she looked like she needed to be put behind panes of glass.

Nikki raised a well-manicured hand, looked her over, and said, brightly, "Hello, new girl!" *damn, hawt and stacked*

Serena immediately blushed at the girl's thought.

Isaac elbowed his friend again, almost knocking him off the bench, and said, "And the grumpy guy here is Jinx. Ignore him. He has issues."

Nikki said, "Not issues, a whole subscription."

"Shut your hole, Nikki!" Jinx shouted back.

"Well, whatever it is, I'd appreciate it if Jinx would stop glaring at me," Serena said.

Jinx narrowed his eyes and looked like he was about to say something when a half-filled carton of orange juice flew out of nowhere and hit him in the side of the head—which did very little for his already scruffy appearance. He glared at Amber, who'd thrown the carton, but didn't immediately get to his feet.

"Oops," said Amber, standing atop the popular table. "I was aiming for your new friend, Jinx." She turned her attention on Serena and said, hands on hips, "So what is it, freak? Do you howl at the moon or turn into the Blob, or what? We need to know for future reference."

Suddenly feeling all eyes on her, Serena turned to face Amber. "Excuse me?"

"You're a freak, or you wouldn't be talking to the other freaks. But what kind of freak are you? We've had blob-kids, batboys, and this one kid who turned into a Chihuahua on the full moon. What's your shtick?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Serena said and started for the trash bin, fully prepared to dump her lunch and get the hell out of there. But before she reached the trash bin, something flew past her shoulder, just grazing her hair, and smashed into the concrete wall and stayed there, deeply embedded in the broken stone.

It was an apple. Nikki's green apple.

"Hey, freak, I'm not done talking to you!" Amber said, and Serena turned to find the girl actually standing over Nikki, who was down on her knees on the lunchroom floor while Amber pulled on her hair. Nikki screamed. Isaac had jumped to his feet to help his sister, but Amber's two toy

boys had both of his arms and were pinning them against his back while he made little *ow ow ow* noises and jumped up and down like a sissy boy.

Amber continued by saying, "What you see there are the sons of Supernova and The Earthmover. My daddy's Atlas, the Strongest Man on Earth. Who are your parents, and do we like them?"

Serena looked over at Jinx, expecting him to have come to the rescue of his two friends, but the coward had stayed down on the bench and out of the fray, looking a bit like a turtle trying to retreat into his shell. She rolled her eyes at the scene. "You must be kidding me. Are you guys like five years old? Doesn't beating up on the misfit kids get kind of old?"

"Are you a misfit?" Amber asked, smiling. She yanked on Nikki's blonde hair and the girl screamed again.

"No," Serena answered, smiling back. "But I can be a real witch sometimes."

Amber, looking a little lost as to how to reply, turned to one of her boys, the one whom Serena thought of as almost cute and her right-hand-minion, and said, "Harrison. Light her fire."

Harrison flinched. "You must be kidding me."

Amber bared her teeth. "Let go of that Frankenstein and fry that bitch!"

Shrugging, Harrison let Isaac go and turned to face Serena. He didn't look particularly happy about his marching orders, but he still raised both hands. They immediately started to glow with a warm, soft white light. But it didn't look like a happy light; it looked like the type of light one should avoid, like the brightness of an oncoming train in a tunnel. He made a pushing motion, and the softly burning white globes sprang out at Serena.

She instinctively threw her lunch tray at the light.

The tray, along with her fish sticks and mac n' cheese, were briefly illuminated and x-rayed. She decided in that moment that she was happy she hadn't eaten any of it. Then it exploded into a glowy, orangey goop that splashed the floor and walls. It also hit her. And the moment it did, it ignited her power.

She'd never had that much control over her grey magick to begin with. When her mom had been alive, she'd always told Serena to shield against it, the way she needed to shield against others' thoughts. But shielding against the Grey, as she sometimes thought of it, wasn't always that easy.

The Grey had a mind all its own. Sometimes the Grey even manipulated her into situations just so she would use it. Being attacked by a source of light didn't help. The Grey didn't like the light anymore than it liked the dark.

She stiffened as her whole body became electrified. That electricity poured down her body and legs and into the floor, then traveled in angry, crackling grey-blue waves to the walls so that every single light switch in the cafeteria, every length of wiring, and every electronic device, was immediately overwhelmed and burned out. There was a sharp stink of ozone, and then everything in the room went dark—the lights, the generators and refrigeration units, even the students' phones and laptops.

The whole room was plunged into complete darkness, with only the dimmest light from the hallway beyond pouring in. That...and her own grey, ethereal power, faintly glowing against her skin.

In that moment, Serena wondered how much of all this had been Amber's doing, and how much the Grey.

The students in the cafeteria flew into a panic. Someone crashed into her from behind, sending her sprawling to the floor on her knees as he charged past her. When she finally looked up, she was dismayed to see the guy, Harrison, glowing faintly with his own ethereal ghostlight, though his light was much brighter—whiter—than her own. The light in his body glowed right through his skin and clothes, creating a weird X-ray effect. She could see his bones, including his wingroots and the thin, bird-like bones that ran down his back under his clothes.

Wings. Harrison had *wings*.

"Shit," she said, "a nephilim." She hadn't anticipated that, and now she saw the inherent danger of being too near him. Nephilim—half angels—didn't like her kind very well. Well, technically speaking, they didn't like anyone too well. But it explained why he was so cute.

Cute...and very, very dangerous.

She scrambled to get to her feet, but Harrison raised his hands and aimed them at her. His light hit her full on, and she suddenly knew exactly what it felt like to be a deer caught in headlights before being hit by a truck. She was blinded for a moment, and then she felt the cool burning of that light as it collided with all the weird stuff inside of her. She cried out at the sudden, all-consuming pain, and the light vanished mysteriously.

Someone had knocked Harrison to the floor. Serena sat up and blinked until her night vision kicked in and she could see the bodies squirming and tussling on the floor a few feet from her. Harrison was down on his back, with Jinx atop him, boxing his face. She was impressed. She decided that Jinx wasn't a bad fighter, when properly motivated.

Then Amber rushed him and slung her muscular forearm under his chin. Jinx choked and came up off Harrison with a cry. Isaac and Nikki rushed in to help Jinx, but the other boy, the one with blond streaks in his hair, cut them off.

"Get out of the way, Blaine!" Isaac yelled at the boy.

"No way, freak! One more move and I'm gonna smash your face in!"

"That's tough talk coming from your closeted little ass," Isaac said, huffing and puffing like a bull ready to charge. Isaac was at least six and a half feet tall, by Serena's estimation. He must have weighed over two-hundred-and-fifty pounds, all muscle. Why he hadn't pounded those kids into jelly before all this was a mystery to Serena. Yet Blaine kept Isaac back and pacing nervously, though the boy was no taller than Serena, and probably weighed just as much.

"Shit," said Nikki, climbing unsteadily to her feet. She turned to Serena, blew her mussed blonde hair out of her face, and said, "Get out of Blaine's way, new girl. Now!"

"Why?" Serena asked, also getting to her feet.

"Don't ask!" Nikki shouted, taking a step backward while keeping her big eyes on Blaine like he was a nuclear weapon about to go off.

Blaine eyed the bigger boy savagely with his bright blue eyes and then stomped the floor, making a hairline crack grow from under his heel that quickly spread outward toward Isaac.

Isaac said, "Shit," and jumped out of the way. But the crack arched right for Nikki. "Get out of the way, Nikki!" he screamed to his sister.

Nikki held absolutely still as the crack split the concrete between her combat boots. She looked down at it in dismay. Then the crack widened and she disappeared down into the basement of the school with a long peal of a scream.

Isaac roared and dived at Blaine, the impact lifting the smaller boy up and hurdling him halfway across the cafeteria before he landed atop a table, skittered over it, and dropped off the other side, dragging down about a half dozen icky lunch trays with him.

Meanwhile, Amber still had Jinx in a chokehold. Serena decided that the girl had some serious muscles, because though Jinx flailed, he was unable to break her hold, and he wasn't exactly a weak-looking guy, either. Serena climbed to her feet and rushed Amber. After all, Jinx had saved her from Harrison's light. But Harrison tripped her halfway there and she flailed to the floor, rolled, and came up on her knees.

Harrison laughed, "You lose, freak," and shot another couple of bolts of light at Serena.

This time Serena was ready. She lifted her hands and deflected them, and they shot off into the back of the kitchen area, the place the lunch ladies had abandoned when all hell had broken loose. Something mechanical exploded with a choking noise, and suddenly the kitchen was full of smoke and fire.

"What did you do?" Harrison screamed.

"Bitch got mad skillz," Serena said, climbing to her feet and eyeing him. She shook herself and felt the Grey encapsulate her, giving off its own creepy, deep-sea glow. She clenched her hands and felt the Grey concentrate itself there into two balls of burning grey light. "And I'm going to burn your angelic tail feathers off if you don't get muscle girl off Jinx. Now!"

Harrison looked torn between obeying her and the fire merrily spreading across the counters, making the warm trays of slowly congealing orange goop explode and decorating the walls of the cafeteria with fish sticks and burned mac n' cheese—which, combined, smelled worse than anything Serena had ever encountered, like a combination of sulfur and burning rubber.

All the fire bells in the school went off, and Harrison, deciding that discretion was indeed the better part of valor, took off for the door, grabbing Amber along the way. Blaine, wobbling on his feet and looking disconcerted by the hole in the floor he had made, suddenly turned tail and chased his two friends out the door, leaving Serena, along with Jinx and Isaac, sitting wounded on the floor.

All three of them jerked to their feet when they heard a hellish cry echoing up from the crack in the floor. Serena felt the little hairs on her body stand on end at the sound of the cry. She rushed as close to the edge of the crack as she dared, afraid that Nikki was in mortal anguish, but seconds after she got there, Jinx tackled her to the floor.

She fought him off and flipped around. "What are you doing?" she demanded to know.

"You've gotta get away from the edge!" he cried, looking terrified.

Seconds later, a darkness shot up from the hole in the floor, made an arc in mid-air, and dived at him. The darkness looked Nikki-shaped, but it was definitely not Nikki. Jinx shoved Serena down, shielding her with his body, and the creature flapped past them, razoring its blood-red claws across Jinx's back, ripping his concert T-shirt to shreds. Jinx cried out at the impact.

Then the thing that Nikki had become shot off across the cafeteria quite literally like a bat out of hell, and looking a little like one too, turned once more and eyed them. The all-black, winged version of Nikki looked like a featureless shadow with wings and fangs. Serena immediately felt the need to clench her bladder closed before she accidentally embarrassed herself.

The all-black, shadowy creature with two burning red eyes hissed at them, but Isaac stepped in front of them and raised his hands. "Cool it, sis, it's over!"

Nikki didn't hear. She folded her wings and dove at them again.

Jinx jumped up and pushed Isaac out of the way. Nikki clashed with him and the two of them crashed back into the nearest cinderblock wall with a disconcerting crunch of bones, leaving an almost cartoonlike impression in the stone. Meanwhile, the flames had moved to the lunchroom

proper and the room was quickly filling with smoke. Coughing, Serena got to her feet, while Isaac reached for her and said in a very gentle voice, "You okay?"

"What the hell is that?" she cried. She'd thought that Harrison was scary, but nothing could have prepared her for Nikki.

"That's Nix. A Kresnik."

"What happened to Nikki?" Serena said. "And what the hell's a Kresnik?"

"That *is* Nikki. And a Kresnik...ah, never mind. Take too long to explain." Isaac grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her out of the way as Nikki—or Nix, or the Kresnik, or whatever the hell the creature was—barreled down at them once more, Jinx still clinging to the creature like an unwilling passenger.

Serena knew they would never get out of the way in time, but before the Kresnik could impact them, Jinx grunted with exertion and slowed her momentum. The Kresnik roared and hissed, but Jinx had it in a headlock like a cowboy wrestling a bull to the ground, and he was indeed much stronger than he looked.

As Serena watched, Jinx twisted in mid-air and wrestled the creature to the mac n' cheese splattered floor. The two crashed down, skidding across the mess, the clouds of smoke almost obscuring their battle. The creature fought him tooth and nail, but Jinx held it down. It scratched at his face, and he screamed and his amber eyes caught a wild glow. His ravaged T-shirt stirred and then ripped apart as two great, shiny-black wings emerged as Jinx's muscles bunched and trembled in his effort to restrain the Kresnik.

The two creatures beat at each other with giant, batlike wings. At least she knew why Amber called him batboy now. "Nikki, cut it out!" he roared.

The Kresnik stiffened, made a feeble cry, and then shapeshifted from a great, black creature to a small, blonde, crying girl with mac n' cheese gooped in her hair.

Serena thought she hadn't seen right. Isaac pulled at her wrist, and she finally gave in. The two of them escaped the burning lunchroom and joined the other students on the lawn outside the school. Jinx and Nikki followed soon after, Jinx carrying the exhausted, sniffling girl, both of them covered in black soot and tattered clothing.

Mr. Snodgrass, the school principal, appeared a few moments later, glaring at the students through his big, bifocal glasses even as the distant scream of fire engines filled the air. He stopped to look at Jinx, Nikki, Isaac...and Serena. He gave Serena a nasty, suspicious one-over and said, "Miss Swanson, we need to talk. *Immediately.*"

Serena swallowed against the dryness of her throat and heard a nervous click. So much for anonymity on her first day at school.

Blaze sighed, readying himself for another class teaching that troublemaking crowd. Damn Geek Squad. Why did he have to mentor them anyway? It wasn't like his Superhero influence did any good. They'd still turn into Supervillians before long. It was ingrained in their nature. Just look what they did to the lunchroom that morning! And that damn Jinx had better not try answering his cell phone mid-class, if his no-good father phoned again. Damn that Prince of Darkness, thinking the world revolved around him, and he could call his kid anytime.

He went to the blackboard and grabbed the eraser. Just as he began swiping away the last lesson, footsteps sounded behind him. The Geek Squad had arrived early, and that was definitely unlike them.

He turned, just in time to receive a white-hot ball of fire to the face. "Ahhhhhhh!" he screamed as his eyes melted, obscuring his approaching attacker.

Two more streams of hot pain lanced his arms and he was suddenly fused to his blackboard. His dying vision blinked in and out as he writhed and squirmed, trying to free himself so he could fight back. Just before blackness overtook his eyes once more, he caught a blurry glimpse of his attacker, and a burst of fear shot through his dying heart.

"What?" was all he managed before the final thread of life left him.

"Here you are, Ms. Swanson," Mr. Snodgrass said as he tore the slip of paper from his Post-it note pad. "Blaze will pencil you into the class, and I'll notify Ms. Tupper, your next period PE teacher, that there's been a slight change in your schedule."

"Thanks," she said sullenly, staring at the note as she got up from the chair in his office. The altercation in the cafeteria had earned her and the Geek Squad, as she'd come to learn Jinx, Isaac, and Nikki were often referred to, a week's detention. And it also got her enrolled in Superhero Mentoring 101.

Great, she thought, *just great*. What a wonderful way to start her first week at school. She sighed as she walked out into the hallway.

Nikki was leaning up against the wall as she emerged from the principal's office. "Looks like you're officially one of us now, new girl." She gave a bright smile, then gave Serena an up and down perusal. *damn she is fine glad we snagged her before the Supers could*

Serena tried not to blush too hard at the stream of thought coming from the little blonde. "So what's this mentoring class like?"

Nikki waved a hand, rolled her eyes as they started down the hallway together. "It's dull as death. Blaze talks about himself more than anything. I usually just zone out and picture Angelina Jolie." Then she changed the subject, but the new topic made Serena wish she'd change it again. "So, is it true you're the daughter of the Night Witch?"

Serena swallowed and avoided the little blonde's eyes. "Umm...yeah, I am. How'd you know that?"

Nikki shrugged, and from her peripheral Serena noted the girl's anxious expression. "Some of the Supers were whispering about it after the cafeteria incident. What's it like? Witch World, I mean. I've heard there's some wicked cool technology over there."

Serena gave the enthusiastic Nikki a small smile. "I've never been to Witch World."

Nikki's eyes grew wide with surprise. "You're kidding. But your mom was the Night Witch."

"Yeah, but whenever I'd ask about Witch World," Serena shrugged, "she'd kind of avoid the subject."

"Oh." Obviously sensing her discomfort, Nikki let the topic drop off into silence.

"So what did old Snot-grass say?" Jinx hurried up beside Serena on the left, blowing a strand of scraggly hair from his eyes as he did so.

"I have to take this mentoring class with you all. Guess it's supposed to mend my troublemaking ways." She shrugged, thinking that maybe she'd end up sitting at the back of her classes, after all.

When they entered the classroom, Serena decided today's session would be anything but dull as death. Their teacher, or the gooey, melted mess that was left of him, was fused to the blackboard in a spread-eagle position. She covered her mouth with her hand at the burning fumes coming off the body, Nikki let out a small scream, while Jinx said, "It smells like burned dog in here," before he, too, focused on the blackboard and the messy corpse.

Isaac came in behind them. "Hey, sorry I'm late, but—" then he let out a curse as he came up beside Jinx and spied their dead teacher.

"What happened?" Nikki breathed, her big, blue eyes swallowing up her tiny face.

"Good question," Serena said, moving a bit closer to the door to put some space between herself and the stench. That quiet life of anonymity she'd hoped for, here at her new home and in her new school, was looking less and less attainable by the day.

"Who would want to kill Blaze?" Jinx said, stepping closer to the murder scene with a frown of morbid curiosity crinkling his face.

Just then, a shrill scream came from the classroom entrance. Serena and the others turned to find two green-skinned twins staring between the mess and the trio.

"Oh, just great. Zack and Zoe." Jinx rolled his eyes at the pair. "Why do you two always pick the worst times to show up? Fly off to your home planet."

The male of the duo shot him a sneer. "We're alien/human hybrids, genius..."

"...and we were born on Earth," the female finished for her twin.

"You killed Blaze!" Zack cried, and a pair of thin feelers jutting from his otherwise smooth, bald head twitched as he did so. "I'm going to Mr. Snodgrass right now!"

Ah, this week just keeps getting better and better, Serena thought, her hopes for normalcy further plummeting.

Jinx ran after Zack, grabbing his arm and stopping him in the hallway. Serena and the others followed after.

"We had nothing to do with this!" Jinx argued. "We just got here and he was already dead!"

"Tell it to the principal." Zack smirked spitefully.

Jinx narrowed his eyes. "You annoying smear of green—"

"What is going on?" Before he could finish his sentence, Mr. Snodgrass appeared in the hall behind them. His arms were crossed over the front of his tweed blazer as he scowled. "Can't you freaks stay out of trouble for more than five minutes?"

"They killed Blaze!" Zoe squealed, wagging a finger at Serena and her companions.

"We did not!" Serena said, tiring of the antics of these alien twins. "We found him murdered, Mr. Snodgrass."

The bulgy-eyed principal gazed between the twins and the Geek Squad. "Show me the evidence, and let me be the judge."

Why did Serena feel doom blossoming in the pit of her stomach at his words? She tried to ignore the foreboding and, with the others, she followed Mr. Snodgrass back into Blaze's classroom.

One look at the melted mess that was once a Superhero and Mr. Snodgrass let free a bloodcurdling scream. The principal retrieved a paisley handkerchief from the top pocket of his blazer and held it over his mouth as he approached the corpse.

"This was done with intense heat," he exclaimed after a lengthy silence in which he examined the remains, choking back gags as he did so. He shot an accusatory glare at Jinx. "You're known for your little bouts of pyromania."

"No way!" Jinx waved his arms and glared as he backed up. "There is *no way* you're pinning this on me. I'm not the only one in this school who could've done it."

"No," Mr. Snodgrass said, straightening and offering a look of disapproval to the entire Geek Squad, "but you have the best motive for it. Blaze was always sending you and your clique to detention, or my office."

"This is crap," Serena blurted, thinking how she was further cementing herself in the troublemaker camp even as the words spilled from her mouth. "Would Jinx really hang around the crime scene if he'd done it?"

Mr. Snodgrass shrugged and frowned at her tone. "Maybe he would, simply to try and defer suspicion." Then he walked closer to Serena and shook a finger in her face. "Either way, I'm calling the police, and if Jinx did do this, remember," he paused to bore a hole through the entire Geek Squad with his penetrating scowl, "you're all accessories to murder!"

Her first week in Sky City was getting off to a great start, Serena thought, sighing as she took a seat between Isaac and Nikki in the police station's waiting area.

"Listen..." Nikki said, gazing at her combat boots as she spoke to Serena. "I'm sorry about what happened in the cafeteria." She looked up briefly, her eyes shining with anxiety. "You know, when I went all fangs and glowing red eyes? I try to keep that part of me under wraps, but..."

"It's okay." Serena reached out and patted the girl's hand. Nikki's thoughts came through, telling her the little blonde wanted to talk about it, but was afraid to. So she asked, "What happened to you back there, exactly? If you want to talk, I'm a good listener."

Nikki gave a grateful smile. "It's kind of hard to explain—"

"Nikki, do you think you should talk about it?" Isaac said, leaning forward and offering his sister a nervous look.

"No worries," she told him, waving a dainty hand at the giant. "Nix is completely under control now, bro. She's not coming out." Then she focused on Serena again. "Our dad is the Diabolical Dr. Blackthorne. Maybe you've heard of him? Mad scientist extraordinaire. He knew your mom from back when they were both with the League of Extreme Evil."

"Oh, yeah." Serena nodded. "Mom told me about him. How he was once your average chemist, and then he started doing some pretty unethical experiments."

Nikki looked down at her shoes again, then back up at Serena. "I was one of those experiments."

"Oh, wow." Serena felt the wave of pain the girl's memories brought. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, no." Nikki shook her head, reached out and touched Serena's arm. "I wanted to talk." Her crystal blue eyes narrowed curiously. "But you knew that, didn't you?"

Serena felt herself blush a bit. "Yeah, I could see your thoughts. I wasn't peeking. Your shield was down and it just kind of seeped through."

"No problem. Thanks for letting me babble." Then the little blonde went back to her story. "So, yeah, basically I'm a vampire created in a lab. How's that for an ice breaker?" She forced a laugh. "This, here?" The girl motioned with a hand up and down her torso. "This is Nikki. The being you saw in the cafeteria is Nix. Nix and I don't get along, and we're completely separate personalities. I exist on blood capsules dear old Dad gives me. Nix..." She shuddered. "Nix isn't so easy to satisfy."

Then Nikki's thought shield went up completely and her story stopped.

When they'd first arrived at the police station, Jinx had been quickly separated from his friends. While the police jostled him down the hall, towards an interrogation room, he protested, "Hey, I get one phone call."

"Fine," the beefy cop with slicked-back hair grunted at him. "There's a pay phone over there. You got any change?"

Jinx shook his head.

With an annoyed sigh, the cop shoved some coins into his hand, then shoved him up to an ancient wall phone that looked ready to fall off its post.

"If you'd just give me my cell phone back..." Jinx grumbled.

"Ha! Fat chance, kid. Get your call done."

Jinx punched in his home number, but he had little hopes of his mom picking up. And, if she did, the chance of her being sober was slim. On the third ring, she answered with a slurred, "Hallo?"

"Mom, can you get down to the police station? I...I'm being held for questioning."

She let out a garbled string of curses. Jinx heard a man's voice mumble something in the background, and he sighed and rubbed his eyes, wishing just one of his parents wasn't so absent all the time. He felt like he'd raised himself, and, just once in his young life, he'd like to feel a bit less alone when it came to his family. Sure, he had great friends, but he had no responsible adult

in his life to turn to when he desperately needed one. It made him feel old before his time, but he tried to hide that from the others.

"Look, Jinx..." Mom's words melted in a loud yawn and smacking of hangover-dry lips. "You'll have to take care of yourself, kiddo. I've got Larry over, and—"

"Don't I always? Never mind!" He hung up, slamming the ancient receiver back in its cradle and thinking how satisfying it felt to do so.

Now, sometime later, he sat in the interrogation room alone, doodling video game characters on a pad of paper he'd snuck in by tucking it under his shirt. The two cops questioning him had briefly left the room to grab coffee. He had read their energy loud and clear, though, before they took their break. They had no evidence to pin on him, but they were doing one last sweep of the classroom. The pair would return to try and put the squeeze for information on him.

Just before they did, his cell phone vibrated in his back jeans pocket.

He sat up, stopped drawing. "What the...?" The cops had taken his phone when they'd brought him in, for evidence, they said.

Quickly he took the slim red phone out and looked at it. It definitely wasn't his phone. When he flipped it open, the number on the call screen made him moan in dismay. Just what he needed: a call from Satan himself. He pressed TALK then END swiftly, just as one cop returned to the room.

"Okay, kid." The burly cop with dark brown skin and chocolate-colored eyes towered over him. "One last time. You sure you didn't see anyone leaving the classroom as you and your friends arrived?"

He shook his head. Just as he opened his mouth, his cell phone chirped loudly again.

The big cop frowned. "What was that?"

Jinx scratched the back of his neck, coughed to try and cover up the ringing. "I didn't hear anything."

The cop tilted his head, listened. Jinx swallowed hard and willed the man not to hear.

The ringing rose in volume.

Glowing down at Jinx, the cop placed a hand on the table and leaned closer. "I heard a cell phone. I know I did. Now how could that be, when I took yours away?"

Jinx shrugged and silently cursed his father. Why was it when he didn't want his parents to interfere, that was exactly when they did, and the results usually turned out for the worst?

"Get up," the cop commanded when the phone gave another sharp bleat. "And give me what's in your back pocket right now." He held out his hand and waited.

Jinx shuffled to his feet, head down as he fished the cell from his jeans. With a heavy sigh, he placed it in the cop's outstretched hand.

"Ahhhh! Too hot!" The cop promptly screamed and dropped the cell, which now billowed black smoke. Tiny flames licked out of its unfolded face.

Jinx screwed up his face and mumbled, "Geez, Dad. Why now?"

"Because I'm saving your behind, son," came the silky, insidious reply, which billowed out of the phone in time with the smoke.

The cop gave another shrill squeak and staggered back from the spectacle. Jinx just stood there, head down, hands buried in his pockets, and waited for the embarrassment, Dad's showboating, to be over. He was in enough trouble already. He didn't need an appearance by the Prince of Darkness to add to his stress, but there was no holding Dad back when he wanted to make a statement.

The cop choked and moved back from the smoke. He opened the door and fled, yelling, "I need back up in here," as he vacated the room.

Soon the column of blue-black smoke took on a form, appearing more human as arms extended from the mass and a chest puffed out. Shoulders and a head were carved from the shapeless darkness.

"I heard word through my League of Extreme Evil contacts," Satan said, as his sharp, angular face and piercing blue eyes materialized and he leaned forward menacingly over the table, "that you did a very bad deed, son."

Jinx glanced up at his dad, who was clad in an impeccable grey Armani suit, his jet-black hair slicked away from his high forehead. He shrugged, shuffled back, then said, "If you mean Blaze, I didn't kill him."

"Oh." Satan clucked his tongue. "I'm so disappointed to learn that." The click of his shoes as he drew nearer made the nerves along Jinx's spine jump.

"Sorry," he whispered, holding his breath when his father touched his shoulder. Latent heat always lingered in the tips of Satan's extremities, and Jinx began to sweat profusely from a combination of nerves and Dad's combustible qualities.

"Jinx...son." Satan sat on the edge of the table and stared at him. "I need you to embrace your darker nature." He sighed and smoothed a hand over his impeccably styled hair. "Truth? I'd be happy if you'd just use your grey magick a bit more."

Jinx scowled, but his gaze remained fixed on the floor. "I'm not doing that. I don't want to get in trouble, Dad. I just want to fly below the radar, be invisible, you know?"

Satan shot up from the table and sharply pulled the wrinkles from his suit. "Invisible? No son of mine will be invisible, thank you very much...!"

"Dad, I—"

Satan held up a long, thin finger, gesturing for Jinx's silence. "Listen, you little shit. I'm going to give you a choice. You can be a boring mundane, just as you wish, but it means severing all ties with me. I won't have a nobody for a kid." He sniffed and his nostrils flared with smoke. "Or you can start embracing the dark side, do me proud as the future Heir of Hell, and for that I'll help you out of this little mess here." He indicated the interrogation room with a sweep of his hand.

Jinx chewed on his bottom lip. He turned his glare on his father, who merely arched an eyebrow at him, gave a smug smile, and waited. What could he do? If he didn't accept Dad's ultimatum, Satan would surely cause chaos and get Jinx in deeper trouble. If he did accept it, he'd owe Dad a bad deed or two, and he hated owing his father anything. But the thought of having two parents non-existent in his life frightened him even more than being in trouble.

"Will you make sure my friends go free, too?" he asked.

Dad nodded. "You just say the word and I'll create all the diversions you need."

"Okay." A part of Jinx hated himself for agreeing, but... "I'll do something to prove my worth if you let me and the others go free."

A demonic smile curled Dad's lips and exposed wide, white teeth. "That's my boy." He patted Jinx's cheek with one burning hot hand and poised himself in front of the door moments before three cops burst through.

Just as cop number one drew his gun, he froze—literally. Satan's skin took on a hint of blue and the temperature in the interrogation room dropped drastically as the Prince of Darkness accessed the power of the Ninth Level of Hell, the coldest level of them all, and froze the policemen in place.

Jinx whirled on him. "You killed them!"

Satan waved him off. "Oh, don't be so melodramatic. They'll thaw out not long after we leave. Then they'll be as good as new." He shooed his son out of the interrogation room and Jinx slipped by the police popsicles and made his way down the hall to find his friends and get out. At his heels, the devil followed close.

As Jinx and his dad breezed by more people, they, too, froze in mid-step or mid-question. One well built lady cop, who stood nose-to-nose with Satan, turned and said, "What're you—?" but that was all she got out before icy feathers formed on her pursed lips.

Jinx raced into the waiting room and found Nikki, Serena, and Isaac propped on a bench that sat against the back wall. When Serena focused on Satan behind him, Jinx noticed her face pruned in confusion. As he drew near, she stood and asked, "Ummm....who is that?" She looked around, eyes widening as she took in the mass of frozen people. "And is he doing this?"

Jinx grabbed her hand and motioned to the others to follow. "Not a lot of time to talk, but that," he pointed beside him, where Satan now stood, "is my dad. The Prince of Darkness. Dad, meet Serena, the new girl at school. And, yeah, he's creating a diversion so we can get the hell out of here."

Satan wiggled his fingers and smiled. "Hello." Then he promptly turned the people near the double glass doors into ice sculptures by pointing at them. "Go," he commanded, and the kids ran toward the exit.

Just as Jinx stepped off the bottom step of the police station and onto the sidewalk, a cold hand folded over his shoulder. "Remember your promise."

He turned to look at his father, whose face was now losing the blue pallor and returning to its usual rosy hue. "Yeah, I'll remember." Jinx looked after his fleeing friends, who hadn't yet realized he wasn't with them.

"Good. Because I'll be watching, son...waiting." With that, Dad began to melt into a column of smoke once more. His face and form lost definition, curling in on themselves. The column grew thinner and thinner, then began to descend, folding into a tiny, compact mass. The mass bloomed a vivid red and a cell phone sat on the pavement.

Jinx looked inside the police station. Already he could make out some people moving slightly, nearer to the exit. Their stiff limbs jerked spastically as they began to thaw.

"You've got twenty minutes to get out of here and begin planning your bad deed," Dad said from within his new cell phone form.

Jinx glowered at the phone. "What if I just leave you behind? Can't watch me if I don't take you along."

The phone gave a hearty, cruel laugh. "Don't be silly, son. I can see you anytime I like. If you leave me behind, I'll just assume another form and follow."

Giving a defeated sigh, Jinx scooped the phone up and shoved it in his back pocket. Briefly, as he fled to catch up with his friends, he wondered if butt-dialing Dad would provide some small, petty satisfaction. Maybe it would at least annoy the Prince of Darkness, he thought spitefully.

He caught up with the others after he rounded a second corner past the police station. "Hey, wait up."

"Where were you?" Isaac turned and gave him a worried look.

"I... kind of got tied up with Dad," Jinx said, and he pulled the cell phone from his back pocket, holding it up and giving it a sideways glance to indicate to the others that Satan was still lurking and could hear them. "Made a deal with him to get us out of there."

"Oh, Jinx." Nikki came forward to stand beside her brother. "No."

Serena joined the three. "Can we help?"

Jinx smiled at her, but it was a smile filled with sadness. "Better you stay out of this, Serena." Then he looked at the others. "You guys, too. I should do this alone. He's my dad, after all."

Isaac clenched his meaty fists and frowned. "Whatever you got planned, I'm coming along to stop you."

The cell phone, still in Jinx's hand, chirped and squeaked. "You stop him, and there will be consequences."

Jinx screwed up his face, glared at the red plastic in his hand. "Go, you three. Just go. I'll see you at school tomorrow...I hope."

And then he turned and ran off, leaving Serena, Nikki, and Isaac standing in the center of the street, staring after him.

"We should follow," Isaac said. "We have to follow."

He moved a step forward, but Serena held back some, and Nikki obviously noticed. She reached out and touched Serena's wrist. "If you can't come with us, we understand."

Serena screwed up her face, feeling guilty. "It's not that I don't want to, but Aunt Macy is probably worried by now. I should really get home."

Nikki gave her an understanding smile, and so did Isaac. "No worries, Serena," he said.

Before she left, she told them, "I'll give you a call later to see if you're okay."

Nikki fished a pen out of her purse and scrawled a number on Serena's hand. "That's my cell." She gave Serena a quick hug. "Talk to you later."

They waved and Serena watched them leave, a sinking feeling growing in the pit of her stomach.

Jinx listened to the instructions the cell phone gave him. "Keep going. I haven't found the perfect location yet. We need somewhere that's ripe for disorder."

"Of course." Jinx kept his responses curt and clipped. He hated how Dad made him jump through hoops just to earn approval, but it was better than feeling orphaned like he so often did. Besides, he couldn't be sure Dad wouldn't come down on his friends, too, if he didn't fulfill his part of the bargain. And he didn't want the others to suffer because of him.

"There!" The cell phone jiggled and turned in his hand, pointing to a gas station/convenience store across a wide, empty parking lot. Neon white and red glowed from a towering sign above, showing the place was open twenty-four hours. It was located at the end of a long strip mall.

"Jinx!" Isaac came around the corner, Nikki following close behind. "Whatever he wants you to do, don't do it!"

The cell phone laughed and began to morph in his hand. Soon the sleek, red design bled to steely grey, and a small gun rested in Jinx's palm. He swallowed hard.

"Hold the place up," Dad whispered through the weapon. "Make me proud, son."

With one last look over his shoulder at his friends, Jinx whispered, "I'm sorry," and disappeared into a border of bushes. He heard Nikki shout, "Jinx, wait," as he did, but he ignored them. He skulked across the parking lot, trying to look nonchalant, but not sure if he was pulling it off. As he did so, he studied the inside of the small convenience store. Only one person besides the clerk hovered about the aisles. He'd wait until the customer left, then he'd go in.

But as said customer walked out of the place, Nikki and Isaac burst through the bushes at the other end of the parking lot.

"Jinx." Isaac ran toward him full tilt, shoulders hunkered and eyes determined. "Resist him. Whatever it is, you don't need to do it."

"I do," Jinx whispered. "For you, for Nikki."

"Go inside," the gun hissed. "I'll cover you. Just get rid of the big dumbass and his sister."

Isaac reached out and knocked the gun from Jinx's hand. It clattered over the pavement, letting out a spray of bullets.

"Yikes!" Nikki skipped up and down as zipping pellets of lead aimed straight for her feet.

"Knock it off, Dad," Jinx growled. Messing with him was one thing. Messing with his friends was entirely different.

Isaac danced around some bullets and pulled Jinx with him. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"Not so fast," the gun boomed.

The three turned in time to see the gun bulge and bend this way and that. A column of smoke rose from the weapon, boiling out in an angry scarlet hue.

"Oh crap," Jinx said. "Now he's really mad."

"You've disappointed me, son," the column of smoke bellowed. "And for that there will be repercussions."

It rose up and widened until it brushed the corner of the strip mall. The center of the column writhed and parted, revealing massive red eyes that glowered down at them all. A great head of smoke formed and lowered toward them. Its roiling mouth opened wide, ready to gobble them up.

But as it lowered, a shrill shriek filtered up into the night. Nikki collapsed to the concrete and began to shiver and shake.

Isaac dropped to his knees beside her. "No, Sis. Not again."

Jinx joined them. "Nikki, fight her off."

"No," Nikki growled before Nix took over completely, turning her eyes black. "We need her now. We need her to fight him..."

Shadows writhed out of the tiny girl. They covered her in a squirming mass, and soon she disappeared under their inky covering. Another piercing scream rang out, and then the shadows flew up in a flurry as Nix emerged from the change. Black-winged and fierce, she rose up into the night. Jinx and Isaac looked up, watching her swoop in loose circles before she straightened out in mid-air and faced the giant head of smoke.

It let out a wrathful cry as Nix flew straight for it, ready to do battle with Satan himself.

To be continued in:

ANTI-HEROES

Book II

BAD BOY

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