

I have a riddle for you:

Why do supervillains, criminals, and various evildoers always pick abandoned warehouses in the middle of the night to conduct their illicit activities?

Seriously, it's such a cliché at this point and really reflects on the lack of creativity that most bad guys have. Or maybe it's because abandoned warehouses are cheaper than a castle and moat or something equally cringe and cliché.

But as Cap always says, "Hey, it makes our job easier, so stop complain'."

I think about that as I peer through the window of just such an abandoned warehouse that is located on the southern side of Oklahoma City. This particular warehouse is actually empty, surprisingly enough. And by 'empty,' I mean totally barren, aside from a few empty crates here and there. Whatever used to be stored here has been gone a long time, although if our research is correct, then this is an old automotive parts warehouse where one of the big auto companies in town used to store their extra parts.

Tonight, however, it is full.

Full of criminals and illegal arms dealers, that is.

Well over a dozen armed men—mostly generic thugs and crooks, from the looks of their clothing and weapons—stand in a circle around a long, thin wooden box. Sitting atop the box is a man in a trench coat, his head bowed as if in prayer. It's impossible to see his actual face thanks to the wide-brimmed hat he's wearing, not to mention the thick gloves covering his hands. That kind of clothing seems unusually warm to wear in early September in Oklahoma, and tonight isn't even an especially cold night, either.

The armed dudes look nervous. A few seem to be chatting or having smalltalk among themselves, but the vast majority are shifting nervously, rubbing their trigger fingers against the sides of their guns, or glancing toward the entrance. None of them are looking at the windows, however, which is good.

It means they won't know what is about to hit them.

"What do you see, Wyldfyre?" asks a Southern-accented male voice below me. "Is Tangle there?"

I look down to see my boss, Captain Cowboy, the superhero of Oklahoma City, and my girlfriend and fellow sidekick, Paintbrush, standing below me. Unlike me, neither Captain Cowboy nor Paintbrush can fly, so it's usually up to me to scout out areas that are easier to see from the air.

"Not sure," I say as I descend just slightly enough so that none of the guys in the warehouse will accidentally peer out the window and see me. "There's a guy sitting on a long wooden box in a wide-brimmed hat, trench coat, and gloves, but I can't see his face."

Captain Cowboy grimaces. "Definitely Tangle. At least, it fits the description and pictures the FBI posts on the Internet."

"You mean you've never actually met this guy before?" I ask incredulously.

Captain Cowboy shakes his head. "No. In fact, very few supers have. Despite his name and appearance, Tangle is more of a black-market criminal than a true-blue supervillain. He rarely tangles with supers

himself and usually acts as an arms dealer for the kinds of villains and criminals we deal with on a daily basis.”

I groan. “You did *not* just make a pun off of a supervillain’s name on a mission where we are hunting down said supervillain.”

Paintbrush giggles and covers her mouth. “I don’t know. I thought it was kind of funny.”

Captain Cowboy flashes me a smirk. “See, kid? Even your girlfriend thinks I’m funny. Just admit it: I tell the best dad jokes.”

“Only under threat of torture would I *ever* willingly admit that,” I reply with my best grimace. “Anyway, Tangle and his men look pretty nervous in there for some reason.”

Paintbrush gulps. “Do you think they know that we know about the deal going down tonight?”

I shake my head. “Doubt it. They aren’t looking at the windows. They’re looking at the entrance to the warehouse. I think they are nervous about whoever is coming to buy their secret weapon.”

“You mean the Weather Staff,” Captain Cowboy corrected. “That’s what it is.”

Paintbrush cocks her head to the side. “We still don’t know that for sure, Cap.”

“Wyldfyre said Tangle is sitting on a long wooden box,” Captain Cowboy says, gesturing at the window. “And the Weather Staff was stolen by Tangle or at least one of his associates.”

“Wouldn’t Tangle be more likely to use the Weather Staff himself instead of selling it to the highest bidder?” I ask. “If the Weather Staff is as powerful as you say it is.”

Captain Cowboy shakes his head vigorously. “Ain’t how Tangle operates. Not all supervillains want to destroy the world. Some just want to make a buck off those who do. But yeah, the Weather Staff actually isn’t as powerful as I said it is.”

I blink. “Then why are you so worried about it ending up in the wrong hands?”

Captain Cowboy gives me a hard look. “Because it’s actually *more* powerful than I said it was. And in the wrong hands, could cause the kind of damage that most supervillains only dream of.”

Both Paintbrush and I exchange puzzled—and, I will admit it, worried—looks when Cap says that. Even though Captain Cowboy is a bit cheesy and overdramatic like most superheroes are, he rarely exaggerates, well, anything, at least when it comes to dangerous supervillains and the weapons they use to hurt people or commit crimes.

See, about a month ago, someone broke into a federally-controlled weapons facility somewhere in western Oklahoma and stole a weapon called the Weather Staff. Once wielded by the supervillain Great Spirit, the Weather Staff supposedly gives the user the power to control the weather itself, ranging from making small rainclouds localized around an individual to full-on tornadoes and maybe even hurricanes (but given how this is *Oklahoma*, I doubt we will be seeing any of those).

No one knows who, where, or why the Weather Staff was originally created. The original user of the weapon, Great Spirit, claimed to have found it in Missouri in the caves that the Choctaw people are

said to have come from. Allegedly, it had been crafted by the souls of the Native Americans who perished during the colonization of the Americas and given to him to avenge them by destroying Oklahoma City and the world.

Or so Cap tells us, because it was Captain Cowboy, along with help from the previous OKC superhero Pioneer and the state and federal governments, who stopped Great Spirit over twenty years ago. As Paintbrush and I weren't even born when that happened, we don't know for sure, but we did learn about it in Oklahoma State History in school and saw footage from the Great Spirit's attack on the Capital, so we assume that's how the story went.

Great Spirit is currently locked up in a high-security prison in McAlester, but the Weather Staff was taken by the federal government and locked up somewhere only they knew about. Knowing how Cap feels about the feds, I doubt he was happy about that, but I guess he didn't have the pull to stop them back then due to being an inexperienced superhero.

Anyway, the Weather Staff was allegedly held in that federal storage facility until a month ago, like I said, when someone apparently broke into the facility, stole the Weather Staff, and vamoosed. Oh, and they may or may not have murdered a whole bunch of security guards and other people employed at the facility on their way out, but we aren't sure. Why?

Because we literally did not even *know* about the theft until yesterday when Cap's favorite federal agent, Templeton Black, contacted us out of the blue and told us that the feds had intel about a weapons deal happening in OKC tonight. According to Black, Tangleworm—and yes, that is his full villain name for some reason—is selling the Weather Staff to a mystery client tonight for a huge amount of money. Apparently, the only reason Black contacted us at all is because of federal laws forcing federal law enforcement officials to reach out to the local superhero in an area where they are going to be conducting an investigation or sting.

And that's what he called us about. Black and his men from the Department of Superheroes wanted our help ending the deal before it even began. Together with some of Black's agents, we have the warehouse pretty well surrounded, although everyone is trying to stay hidden so that none of the people involved in the deal, whether Tangle or his men, know about us and call off the deal. Given how Tangle is here tonight, I can only assume that means we were successful in keeping our presence hidden from the bad guys.

Being suddenly told about the theft of a superweapon powerful enough to nuke a city is one thing, but doing it the night *before* SuperCon—the biggest superhero conference in the country, if not the world—that we are supposed to attend and host?

I had never heard Cap cuss the feds *that* much until yesterday. And frankly, I agreed with him this time. I imagine if Tangle had not stolen the Weather Staff, we wouldn't even be here.

That tells you how dangerous the Weather Staff is. If Captain Cowboy, who usually looks for every excuse *not* to work with the feds, is still willing to work with them to get the Weather Staff back ... then yeah, I get why Cap seems so nervous.

As for who Tangle's client is, we have no idea. Even the feds aren't sure. They think it may be a terrorist or criminal gang, possibly even someone associated with the cartels, but again, they don't know for sure. And honestly, it doesn't matter. No one should have a weapon as powerful as the Weather Staff. Heck, I am surprised that the feds didn't outright destroy it after confiscating it from Great Spirit, although I can guess why they didn't:

They probably wanted to study the Weather Staff and see if they could replicate its powers and make a weapon for the military to use. That's what Cap thinks and, while neither Black nor any of the other agents we met up with earlier said anything, I think it's a fair theory.

Regardless, I'd rather the Weather Staff be in the hands of the government than in the hands of some random criminal or supervillain who doesn't fully understand its destructive power.

Or even worse, someone who *does*.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of several motorcycle engines revving loudly nearby. The rays of lights from what I assume are motorcycle headlights shine over the top of the warehouse, coming from the front entrance from what I can tell, before the engines die and the lights turn off, making everything dark again.

"What was that?" Paintbrush asks, her vine whips already extending from her wrists. "An attack?"

I hover up to the window and shake my head. "No. I think the client is here."

The reason I say that is because Tangle and his goons have turned their gazes upward. They are staring at the front door, which lets me see Tangle's face for the first time.

Not really. Tangle's face is covered in thick brown bandages like a mummy while his eyes are hidden behind thick sunglasses, which seems really weird. Who the hell wears sunglasses at night? The lights in the warehouse can't be *that* bright.

But then the front doors swing open and another half dozen guys walk in. They look completely different from Tangle and his men. Whereas Tangle's men are wearing paramilitary gear and uniforms, these dudes are wearing long, dark cloaks, with hoods and blank black masks covering their faces. Their cloaks have what appear to be black angelic wings on a motorcycle etched into them, but I can tell that these guys are all super buff even with their cloaks.

Except the guy in the middle, who is super short. Seriously, he barely even comes up to the waists of the guys surrounding him and yet he walks like he's in charge. The other guys surround him like bodyguards, however, which tells me that he must be the leader. His face is hidden under his hood, however, making it impossible for me to see who he really is.

My earcom in my left ear crackles and Black's gravelly voice says, "Agent Black to Captain Cowboy and sidekicks. Our scout at the front of the warehouse saw half a dozen robed men on motorcycles enter the warehouse."

"We saw them, too," I reply. "Oh, and you do know that we 'sidekicks' have names, right, dude?"

“Please speak like an adult or I will be forced to cut you off this line and send you home from the mission,” says Black without missing a beat. “Remember who is in charge of this mission. Hint: It is not you or Captain Cowboy.”

I scowl, but Black is right. As annoying as Black is, he is technically in charge here, and there is no way in hell that I am going to sit this mission out. Besides, I’ve got a bad feeling about that short guy in the middle for some reason, even though he looks like the smallest and weakest guy in that whole room.

“Any idea who those bozos are, Black?” Captain Cowboy asks.

“I am having my lead researcher look them up in the FBI’s criminal database right now,” Black says. “As it is, we aren’t sure who they are, so I assume they are a local gang rather than a national one.”

I look down at Captain Cowboy with mystified eyes. “Do you know who they are?”

Captain Cowboy shakes his head. “Nope. No idea.”

“Troubling,” is all Black says. “In any case, we will keep monitoring the deal and, whatever you do, do not engage with either Tangle or his client until I say so. Understood, Wyldfyre?”

I scowl. “Understood, *sir*.”

I say that with as much sarcasm as I can. I know Black is singling me out because he thinks I am the most impulsive person on this mission, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.

“Good,” says Black. “Black out.”

My earcom turns off with a click and I scowl even more. “Stupid feds.”

“Now you know why *I* dislike them,” says Captain Cowboy. He sighs. “But Black’s got a point. No point in any of us rushing in until we have a better idea what we are up against.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “I wasn’t planning on rushing in guns blazing. I just don’t like being told what to do by Black.”

“Understandable, but we still need to keep on our toes here,” says Captain Cowboy. “If we move too early, we risk losing not just Tangle or his mysterious client, but the Weather Staff, too. We gotta be smart about it.”

I nod and look back into the warehouse. At least I can monitor the situation and hey, since I can fly, I will probably be one of the first to respond when it *is* time to start kicking bad buy butt.

The cloaked dudes have stopped several feet away from Tangle and his men. Oddly, Tangle’s men now look even more nervous, based on how still they stand, their muscles tight with tension. Are they afraid of these hooded guys?

Only Tangle appears relaxed, although he’s a hard one to read, and not just because every inch of his body is covered up. His body language is just ... *off*, like he’s not even human. He’s not one of the Meteor Monsters—I would know if he was—but he’s really weird nonetheless.

Then the leader of the hooded dudes steps forward and lowers his hood and my breath catches in my throat:

It's Walter Ellison, the younger brother of my late ex-best friend, Drew Ellison.

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