



SILENCE

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There are few things more terrifying than waking up blind. Riley had faced monsters and magic, aliens and robots, his foster father's fists and the scrutiny of the press. Compared to this, regular life was a cake walk.

Sharp pain pounded behind his eyelids. Screwing up his face only added to his headache, so Riley remained still while he tried to breathe through the dusty air that trickled down his throat. When he coughed, his lungs burned but nothing rattled in his chest and he didn't feel immediate pain besides the thumping in his head, so he eased his eyelids open.

It took him all of two seconds to realize just how much trouble he was in. Darkness surrounded him, along with crumbling pieces of solid, dry rock. Something big pinned his legs to the cave floor and specks of crumbled granite fell onto his face from above when he shifted. Riley closed his eyes, breathing through the panic. He couldn't see anything, but that didn't mean he was helpless. He was a superhero. He'd faced worse than this.

Riley reached up to gauge how much room he had. When his fingers touched empty air, Riley took as deep a breath as possible and concentrated. His head buzzed, followed by his shoulders, torso, waist, legs, and feet. He pushed up and out of the rock holding him down, phasing straight through. Once safe, he stood and exhaled in relief. At least his powers were still working. Too bad they didn't come with a flashlight.

Surveying the room proved futile. The air around him was thick, gray and black. There must have been some light somewhere, because he could see little specks of dust particles floating in front of him, but he couldn't tell where it was coming from, or which direction was out. That could wait. First he needed to figure out just what had happened.

Rock on all sides, pitch blackness, stinging headache... Riley jerked as it all came back to him. He'd answered a distress call about a cave collapse in the Cascades. The police were able to extract the majority of hikers near the entrance but there were a few trapped behind the rubble. Luckily for them, Riley specialized in passing through solid objects.

Before he could work out what happened next, the motion sensors on his back vibrated, sending a small buzz straight to his head. Riley whirled and slid into a defensive stance, but he still couldn't see anything. He sensed rather than saw the girl standing in front of him, arms out in surrender. She was probably talking, but he couldn't see her lips.

Oh crap. Panic flooded him again. Her posture was easy going and open. He could just barely see the outline of her muscular, but feminine shape. She took a step towards him, so Riley took a step back. For all he knew she could be a monster trying to kill him. It wouldn't be the first time they had preyed on his need to rescue people.

She stopped. Riley could imagine her frantic words: "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

The truth was he was starting to choke with terror. If he couldn't see her lips how was he supposed to communicate? The press had nicknamed him Silent because he didn't speak, just "listened". But he couldn't even do that here. She could be trying to warn him about something he couldn't see, that his motion detectors couldn't pick up, and he would never know.

A light clicked on.

Riley screwed his eyes shut. Even through the filtered eyepieces of his cowl, it was nearly blinding. His motion detector buzzed again, and a second later a hand closed around his arm.

He spurred into action, grabbing the fingers of the hand and pivoting his body so he could twist the arm it belonged to. The light, which he realized came from a flashlight, flickered as it was dropped, illuminating the attacker's face. Riley froze as best he could. Staring back at him was a black man dressed in a dusty blue policeman's uniform, with broad shoulders and a strong chin, nothing short of seething hatred simmering in his dark eyes.

Officer Carson. This man had made it his duty to bring down the vigilantes in Seattle by any means necessary. The two of them never got along. As the silence stretched on, Carson reached with his other hand towards his firearm. Riley shook his head in warning, bringing a scowl to Carson's face.

"What did you do?" the cop demanded.

Riley knew Carson's face well. Carson had spent enough time yelling at him after Riley had saved someone else from what would have been certain death. His words were always accompanied with a sneer or a glare. God knew why he hated Riley so much, or superheroes in general for that matter.

Instead of answering, Riley let him go. The cop straightened up and pulled his firearm on Riley. Riley just stared at him - they both knew bullets wouldn't do anything to the hero.

Carson growled without words this time and holstered his weapon. He looked behind Riley. "You okay, Miss?"

Riley had almost forgotten about the woman standing a few feet away. He turned in time to catch her nod and say something that might have been a question as she looked from Riley to Carson. Riley needed a better vantage point. He pushed himself as close to the cave's wall as he could so he could see both sides of the conversation.

“You’re my priority, Miss,” Officer Carson was saying in response to whatever her question had been. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” she answered with a small shake of her head. “But I think-”

Damn it. She turned before he could catch the last bit. Riley straightened up and watched concern cross Carson’s features as he jogged quickly to the girl and knelt next to her. He sighed. Great. Now he had to move again.

He picked up the fallen flashlight and went to the two adults, kneeling next to them. There was a boy Riley’s age on the ground, a gash bleeding from his temple. The woman looked concerned, but she wasn’t old enough to be his mother - sister, then, or aunt. Carson sent him a swift glare as Riley directed the light to the teenager’s face, reflected in scarlet from the wound as it bled sluggishly.

“He’ll be fine, Sarah,” Carson assured the woman. “Just a bump on the head.”

“Thank you, Officer,” Sarah said, relief evident on her face. She looked up at Riley. “Thank you, too, Silent.”

Riley tilted his head in confusion. He didn’t remember doing anything for her. She read his expression and elaborated.

“When the rocks started to cave in again, you stood above me and Jake and...” She faltered, but Riley didn’t need anything more as his memories flooded back. He remembered changing his molecular structure so that he was atomically equivalent to titanium, protecting her and her brother. The boulders came crashing down on him and he’d held out for as long as he could. Then darkness.

Carson snatched the flashlight from his grip and stood, sweeping the light across the small space they were trapped in. It was about the size of Riley’s kitchen, with smaller paths snaking to deeper parts of the cave. Sections of the rock ceiling stretched for what seemed like miles above them, while other parts made them bend over or risk losing their heads. Riley looked at Carson in concern and the cop’s lips twisted like he’d sucked on a lemon.

“I have no idea which way’s out,” he admitted gruffly.

“I have a compass,” Sarah offered, standing. “Out is southeast from here.” She pointed off to her left. Riley frowned at the formidable wall blocking their path. He walked to it, concentrated, and stuck his hand through.

When he turned his head again, Sarah had asked a question, brow furrowed in his direction. He frowned at her until she repeated it, saying, “How long can you hold that? The phasing thing, I mean?”

Riley shrugged.

“You definitely live up to your nickname,” she said.

Officer Carson scoffed. Riley allowed a small smile and a modest shrug. It wasn’t a nickname he’d chosen, but it was appropriate. Talking was dangerous when you were deaf. It was damn near impossible to pass for a hearing person - a necessity if he was going to keep his identity a secret. Using his voice elicited too many weird looks anyway.

Sarah seemed content to carry most of the conversation. “So you’re not sure if you can just walk through solid rock until you get to the outside then?”

Riley shook his head in confirmation. Carson huffed something Riley couldn’t decipher before turning to Sarah. The superhero moved again so he could see Carson’s face.

“-a delinquent, and a criminal,” he was saying, eyebrows scrunched together like crumpled caterpillars. The cop sent an accusing finger in Riley’s direction. “And don’t think I’m not arresting you as soon as we get out of here.”

“He saved our lives,” Sarah protested.

“He’s still breaking the law! He should be held responsible.”

Riley’s motion detector buzzed. He held up his hands and turned, cutting off their argument - from his eyes at least. Jake was sitting up, looking dazed. Sarah rushed past Riley and knelt by the kid’s side.

Carson stepped up next to him. Riley looked over and realized with some frustration that he was talking, but with this angle he was only catching every few words: “-don’t know - you’re doing - can’t fool me - soon as-”

Riley just turned away, rolling his eyes. Jake was on his feet by then. Sarah took Carson’s flashlight and directed it towards one of the paths that twisted deeper into the cave.

“There’s more than one way out of the cave,” she said. “We can try one of the other paths, but they could be caved in, too. What do you want to do?”

She looked at Riley, and he shrugged in response, looking to Carson instead. The cop scratched his chin. “Don’t think we have much choice at this point,” he said. “Kid, you up to it?”

Jake nodded. Riley and Carson both stepped up to take the lead, but the man glared at Riley, so he held his hands in surrender and opted to take the rear instead. The four filed in together and set off to the deep, dark unknown.

They had been walking for ten or so minutes before Sarah turned around with a concerned look on her face. Riley missed a step at the intensity in her gaze.

“Sorry,” she said with a smile, walking backwards. “It’s just that you didn’t answer my question, so I thought something bad had happened.”

Riley studied her. He wondered just how old she was. She looked like late teens, early twenties, but for all he knew she could have been seventeen like him. There was something about her that made him feel staticky and nervous. Still, her face was open and she was one of the first citizens who didn’t mind his company, even though he didn’t talk, so he allowed a sheepish grin as an apology.

“It’s okay,” she said, reading his posture easily. “We’re all stressed.”

Carson called something over his shoulder that Riley didn’t catch, but, from the annoyed look that crossed her face, he guessed it wasn’t very polite. Riley smirked in response, letting her know he didn’t mind the banter he and the police officer shared. She smiled back.

It took him a second to notice her hands were moving. She was finger-spelling for him. He reached over and took her hands to stop her, and she peered through his eyepieces as if trying to see just how blue his eyes really were.

“It’s okay,” she said with a small smile. “I figured it out earlier, when you were freaking out because of the darkness. You couldn’t see our lips, right?”

Riley just stood there. He wasn’t sure if he should be panicking because she’d figured out his secret or relieved because he wouldn’t always have to move to read an entire conversation. Slowly he nodded, somewhat amazed.

Sarah gave him a big smile. “Our mom’s an interpreter,” she said, gesturing to her and Jake. “I only know a few signs, enough to carry a conversation. But I’m guessing you don’t want Officer Carson to know that.”

With some reluctance Riley shook his head. He wasn’t afraid of that creep, but the idea of the police using process of elimination to find him was a definite threat. His mask concealed his face, sure, but he was white and had copper spiked hair. Added to the fact that he’d been born deaf, it wouldn’t be all that hard to track him down. The police could arrest him, but what if Riley’s enemies found him? They could use his friends as leverage. They could attack Trent - and as much as Riley despised his foster father, he was a superhero and he protected civilians from bad guys. Even when the civilians weren’t very good people to begin with.

“Your secret’s safe with me,” Sarah said. “And Jake. Don’t worry about it. And thanks, again. For saving me.”

Riley gave her the sign for *you’re welcome* and her entire face lit up. She was really pretty, with blonde hair and brown eyes. But if her maturity was anything to go by, she was too old for him. Too bad.

His motion detector buzzed. Riley frowned and turned away, holding up a hand to stop Sarah’s questions. He scanned the area behind them, but nothing immediately popped out at him. His motion detector was useful for when he wasn’t in the city. It was designed by one of his superhero allies to pick up anything that might have changed since a second earlier, constantly analyzing each picture taken in rapid fire succession and sending anything of note onto him. It had never been wrong before.

But Riley couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary. Sarah put a hand on his shoulder and he tensed, unused to physical contact that wasn’t violent. Then her head turned in response to Carson. He had one hand on his belt like he wanted to draw his weapon, though his stance was more bored and irritated than threatening.

“We’re coming,” Sarah said, sharing a secret grin with Riley before turning back. Riley looked over his shoulder again but nothing jumped out at him. He followed Sarah further into the cave.

She put her hands where Riley could see and finger-spelled what Carson was saying. “Do we know how this thing happened?”

“Not really,” Sarah replied. “Jake and I were on our way out. There was this noise...” She faltered. “I’m not really sure what it was. But the walls shook and the next thing I know Silent is there, protecting me and Jake.”

Apparently Carson didn’t have a response to that. Riley held in a snort.

He was about to start moving again when his motion detector went crazy. With a gasp apparently loud enough to catch the attention of the three in front Riley jolted from the buzz, spinning in the same movement and concentrating hard. A rock slammed into his chest, knocking him back a few steps. It probably would have killed him if he hadn’t made his skin virtually impenetrable. Still, he could only protect himself, and he still had no idea what he was up against.

Riley turned and grabbed Sarah’s arm, dragging her over to Jake. She grabbed Jake, and in turn he grabbed Carson. Together they ran.

The path ahead was barely lit by the flashlight as it swung wildly around the room. Riley kept moving but tensed every time his motion detector sent him a nudge. Rocks berated him again and again, and while he felt the pain it did no serious damage. This only confirmed what he suspected from Sarah’s story: that someone caused the cave in and they were now hunting down those caught in the trap.

He was so focused on protecting his back he was completely unprepared for Jake. The kid had stopped abruptly, turned on one heel, and held out an arm. Riley slammed into it and tumbled to the ground. He rolled, coming up on one knee. Riley glared at Jake, who gave him a serene smile.

“Jake!” Sarah yanked Carson to a stop, staring at her brother in confusion. “What are you-”

She gasped as Jake changed shape. His image flickered. Suddenly he was taller, his blonde hair replaced with greasy black locks, his tan skin rapidly paling before their eyes. Riley slid into a crouch, recognizing the supervillain.

Sarah recognized him too. She let go of Carson’s arm and staggered backward. “Chamo... but Jake-”

“I left him outside before you even entered the cave,” Chamo said with a sneer. “Don’t worry, he’s safe. Which is more than I can say for you, my dear.”

Carson drew his weapon and fired. The bullets hit Chamo in the back but Riley already knew he wore shock absorbing bullet proof vests under the disgusting leather jacket he never took off. Cracking his neck, he threw a look over his shoulder, saying something that Riley couldn’t see. From the look of frigid terror on Sarah’s face, it couldn’t have been good.

Riley’s motion detector alerted him again to someone behind him. He made himself intangible just in time for a woman to leap through him in an attempt to break his spine with her pointed Stilettos. She stood with a casual stretch.

“Oh hello there, Silent, hon,” she said. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Riley watched her warily. He didn’t remember her, but from the way she was acting he guessed she was a new villain. That was dangerous. He had no idea what she could do.

“My name is Shane,” she said with a smile. “But you can call me Scream.”

She stretched her mouth wide and threw her head back. A shiver raced down Riley’s spine, the walls shook, and Sarah and Carson crashed to their knees with their hands slammed against their ears.

Scream closed her mouth again, bewildered that Riley was still standing. “That should’ve blown your eardrums!”

Hate to break it to you lady, Riley thought as he ran at her, *but they’re already blown*.

In this small space he couldn’t work up much speed, but being hit by someone who might as well have been made of steel still hurt like hell. Chamo dodged - Riley wondered why he wasn’t affected by whatever Scream’s scream was - but the woman dropped like a stone. She recovered fast, perching on both hands and sweeping Riley’s feet out from under him.

The two wrestled on the ground. Scream pulled out a knife and tried to take Riley’s head off with it. He let it pass through him before slamming his elbow into her chin. The knife clattered to the rock floor as her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

A shadow loomed over Riley. Riley looked up and damn near had a heart attack as the figure standing over him turned out to be a perfect copy of himself. *Chamo*. The other man grabbed Riley and threw him against the cave wall. They grappled until Chamo pinned Riley against the rock, pressing his forearm into his throat.

Chamo’s head snapped to the side, responding to something he’d heard. An instant later the room was lit with arcs of lightning. Blue electricity slammed into Chamo, throwing him to the side and off of Riley.

Riley sucked in air and stared at Sarah, who was panting in exertion. Her curls stood on end and she leaned to one side, like her balance was totally off. She looked at Riley. “Nobody messes with my family,” she said fiercely.

Riley smiled. That explained the staticky feeling he kept getting off of her, and her ability to keep a cool head in such a dangerous situation. She had powers, just like he did.

His motion detector buzzed. Riley turned, ready for another fight, when the wall came crumbling down and light flooded in. Standing there was Quake, the Northwest’s resident earthbender.

“You guys okay?” the superhero asked, poking his head in curiously.

Riley gave him a droll stare. Sarah said it for him. “What the hell took you so long?”

After making sure everyone had made it out of the cave, Riley was ready to leave. He was filthy and exhausted and he still had science homework. Before he could hop on his grav disc, though, Officer Carson approached.

Frankly he was surprised Carson was still standing. Whatever noise Scream unleashed didn’t cause lasting damage but it had to have hurt. In any case, Carson looked like he might be ill. The man had avoided him during the rescue of the other trapped hikers, frowning even while his colleagues

congratulated him on arresting Chamo and his psycho girlfriend. Riley had been hoping he could put off this conversation until maybe never, but apparently that wouldn't be the case.

“You're deaf.”

Riley cocked his head. Officer Carson scowled. “Don't look at me like that. Do you know how dangerous that is? I know you're just a kid, I can see it on your face.”

Can you see my eyes roll then?

“Look.” Carson appeared as if he were unsuccessfully trying to swallow a coconut. “I don't like it. You should be in school, not running around in costumes trying to do a policeman's work. Especially when you're deaf. But... I guess it has its advantages.”

Damn straight it did. Who needed ears? Riley didn't have a problem not hearing. It was everybody else who thought different.

“You did good, kid. Thanks for saving my life.” Carson's eyes hardened. “But if I ever catch you out on the streets again I am throwing you in a cell for the rest of eternity. You will be grounded until you die. I said the same to Sarah. Just because you have superpowers doesn't mean you're better than the rest of us. Do you hear me?”

This time Riley did roll his eyes. He hopped on his grav disc and rose into the sky, sending a wave and a smirk in Carson's direction. The cop crossed his arms over his chest, his lips tugging upwards.

Well, hell, if Riley could get Officer Carson to smile, he could do anything.

--THE END--