

Freedom's Foursome #3 - "The Static of Us"

Written by Steven Bland

The street noise of Manhattan was a chaotic symphony, the kind of beautiful racket that Detective Angela Park usually loved. To anyone else, the overlapping blare of yellow cabs honking, the hiss of city bus brakes, the shouting of street vendors, and the distant rumble of the subway beneath the grates was a headache. To Angela, it was the sound of humanity breathing. It was millions of entirely different lives intersecting, arguing, laughing, and existing all at once. It was beautiful chaos.

But as she sat in her unmarked police cruiser outside a precinct deep in the Bronx, filling out a mundane stack of paperwork on the dashboard, something felt deeply, fundamentally off.

Angela paused her pen, her eyes narrowing as she looked through the rain-streaked windshield. She possessed sharp instincts developed from years on the force, but this went beyond basic police intuition. The rhythm of the street was too consistent. The natural randomness of New York City had suddenly vanished, replaced by an eerie, metronomic precision.

Across the asphalt, three separate pedestrians – a wealthy businessman in a tailored suit, a frantic bike courier pushing his pedals, and an elderly dog walker managing a pair of terriers – all stepped off the curb with their left foot at the exact same millisecond. They didn't just walk at the same time, their strides were perfectly mirrored. Their arms swung at identical angles. Even the blink of their eyes seemed synchronized. Nearby, a group of teenagers laughing on a street corner suddenly went dead silent, turning their heads in perfect unison toward the south.

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Before Angela could open her car door to investigate, a voice echoed in her mind. It didn't arrive as a soft thought, but as a resonant wave that vibrated against her skull like a deep cello string.

"Freedom's Foursome... the harmony of your world is being silenced. Return to the Sanctum."

It was the telepathic call of Forzon. Angela didn't hesitate. She dropped her pen, grabbed the handle, and rolled up her cruiser's window just as a shimmering, luminescent blue light enveloped the entire interior of the vehicle. The light grew blinding, erasing the dashboard, the steering wheel, and the rain-slicked Bronx streets.

In an instant, the city was gone. The smell of exhaust and wet pavement was instantly replaced by the sterile, crisp scent of ozone and advanced metallurgy. Angela found herself standing on the smooth, polished floor of Forzon's advanced laboratory, surrounded by glowing geometry, and towering holographic arrays that pulsed with cosmic energy.

She wasn't alone. To her left, a flash of blue light materialized into Keith Kendall, who was already frowning, his analytical mind visibly racing. To her right, a second flash revealed Danny Ramirez, still wearing his stained flight jumpsuit, looking as though he had just been plucked out of a cockpit. A half-second later, Bill Stone materialized with a heavy thud, holding a wrench, looking like he'd just been taken directly off a massive construction crane mid-shift.

"Forzon sounds worried," Bill said, his deep voice echoing off the metallic walls as he set the wrench down on a floating console. He wiped grease from his forehead with the back of his hand. "He rarely calls us all back using a direct quantum recall unless the world is ending."

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"He should be worried," Keith said, stepping forward toward the center of the room. His eyes scanned the massive, circular holographic displays floating in the air. "Look at the neural maps of the city. This isn't a localized anomaly."

Forzon stepped out from the shadows of the primary energy core. The extraterrestrial being looked at the four humans with an expression of profound gravity.

"Keith is correct," Forzon said, his voice echoing both aloud and directly within their minds. "A parasite has attached itself to the city's consciousness. Dr. Julian Voss, once a brilliant pioneer of neural-link medical technology, has suffered a catastrophic psychological break. In his grief and madness, he has created a technological hive-mind – which he calls the Echo Chamber – to permanently erase the pain of human individuality. He believes that if everyone thinks as one, no one will ever suffer the agony of being alone again."

"A hive-mind in New York?" Danny scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. A nervous spark of blue ice-flame danced across his knuckles, crackling softly. "Good luck to him. This city can't even agree on a pizza topping, let alone a single thought. The moment he tries to link a Yankees fan and a Mets fan, his server is going to melt."

"Do not underestimate him, Danny," Forzon warned, stepping closer to the holographic display. With a wave of his hand, the map zoomed in on five distinct, featureless silhouettes. "Thorne has created five 'Echoes' – elite, cybernetic thralls who share his single, unyielding consciousness. They do not communicate, they do not plan. They move with a frame-perfect synchronization that your team has never encountered. They are a single mind operating five devastating bodies."

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Keith looked at Angela, Danny, and Bill, his expression hardening. "Then, let's suit up, team,"

All four of them reached out simultaneously, accessing the pocket dimensions where Forzon had stored their specialized tactical suits. Angela felt the familiar, heavy pull of her subatomic density shifting as her suit manifested around her. Danny's uniform shimmered with thermal dampeners, ready to contain his volatile elements. Within minutes later, they were fully suited up. Then came the physical transformations. Keith closed his eyes, inhaling deeply as he assumed a gleaming, shifting form of green liquid mercury. Bill grunted as his body expanded, his muscles turning into raw, humming electrical energy given physical structure by thick plates of orange, volcanic rock-like armor.

"We're ready, Forzon," Keith said, his voice now carrying the metallic, echoing timbre of Galvanex.

"I am sending you to a massive construction site in Midtown," Forzon told them, his hands glowing as he locked onto the coordinates. "It is the primary antenna Voss is using to broadcast his neural signal across the borough. Stop the transmission, or the city's free will shall be permanently extinguished."

The alien paused, his luminescent eyes flickering with an unsettling shadow of doubt. "Once you are there, Voss's neural shroud will completely cut all four of you off from my sanctum. I will be blind. I won't be able to guide you, and I won't be able to pull you back. You will be entirely on your own."

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"We understand, Forzon," Galvanex said, his mercury arm shifting smoothly into a solid, reinforced stance. "We'll cut the wire."

With a massive flare of blue cosmic energy, the pristine laboratory vanished.

The Foursome materialized on the 40th floor of a skeletal, unfinished skyscraper in the heart of Midtown. The environment was instantly terrifying. The wind whistled fiercely through the exposed steel girders, carrying the scent of raw concrete and rusted iron. But something was missing, the noise.

There were fifty construction workers scattered across the high scaffolds and half-poured concrete ledges, but not a single one of them was moving. They weren't taking breaks, they weren't talking, and they weren't working. They stood perfectly still, their tools hanging loosely in their hands, all staring blankly at the exact spot where the heroes had just appeared.

"Incredibelle," the workers said. The words didn't come from one throat, but from fifty voices speaking in a terrifying, flat unison that echoed over the howling wind. "You're late for the rehearsal."

Before Incredibelle could respond, the shadows above them shifted. From the dark, unpoured upper decks, the Five Echoes dropped silently into the dust. They were featureless humanoids clad in sleek, matte-grey suits that absorbed the afternoon light. They didn't growl, they didn't posture, and they didn't trade villainous banter. They just moved.

Coldfire reacted first. Guided by his hot-headed pilot instincts, he instinctively engulfed his entire body in roaring, paradoxical ice-flames, launching himself upward into the rafters to seize the high ground.

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“I’ll flush ‘em out,” he shouted, leaving a trail of blue frost and searing heat in his wake.

But Echo One didn't even look up. He simply raised a single, matte-gray hand toward the sky. A colorless, shimmering ripple distorted the air, striking Coldfire mid-flight. Instantly, the hero's roaring ice-flames didn't just go out – they froze solid, turning into jagged, static sculptures of immobile energy. The propulsion killed instantly, Coldfire tumbled heavily to the hard concrete floor, his body entirely caught dead by the absolute stillness of the Dampener's stasis field.

“Coldfire,” Fulgurite roared. His massive orange rock armor glowed with brilliant white energy as he lunged forward to defend his teammate, targeting Echo Three. The hero unleashed a catastrophic, blinding electrical discharge – a bolt of pure wattage sufficient to power an entire New York City block for a day.

Echo Three didn't dodge. He didn't even brace himself. He just stood there. His specialized, high-grade ceramic skin absorbed the entire multi-million-volt bolt, grounding the energy and venting it completely harmlessly through his boots into the skyscraper's steel frame.

Before Fulgurite could chamber another attack, he swung a massive stone fist at Echo Three's head. But the ceramic villain caught the punch effortlessly with one hand. The Grounder's grip felt like cold, unyielding porcelain, entirely immovable.

“They're countering us! They know exactly what we're going to do before we do it!” Incredibelle shouted, her mind racing.

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Seeking an opening, she tried to use her density-shifting abilities to phase entirely through a thick steel support beam to flank the line. But Echo Two anticipated the maneuver perfectly. He slammed his fist heavily into the concrete floor. Instantly, a localized molecular vibration surged through the architecture. The molecules of the entire floor and the specific beam Incredibelle was touching suddenly “locked”.

Incredibelle let out a muffled, agonizing cry as she was violently jerked back into a solid state mid-shift – halfway through the solid steel wall. Her density powers were entirely suppressed, leaving her left shoulder and arm pinned painfully inside the structural steel, unable to break free.

“Galvanex, do something!” Fulgurite grunted, his knees buckling as he struggled desperately against the Grounder's unyielding, ceramic grip.

Galvanex tried to react, attempting to shift his liquid mercury arm into a high-frequency blade to slice the steel and cut Incredibelle free. But before the metal could take shape, Echo Four began to emit a high-pitched, rhythmic hum. The noise wasn't acoustic, it was a devastating digital screech that bypassed human ears and hit the hero's internal tech-arrays directly.

Galvanex's liquid metal body began to violently “glitch”. His skin flickered uncontrollably between solid iron and running fluid. He couldn't hold a consistent shape, let alone construct a rescue device. He was entirely trapped in a loop of digital feedback.

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As the heroes struggled, Echo Five stood perfectly still in the dead center of the floor. His eyes glowed with a cold, pale light. He didn't participate in the physical violence, he just conducted it. At his silent, central command, the other four Echoes moved in a frame-perfect, brutal combination.

Echo Three lifted the massive Fulgurite and threw him high into the air.

Echo One caught the flying rock-hero in a stasis field, holding him suspended and helpless in mid-air.

Echo Two momentarily released the molecular lock on the floor just long enough for Echo Four to sweep Galvanex's glitching legs out from under him.

Then, they all struck at once. Moving with identical speed and terrifying symmetry, they delivered a synchronized, crushing blow that sent all four heroes crashing into the concrete dust at the exact same microsecond.

The Foursome lay scattered across the unfinished floor. They weren't just physically battered; they were profoundly confused. Their individual powers – which had previously made them unstoppable – had been completely, flawlessly dismantled by an opponent that hadn't uttered a single word.

As the superheroes painfully forced themselves up, the Five Echoes spoke again, their voices perfectly blending Voss's arrogant, intellectual tone through fifty different construction workers and five cybernetic bodies.

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“Your discord is your downfall. Why fight so desperately for an identity that only makes you vulnerable? Erase the noise. Join the song.”

“Not... today,” Galvanex gasped, his mercury skin slowly stabilizing as the digital screech faded. He looked over at the battered rock-giant beside him. “Fulgurite! The foundation! Short the entire building!”

Of course, Fulgurite thought, the realization hitting him through the pain. While Echo Three can absorb my electricity directly, the *raw ground itself* can't handle the sheer, unbridled volume of my entire power reserve at once.

Fulgurite gathered every ounce of his remaining strength and slammed both of his glowing orange fists directly into the skyscraper's unfinished concrete foundation. He didn't aim for the villains, he aimed for the structural rebar of the site.

He sent a massive, terrifying surge of raw, untamed electrical energy tearing through the metal grids inside the floors. The concrete buckled and cracked violently. The sudden, ground-shaking shockwave forced the Phase-Locker and the Dampener to instantly break their absolute focus to avoid being electrocuted through their own boots. The disruption shattered the stasis field on Coldfire and dropped the molecular lock on Incredibelle.

With the Echo Chamber momentarily thrown off-balance, Galvanex's nanomachines stopped flickering.

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I can't fight their coordinated signal, directly, the hero thought frantically. So I'll have to completely mask my team's signatures.

Galvanex liquefied his entire right arm, thrusting it deep into a nearby high-voltage junction box. Instead of attempting to hack or control the building's sophisticated tech, he deliberately overloaded it, creating a massive, catastrophic EMP-style burst of pure, electromagnetic noise.

The burst exploded in a blinding flash of blue sparks, entirely deafening the Signal-Jacker's arrays and blinding the hive-mind's sensors.

“Coldfire, grab Incredibelle! Fulgurite, on me! GO!” Galvanex commanded over the roar of the sparks and the falling concrete debris.

“You got it,” Coldfire said, his blue ice-flames finally roaring back to life with a vengeance. He swooped low across the floor, snatching Incredibelle out of the collapsing steel wall just as she solidified..

Fulgurite lunged toward Galvanex, who instantly liquefied his entire body into a thick mercury-shroud. Wrapping around the rock-hero, Galvanex masked both of their energetic signatures from Thorne's sensors. Together, the Foursome dove off the side of the unfinished 40th floor, plunging into the dark New York City night just as the entire skyscraper went pitch black.

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The Foursome retreated to Keith Kendall's private, heavily shielded underground laboratory tucked away in a quiet corner of Long Island. They were completely battered. Their tactical suits were torn, their armor was cracked, and for the first time since Forzon had chosen them, they looked genuinely terrified. The Echoes hadn't just defeated them physically, they had insulted the very core of who they were. Dr. Voss had called their unique individuality a design flaw.

"I can't believe it," Danny said, pacing frantically across the laboratory floor. He kept snapping his fingers over and over, watching with anxiety to see if his blue ice-flames would still ignite. "They just snuffed out my fire, like it was a cheap candle. I couldn't even breathe."

"I might be scared to phase again," Angela admitted softly, leaning against a medical table. She was still trembling, remembering the suffocating horror of being trapped inside the solid street wall, unable to move a single atom of her body.

"And my strength didn't mean a blasted thing against an opponent made of porcelain," a frustrated Bill said, sitting heavily on a reinforced steel bench. His orange rock-armor was deeply cracked and covered in gray construction dust. He looked down at his massive hands in disbelief.

"I'll have to come right out and say it. Our plan failed," Keith told them flatly, his mercury skin receding back into his human features as he stood before them. "The Echoes aren't just faster than us. They are thinking as a single, flawless entity. Every move we made was countered because they process our teamwork as a math equation."

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Suddenly, Angela paused, her eyes widening as she looked up at the ceiling. Her police instincts and her love for the messy reality of the city clicked together.

"The Echoes move together because they have to," she said, her voice rising with sudden excitement. "They're a symphony, Keith. Every note has to be written down. Every player has to follow the conductor exactly. But a symphony can't handle a jazz solo."

Keith stopped, staring at her as the analytical gears in his mind began to turn. "Go on, Angela."

"We were fighting them by the textbook," she explained, standing up. "We were using structured tactical formations. Voss calculates traditional teamwork. He expects us to operate as a cohesive unit. So, we're going to give him something his pristine neural network absolutely cannot calculate: pure noise."

"But how are we gonna do that without tripping over each other?" Bill asked, rubbing his aching shoulder.

"Give me a few minutes," Keith answered, a brilliant spark of inspiration finally returning to his eyes. He turned on his heel and headed rapidly toward his primary technological workstation.

Inside his lab, Keith worked with frantic brilliance. He coded, soldered, and manipulated liquid metal with his nanomachines. Minutes later, Keith, now wearing a small, shimmering liquid-metal patch on his own collarbone, returned to the main room carrying three more identical discs. He handed one to each of his teammates.

"What are these?" Bill asked, inspecting the tiny, pulsing green disc in his palm.

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"These are Chaos Scramblers," Keith answered proudly. "They will constantly fluctuate our individual biometric data and neural outputs. The Echo Chamber relies on predicting our trajectory based on our energy signatures. These patches will make our movements entirely unpredictable, masking our intentions until the exact microsecond we strike. But they have a limited operational range; they need to interact directly with the Echoes' physical proximity to disrupt their hive-mind loop."

Danny, Angela, and Bill didn't hesitate. They each pressed the patches onto their suits, watching as the liquid metal bonded with their uniforms, pulsing with a faint, erratic green light.

"Okay, team. We need to be physically in position before we spring the trap," Galvanex told them, his tone turning dead serious. "We get one shot at this."

"All we need is the perfect kill zone," Danny said, a confident smirk finally returning to his face.

"The center of Times Square," Angela said immediately. "It's a place already overflowing with sensory noise, flashing lights, and neon-soaked madness. The surrounding digital infrastructure will be perfect for your hack, Keith. It's the loudest place on Earth."

"Alright," Danny said, cracking his knuckles as his ice-flames flickered to life, brighter than before. "Now we're ready for Round Two."

"Then, let's go to Times Square," Keith said.

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The Foursome traveled to the heart of Manhattan, arriving in the dead center of Times Square. Upon their arrival, they didn't stand together in a traditional heroic line. Instead, they scattered immediately, taking up their designated positions and completely blending into the deep neon shadows and the massive crowds of late night tourists.

High above the street, Galvanex “flipped the switch.” Using his advanced nanomachines and technological brilliance, he hijacked the massive, towering digital billboards and the scrolling news tickers that wrapped around the skyscrapers. The flashing commercial advertisements vanished in an instant. In their place, a stark, black-and-white message broadcasted across every screen in the square – a message specifically designed to exploit Dr. Julian Voss's deep obsession with absolute unity and silence.

“One mind. One voice. The silence is broken.”

Directly below the text, Galvanex programmed a massive visual representation of a glitch – a jagged, violently pulsing waveform that perfectly mimicked a fundamental flaw in Voss's neural network. It was the ultimate bait for a strict perfectionist like Voss. To his broken mind, that pulsing waveform was a leak in his grand harmony that had to be corrected immediately.

Back in his hidden laboratory, Voss saw the screens through the hijacked eyes of a nearby civilian. Sensing a golden opportunity to finally assimilate the troublesome heroes while they were exposed in a highly public space, he commanded the Elite Five Echoes to converge on the source with absolute prejudice.

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The Foursome waited patiently in the center of the square, hidden in plain sight among the blinking lights and the wandering crowds. Their liquid-metal patches were already pulsing with an erratic, chaotic static that was ready to turn the trap back on their hunters.

As the Echo Chamber descended from the rooftops to finish them, the Foursome didn't take a defensive stance. They didn't form a wall. They scattered in completely random directions.

Coldfire took to the air, but he didn't fly in his usual straight, precise military lines. Instead, he flew in a completely erratic “drunkard's walk,” zig-zagging wildly through the air without any discernable pattern. As he flew, he created a complex slalom of frozen statues, bouncing his heat and cold directly off the reflective surfaces of the giant billboards. The Dampener tried to lock onto him, but he couldn't find a single stasis point because the hero's movement was completely, beautifully erratic.

Meanwhile, Incredibelle sprinted directly toward the Phase-Locker. She stayed completely solid until the very last micro-second. Relying on her extensive police training as Detective Angela Park, she baited the villain into a reckless, aggressive lunge. The exact moment he struck, she phased her body out, causing his fists to pass through her, and instantly altered her density to phase just his feet deep into the solid asphalt of the street before solidifying him instantly, trapping him in place.

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Across the square, Fulgurite faced the Grounder. He didn't use his traditional lightning bolts this time, knowing the ceramic villain would just absorb them. Instead, he relied on his civilian construction background. Using his electrical telekinesis, he ripped massive, heavy steel girders directly from a nearby building renovation, burying the ceramic villain under tons of low-tech, heavy steel that had nothing to do with energy and everything to do with weight.

In the absolute center of the crossroads, Galvanex stood alone to face the Synchro. Instead of deploying a technical virus or a digital hack, Galvanex used his nanomachines to infect the massive Times Square screens with something entirely human. He began broadcasting raw, unfiltered human memories directly onto the billboards – the team's loud laughter, their heated arguments in the lab, their shared grief, the rich smell of Bill's morning coffee, and the heavy, real weight of Angela's police badge.

Dr. Voss, watching the battle directly through the eyes of his Echoes, was suddenly hit by the massive, overwhelming wave of emotional feedback. The pristine symphony in his mind completely shattered.

The Five Echoes stopped moving in unison. Their terrifying synchronization vanished. They began to shriek in agony, twitching and staggering across the pavement as their shared consciousness reeled from the sudden, violent static of four distinct, stubborn human souls refusing to be silenced.

The Foursome rapidly regrouped in the center of the intersection.

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“Now!” Galvanex yelled, his voice cutting through the neon roar. “It's time for – THE UNION!”

Fulgurite slammed his massive orange stone fists together with a deafening crack, creating a colossal, blinding electrical arc that lit up the night sky.

Incredibelle lunged forward, grabbing Fulgurite's massive shoulders. She instantly increased her own subatomic density to near-infinite levels, turning her body into a perfect, flawless super-conductor and a physical anchor that kept Fulgurite from being blown backward by his own immense power output.

Coldfire dived down from the rafters, wrapping both Incredibelle and Fulgurite in a roaring, violent cyclone of ice-flames. The extreme temperature differential between Fulgurite's white-hot lightning and Coldfire's freezing blue flames created a massive, localized vacuum, generating a powerful gravitational pull that dragged all five staggering Echoes into a single, centralized point.

Surging directly into the center of the vortex, Galvanex completed the circuit. He completely liquefied his body into a vast mercury-web that wrapped tightly around all three of his teammates. He acted as a living processor, focusing all three of their raw, conflicting energies – electricity, ice-fire, and absolute density – into a single, blinding beam of pure individuality.

The beam of pure white light didn't just hit the Echoes, it blasted through the airwaves and struck Voss's central server miles away, shorting out the entire network. The white light wasn't sterile; it was filled with the beautiful, loud noise of four different human lives.

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The central servers in the hidden laboratory exploded in a brilliant, cascading shower of sparks and black smoke. With the neural web completely shattered, the five Echoes fell instantly to the pavement like puppets with their strings cut, rendered unconscious, independent individuals once more. Far away at his main command console, Dr. Voss was violently thrown backward by the sheer force of the feedback, the cybernetic wires snapping and ripping away from his temples.

The silence that followed across New York City wasn't the eerie, terrifying hive-mind silence of Voss's design – it was the natural, beautiful spirit of a living city that had just started breathing again. The cabs began to honk randomly, people began to shout, and the chaos returned.

“Did we...,” Coldfire started, his blue ice-flames slowly flickering out into standard air as he landed heavily on the asphalt, completely breathless.

“We did,” Incredibelle said, solidifying her form and taking a long, deep breath of the oily air.

“Messy,” Fulgurite grunted, looking down at his cracked, smoking rock armor with a wide, exhausted smirk. “But highly effective.”

Galvanex stood in the center of the crossroads, his liquid mercury skin smoothly returning to his normal human features as Keith Kendall. He looked at his battered, exhausted team – not a perfect, sterile machine, but a messy, beautiful family.

“Let's go home,” Keith said, offering them a tired smile. “I think we've had enough 'unity' to last us a lifetime.”

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Back in his ruined laboratory, the silence was a heavy, suffocating stillness of total defeat. Julian Voss lay trembling on the cold concrete floor, his mind still reeling from the catastrophic surge of pure human individuality that had torn through his head. All around him, his life's work lay in smoking, blackened ruins. Severed cables dangled from the ceiling like mechanical vines, spitting weak, dying sparks across the scorched walls. For a perfectionist who demanded absolute order, this chaotic mess was the ultimate humiliation.

Minutes later, the facility's heavy blast doors hissed open as federal authorities overrode the locks. A highly trained tactical team and high-containment medical specialists flooded the ruined room, their heavy boots crunching loudly over the shards of shattered monitor glass.

Voss didn't fight them. He didn't even move. He just stared blankly up at the cracked ceiling, his mind still echoing with the beautiful phantom “noise” of those four stubborn human souls. As the medics quickly snapped him into specialized restraints and the darkness of physical exhaustion began to overtake him, Voss parted his cracked lips to whisper a final, shuddering breath into the quiet room.

“The noise... it's beautiful.”

His eyes closed, and he was wheeled out into the night, whisked away to the most secure, classified wing of a federal medical facility – a solitary mind locked inside his own quiet prison.

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Hours later, the sun was slowly rising over a quiet, peaceful New York City, casting a warm golden glow over the skyline. In a small, classic 24-hour diner on the edge of town, Keith Kendall, Angela Park, Bill Stone, and Danny Ramirez sat crowded together in a vinyl booth that was entirely too small for them.

"I'm telling you, Danny," Angela said, pointing a golden French fry directly at the pilot's face. "Subtitles are the only correct way to watch a movie. You miss half the dialogue without them."

"It's a literal crime against the eyes, Ang!" Danny groaned, throwing his hands up in mock despair. "Why would I want to read a movie when I'm trying to look at the explosions?"

Bill just laughed heartily, his hand holding a ceramic coffee mug. Keith watched the three of them bicker, a deeply contented, tired smile resting on his face.

Suddenly, they all paused. A warm, familiar telepathic presence brushed gently against their minds – the distinct, cosmic mental image of Forzon.

"Well done, Freedom's Foursome," Forzon said telepathically, his voice filled with pride. "I gave you the cosmic powers of the stars, but today, you fought and won with the strength of your own individual souls. That is a power that even I cannot grant."

"Stay loud."

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The presence faded, leaving the diner exactly as it was. Four regular people, who had originally been bound together by an alien's choice, chose to stay together entirely by their own. Angela took a bite of her fry, Danny took a sip of his soda, and the beautiful, messy noise of the city carried on around them.

THE END

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