

One Piece at a Time

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One Piece at a Time

by [Tiriël](#)

Summary

Pat Dugan's family is bigger than he thought. Set between the climactic battle in Stars & STRIPE Part 2 and the Christmas party.

For so long, it had been just him and Mike and his memories, and they'd been fine. Then he'd met Barbara, which felt like a miracle, and gotten to know Courtney. Then the Cosmic Staff had picked her and next thing he knew, in spite of his objections she'd recruited the start of a new Justice Society. The idea of any of those kids getting hurt chilled him to the bone more thoroughly than he thought Icicle ever could have, but he hadn't been able to stop them. And in the end it had been a good thing to have a few immature brains on the team. So now it was him, Mike, Barbara, Courtney, Yolanda, Beth, Rick (who was more like his dad every day), and, much as he hated to admit it, the Cosmic Staff. There was a new JSA, a new family. So it was time.

"There's only so much training we can do at the garage, and we need to see if we can fix the goggles," Pat said. "I think we should reopen the JSA headquarters."

"Of course, that's where Chuck's databases are! Maybe we can access him from there and he can help us!" Beth exclaimed.

"I hope so," Pat said. "The third-smartest man on Earth helped build the computer systems there, back in the day. I'm more of a mechanical guy, so I don't know the details of the AI storage."

"I don't think the goggles are big enough to hold everything, and he said he had access to the JSA databanks, so I think—"

"Can I come?" Mike interjected. "I want to see it, and I've been coming up with ideas for a code name. What do you think of Candyman? Or Sugar Rush?"

"A code name can wait until you're older. You can come if you're willing to help us clean up," Pat said.

"Then I'm out. You can give me the tour once it's set up." Mike darted off up the stairs.

"I'm in," Rick said.

Yolanda nodded. "Let's go."

He had taken Courtney there a few months prior, and stopped in once more to return some of the equipment she'd "borrowed," but otherwise the secret headquarters of the Justice Society of America hadn't been disturbed in years. The power was still on (some self-sustainable thing the more scientific members had dreamed up), but there was a pretty good coating of dust on anything that hadn't been covered up.

He watched the kids closely as they walked in. Beth looked around in wide-eyed wonder, Rick was aiming for nonchalance but not quite making it, and Yolanda seemed calm and thoughtful.

Pat pointed out the training room, medical center, general equipment storage, and personal rooms as they passed by. The kids peered into each door with interest, but they all kept moving. "And this is the main meeting room," he said. They all paused and looked at the

central table, then turned to look at the banners of the original team on the walls. Rick walked over to stand in front of the banner of Hourman, then stopped, staring.

Yolanda and Courtney moved to flank him, one gently touching each arm, while Beth said, “Your dad looks like a good man.”

“He was,” Pat said, “and I know he’d wish he could see the good man you’re growing into.”

Rick nodded silently.

Just then, the owl flew over and landed on Beth’s shoulder. She shrieked, startled. The owl took off and circled overhead.

“That’s Hooty,” Pat said, “he belonged to Doctor Mid-Nite.”

“Oh, okay,” Beth said, then hesitantly held out an arm. “Hi, Hooty.” The owl landed gently and turned its head, examining her carefully. “This is cool! I can’t wait to tell Chuck about it. Let’s find the servers.”

“Next room,” Pat said.

Beth darted off in the direction he was pointing. “Holy crap, I didn’t know Wayne Enterprises made anything this big!” she exclaimed.

“It’s a custom model. The JSA has contacts there. Long story,” Pat called back. “I’ll log you on in a second.” He turned to Rick. “You good?”

Rick nodded. “Go ahead, I just need another minute.”

“Look around as much as you want,” Pat called back over his shoulder as he followed Beth, “it’s your headquarters now.”

“Our headquarters,” Courtney added with a smile. “You’re still in the JSA, Pat.”

Beth was standing in front of the wall-sized video screen, jaw open in awe.

“Voice authentication, Pat Dugan, code name Stripesy,” Pat said, putting his right hand on the a piece of the control panel. The screen lit up. “I’ll get you guys set up to use this while we’re here. I know it hasn’t had any updates in ten years, but I think you’ll find it’s still pretty advanced.”

“It houses a real live AI,” Beth said. “At least I hope so. It’s got to be the best computer system on the planet.”

“Thank you, Beth,” said a voice from the speakers in the wall.

“Chuck!” Beth exclaimed, “I’ve missed you so much!”

“Thank you again. Luckily, I believe data loss from the incident with Icicle was minimal. There are backup parts for the goggles in the equipment room. This isn’t the first time

something has been damaged by a super-villain. I will guide you through the repairs so that we can communicate again.” Schematics began to appear on the screen.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Pat said, and returned to the central meeting room. Courtney was there, folding up dust covers from the chairs at the table.

“What can I do to help?” Pat asked, and she smiled at him.

“Tell me if anything in here is too dangerous to touch,” she said, “you know what everything is.”

Pat nodded and smiled back. "I think you can handle it."

“Yolanda and Rick went that way,” she said, gesturing back down the hall.

“I’ll check on them and be right back,” he said. She nodded.

He found Rick first, in his dad’s personal room, looking around. Rick glanced up and gave him a nod of acknowledgement, which Pat returned.

"You know, the Mustang wasn't the only vehicle your dad had. How'd you like to see the garage?"

Rick grinned. "I'd like that."

"Since most of you can't fly," Pat said as they walked, "we'll have to think about transport sometimes. There are a few options." He stepped into the garage and flipped a switch near the door. "Welcome to my favorite room."

"Whoa," Rick said, as the lights came up over a room full of cars, motorcycles, what looked like at least two aerial vehicles, and, "is that a submarine?"

"I always thought that was taking things a little too far," Pat said, "but yeah. The red and yellow motorcycle was your dad's, by the way, and that T-bird over there was what he drove when he was in costume."

"This is sweet. Do you think everything still runs?"

"I'm pretty sure that between you and me we can figure it out. I'm going to go check on Yolanda. You good?"

"I'm good," Rick said. "Thanks, Pat."

Pat found Yolanda in the training room, taping up her hands and eyeing the heavy bag speculatively.

“Ted gave lessons to the rest of the team in here,” Pat said from the doorway. “Most of us weren’t professional fighters like him, of course, and not everyone had strength-enhancing powers to fall back on.”

She threw a punch into the bag, then stepped back and bit her lip. “Was he angry? About how his career ended?”

“I think so, for a while. But he loved being able to help people as Wildcat, which he wouldn’t have had otherwise. He found a new purpose.”

She tilted her head at that, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah, I know,” he said, “But it’s true. I’ll leave you to your workout.” Pat knew his brand of dad wisdom was a little cheesy for the teens, but if he was going to be the senior member of the new team, he wasn’t going to let that stop him from handing it out.

He went back to the main meeting room to help Courtney. Eventually everyone else gathered there, too, and Pat felt the gentle warmth of their camaraderie wrap around him. It was good to see the place alive again. He’d had his doubts over the years about keeping the Cosmic Staff with him, had considered putting it into storage here at headquarters, but something about the idea had always felt wrong. He’d assumed it was a way of hanging on to his last connection to his friend, but maybe it had been fate. Courtney had held him at arm’s length until the Staff had gotten into the mix, and as much as it was going to hurt to watch these kids throw themselves into whatever dangers the future might bring, he had to admit he didn’t hate the way things had turned out. Icicle and most of the ISA were gone, they’d laid the foundation of a new JSA, and he’d gained not just a daughter, but a whole new family. One piece at a time.

Pat called out, “Hey, Christmas party at the Whitmore-Dugan house next Saturday, okay, everybody?”

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