

"Doesn't mean we can't try," she countered. She waited a moment, crossing her arms in front of her in the slightly chill night air, before reminding him, "You don't have to go with me."

"You wouldn't be much of a leader if you didn't have at least one follower," he smirked, and she laughed her unbreakable laugh, shaking her head. Her smile broke clear across her face—her smile had become his horizon. But he did not say this out loud.

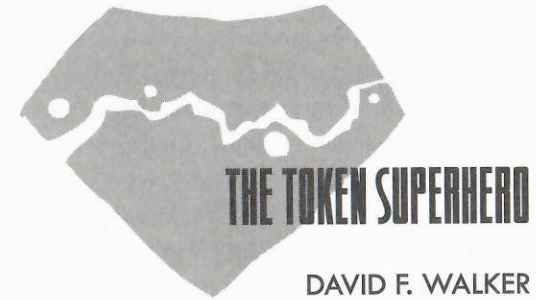
He turned and looked her solemnly in the eyes. "Is it too much to ask for a happy ending?"

She smiled sadly. "I don't think there are any happy endings left."

After a moment, she said, "I miss hotel rooms. I used to love to travel, you know? Before all of this. Sure, hotel rooms were never yours. But I loved that you came back to a place that wasn't yours, and someone made the bed for you." She shook her head, then smiled her radiant, breathtakingly beautiful smile for him. It got even wider when she saw his rare, small smile finally break across his face, a hair-line fracture on an egg.

She put a hand on his shoulder, and they stood in silence for a moment, the giant pistons' blocky silhouettes swallowing them from the moon's light, their bodies becoming one with shadow before thumping down to the earth once again.

Then they strode down the hill together, rifles in hand, straight for the prison camp. Toward a war that just might turn into something like a revolution.



ALONZO RAMEY WAS BORN TO BE A SUPERHERO. AT THE TIME OF HIS birth, he tested positive for Kurtzberg-24 Syndrome, the genetic anomaly responsible for giving superpowers to people. All babies with K-24 were identified and monitored, with cautious eyes keeping track of the powers that developed. The vast majority of K-24 kids developed a power set that usually included superhuman strength, endurance, speed, and bulletproof skin—the "Standards" is what such powers were called by the doctors and experts who tracked such things. Some of the kids developed unique powers—anything from pyro-telekinesis to the ability to breathe underwater. Alonzo's parents prayed that his powers would be limited to the Standards. With the Standards, there was always the chance of having a life that could at least pass for being normal. The more unusual the powers, however, the more difficult life could become. With some powers, there simply wasn't any chance of leading a normal life. Everyone knew about the Flamer, who could make fire but couldn't control it. The Flamer had to walk around in a specially designed suit to keep from burning everything and everyone around him whenever fire would randomly shoot from his body. And then there was Elasticene, who could stretch her body like it was made out of rubber, but it took days to return to its original shape.

"Them white folks ain't gonna take too kindly to a colored boy with superpowers," said Kelvin Ramey, Alonzo's father.

Kelvin had grown up in rural Mississippi, back when being black meant a second-class life. Alonzo was born into a better world, after the marching and the demonstrations and the water hoses and the police dogs, but his father remembered it all, and he worried for his

son. They'd killed Martin, Malcolm, Medgar, and so many others, and none of them even had any superpowers. There was no telling what might happen to Alonzo if some crazed redneck decided a superpowered Negro was a threat to the possibility of the South rising up. That was, after all, what every southern redneck claimed was going to happen. Time and time again, the South had failed to rise again, but the fear and hatred of black people remained. And it wasn't just the South: black people were feared and hated all over the country. And where they weren't feared or hated, they were misunderstood.

Fortunately, Alonzo being born with K-24 Syndrome meant a ticket out of Mississippi for his parents and his older sister. Some clinic up north—the Kurtzberg Metahuman Research and Training Center—wanted to test Alonzo regularly, and as his powers manifested, they wanted to make sure he'd get the proper training. Proper training, of course, meant that he'd be trained to use his powers to fight for truth, justice, and all that other stuff they talked about in the comic books, movies, and television shows that recounted the adventures of superheroes and crime fighters.

By the time Alonzo turned sixteen, his powers had fully developed. Much to the delight of his father, Alonzo only had the Standards—although his strength levels tested right up there with some of the strongest superheroes. Kelvin Ramey's relief that his son only had the Standards was short-lived, however, when Alonzo was asked to join the newly formed Teen Justice Force, which was started by Super Justice Force in a stroke of marketing genius to appeal to the younger crowd. Superheroes in their twenties and thirties were popular, but tended to trend low with teenagers. It all had to do with hostility toward adults—older superheroes made teenagers think of their parents and teachers. Teen Justice Force was created to bridge the gap between the younger demographic and the crucial adult demo, to make sure that valuable consumers didn't lose interest in Super Justice Force, their exploits, or, most important, the multibillion-dollar entertainment industry that kept the entire operation running.

"I don't know how I feel about you joining this Kiddy Justice Force outfit," Kelvin Ramey told his son.

"They're called Teen Justice Force, not Kiddy Justice Force," said Alonzo.

"Teen, Kiddy, it's all the same. You're too young to be running around playing being a superhero."

"I'm not playing, dad. I am a superhero," said Alonzo. "And these powers that I have are a gift. It's my responsibility to use them to help my fellow man."

"See, I told your mother, they brainwashed you," Kelvin said. He'd been convinced that his son would be turned into a pawn of the Man—even though he couldn't actually identify the Man or his agenda.

"I'm not brainwashed! I'm thinking for myself, just like you and Mom taught me to do."

The conversation went on like that, but in the end, Kelvin knew his son was going to be a superhero, and nothing could stop it from happening. He wanted to be angry, but his wife Voncetta—the pragmatic one in the family—helped calm him down. "Daddy K, are you really going to be angry that our son was blessed with wings and has decided to use them to fly?" she asked.

Even though Voncetta calmed him down, Kelvin could not bring himself to sign the parental release form required for Alonzo to join Teen Justice Force. Instead, Voncetta signed the release. "It's not that your daddy doesn't want you being a superhero, it's just that he worries about you," said Voncetta. "You know that, son?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Alonzo.

With the written consent of his mother, Alonzo Ramey became one of the first members of Teen Justice Force, and the only member of color—unless you counted Neptuna, who had bluish skin and could breathe underwater. Neptuna had been given a terrible name, and when it became the object of public ridicule, it was quickly changed. Alonzo didn't have the same luck. He had been given the superhero name Black Fist, which made absolutely no sense to him. It wasn't like he had unusually large fists, or fists made of anvils—like the supervillain Anvil Fist—or that his powers were solely based in his fists. No, he was stuck with the name Black Fist because, when push came to shove, no one wanted to think that hard when it came time to give the token black guy on Teen Justice Force his name.

Alonzo's career in Teen Justice Force was perfectly fine, although he was the only member without his own solo comic book or an endorsement deal. Even Neptuna got some choice deals—although

these came after her name was changed to Princess Oceana. And when the Teen Justice Force animated series proved popular enough to see a line of action figures produced, the only member to not have a figure made was Black Fist.

If it had been just a case of not having his own comic, action figure, or endorsement deals, the degradation of being a black superhero with “black” in his name might have been bearable. But all of that stuff was minor compared to the fact that neither Black Fist nor his alter ego got much respect from the press. In private, Black Fist was pretty much the leader of Teen Justice Force. In a fight, the other members all turned to him for decisions, and on multiple occasions he’d saved each of them from certain death. But every article about the force’s exploits always seemed to downplay his involvement, saying, “Black Fist was also present” (if he was even mentioned at all).

Things didn’t get better when Alonzo aged out of Teen Justice Force, which is when Captain Freedom, the leader of Super Justice Force, offered him a position on the team. But at the age of twenty, Alonzo was already bitter, cynical, and tired of being a token. He tried to reinvent himself, with a new costume and a new name, but none of it took. Twice he’d been attacked by other superheroes who’d mistaken him for a supervillain, and then there was the time he’d been shot by cops. Fortunately the bullets had bounced off. Disgusted and depressed, Alonzo Ramey decided to retire from the superhero business.

Despite his original misgivings, no one was more disappointed by the retirement of Black Fist than Kelvin Ramey. He had come to see that his son was a great superhero. In the barbershop where Kelvin worked, the exploits of Black Fist were a regular topic of conversation, along with relevant issues such as police brutality in the community, gentrification, and how music was so much better “back in the day.” The autographed picture of Black Fist hanging on the wall at the shop got more comments than the photos of famous rappers and athletes.

“You sure you want to do this?” Kelvin asked his son.

“I thought you of all people would be happy to see me give it up,” Alonzo said.

“I just want to make sure you’re giving it up for the right reasons,” Kelvin said. He took great care not to explain what the “right reasons” were, because he knew that was something only Alonzo could

determine for himself.

So Black Fist officially retired, and Alonzo tried to adjust to his new life, but it wasn’t easy. He got a regular job and enrolled in college, with no plans other than leading a normal life. After a few months, however, he started missing the action and excitement of being a superhero—even when it came with little respect or acknowledgment. And one day, while riding the subway home from his boring job in the non-superhero world, he saw something that changed his life.

A group of rowdy teens, not much younger than Alonzo, had been terrorizing passengers on the train headed uptown. His years as a superhero kicked in, and Alonzo started to intervene, but before he could, another group of teens entered the subway car. These kids, a motley group of three boys and two girls—of various backgrounds—rushed the rowdy teens. For a moment it looked like things would turn violent.

The punks who had been terrorizing the other passengers were bigger, but the other kids stood their ground. And after a few heated words laced with profanity, the confrontation ended. That’s when Alonzo noticed that the kids who stood up to the punks were all wearing T-shirts with an image of Black Fist. In all his time as Black Fist, there had never been any officially licensed merchandise—no T-shirts, pajamas, or anything like that.

“Excuse me,” Alonzo said to the group of teenagers. “Where’d you get those shirts?”

“We made ’em,” said one of the girls. She flashed a huge grin, revealing the braces that covered her teeth.

“You made your own Black Fist T-shirts?” Alonzo asked. “Why?”

All at once, the kids launched into an explanation of how Black Fist had not only been the coolest member of Teen Justice Force but was also the coolest superhero around.

“He does what he does because he can do it,” said one of the boys. “It ain’t all about the business with him.”

“He just made me feel good about myself because, you know, he’s black and all,” said the other girl.

“I just wish he hadn’t retired,” said the first girl.

In that moment, it struck Alonzo Ramey that being a superhero meant more than endorsement deals, your own comic book series,

and whatever fame and fortune might come your way for fighting the good fight. He had gone through years of training, been on countless missions, and saved hundreds of lives, but it was that moment on the subway that he understood what it was all about.

Yes, he'd been a token black superhero in a world made up mostly of white heroes. Yes, his name was ridiculous, and he hated that it was a constant reminder that others felt the need to state the obvious when it came to defining who he was as a hero. And yes, it sucked that he didn't get credit where credit was due. But that wasn't how those kids on the subway saw him. To them he was simply a superhero they admired enough to make their own T-shirts emblazoned with his image. And that was enough to make Alonzo Ramey rethink everything.

Shortly after that, Alonzo asked Captain Freedom about returning to Super Justice Force. He'd been apprehensive at first, recalling how his father used to say, "If you ask a white man for anything, you best be prepared to beg." But there was no begging. He didn't even have to "tooth it up" by putting on a fake smile—something his father told him never to do. Instead, Alonzo and Captain Freedom talked man to man.

"There's very little about this line of work that is easy," said Captain Freedom. "If I could make the world a better place—the kind of place where you could be who you are, without any of the crap that the world puts on you—then I'd do it. But in that world, there'd be no need for superheroes."

And so Alonzo Ramey went back to being a superhero. He once again donned his Black Fist costume and took to the streets fighting crime. But this time around, he changed his personal definition of what it meant to be a superhero. Yes, he still spent time slugging it out with supercriminals and engaging in what amounted to a ridiculous carnival sideshow, but that was only part of what he did. Instead of patrolling the streets of the inner city and busting gangbangers, he spent much of his time reaching out to the youth that most people saw as a threat. He became known as much for being a community organizer superhero as he did for being a superhero. With the money from his first real endorsement deal, he bankrolled his own comic book series, which was geared toward promoting literacy. The series became so popular that it launched an entire line of comics that helped teach kids of all colors how to read.

Over the years, Black Fist felt the bitterness rise up inside of him from time to time, as well as the cynicism. He hated his name, didn't care much for the costume, and when he finally got his own action figure, they'd made his lips look way bigger than they were in real life. But whenever these things got to him, Alonzo Ramey remembered that at the end of the day none of these things mattered. For him, his life would always be defined by a group of boys and girls, no more than fourteen or fifteen years old, wearing T-shirts with hand-drawn designs inspired by Black Fist. His life would not be defined as much by his adventures as by the adventures recounted in comic books that helped young people learn to read. That's what defined Alonzo Ramey. That's what let him know that, despite it all, he really was a superhero.