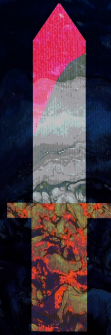


# Vigilante



By Xine Fury

## *Vigilante*

Ember leaned on the rail of the fire escape of her second-story apartment, overlooking the poorest part of town. The moon was just a sliver in the sky, and half the streetlamps were out, but she could still make out the customers trickling in and out of the bar across the street. Their laughter echoed up from below, sounding eerie and ghostlike by the time they reached Ember's ears.

But then a new sound joined in. It was faint, but she heard shrieking from her right. She strained her eyes for the source. She could just make out three stick figures running through an empty lot. As her eyes adjusted, she saw that it was a young woman being pursued by two men. Ember reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. She was about to call the police, but she knew they'd never arrive in time. The response time in her neighborhood was notoriously lax.

She briefly considered running down to help, but fear took over. She knew she'd just become a victim herself. She'd been brave once, but that was before her egg had cracked, before she'd started living as her true self. Since

then she'd been a bully magnet, and she'd yet to win a fight against the transphobic bigots that roamed her street. If she went down there now, she probably wouldn't make it back home.

She looked at her phone again, and pressed the "Emergency Call" button. Maybe it was futile, but she had to do *something*. But while she waited for an operator to pick up, a fourth figure joined the group. Another feminine shape, dressed in black like a ninja, with a long ponytail trailing from her mask. She got between the men and their intended victim, then taunted them, goading them into a fight.

One of the guys ran right up to her, and she kicked him in the chin. As he went down, the other man tried to attack her from the side, and she punched him. The second guy staggered back for a second, then lunged forward. The dark woman then did something Ember couldn't really see. It looked like she just touched him on the forehead with her index finger. Whatever it was, the guy immediately fell flat on his back. The first guy started to get back up, only to get kicked again. He stayed down this time.

The intended victim had wedged herself behind a trash can, and now her rescuer helped her get to her feet. It looked like they said a few words to each other, then the ninja woman ran back into the darkness.

"Emergency Services, how may I direct your call?"

*Oh.* Ember had forgotten she was holding the phone. "I'm... not sure," Ember said, staring off into the darkness.

"So, I was patrolling the neighborhood, like I do

most nights. And I heard a scream. Not a 'bloody murder' scream, more of a desperate protest."

"What was it?"

"I tuned my directional microphone until I heard it again. It was coming from a parking lot. Three guys were harassing a young woman. Half of her clothing lay on the ground, ripped. The men were calling her an 'effing whore' and beating her badly. One of them was undoing his pants."

"So you stopped them."

"What else could I do? They were going to rape her, and probably kill her."

"Were you afraid?"

"If I'd stopped to think about it, I might have been. But I just jumped in. I had the element of surprise."

"But you were outnumbered. And they were stronger, right?"

"Well, yes. But I know karate."

"This isn't a movie. You didn't stop three strong men using karate."

"Well, no..."

"I'm just afraid that this might be another way of attempting suicide."

"Then why would I fight back?"

"Maybe you're afraid suicide would make your life meaningless. Maybe you want to die a hero."

"Look, I didn't want to fight them. I just wanted her to be safe. And there wasn't time to call the police."

"Okay, so you 'heroically leaped into the fray.' Maybe not the best decision, but then I'm not you. Then what happened?"

"I yelled for the woman to run. Then I fought

them."

"You obviously survived. So you managed to take them out, all by yourself?"

"Not exactly. I got one of them down using my taser gloves, and I managed to mace another one. But the third one blindsided me. I nearly bought it."

"How did you escape?"

"The victim - she didn't run after all. She hit one of the attackers with a board."

"I see."

"And then they were down. We'd won. I'd saved a life. Then I stood over one of the attackers... and... and... I picked up his knife. And I wondered what kind of person could do such a thing to another human being. Here was someone who was willing to destroy another person's life, just for a few minutes of pleasure. I held the knife tightly, and I could see myself swipe it across his throat."

"You didn't."

"It wasn't easy to stop myself. I mean, what he was about to do to that girl - I really wanted to just kill him right there."

"But you *did* stop yourself."

"Of course. But even so, I could just see myself giving in. The world simply doesn't need someone like that in it."

"So what stopped you?"

"I was... afraid."

"Of?"

"If I took that step, what else would I be capable of? My identity... You know I'm changing. I don't know everything about the person I'm becoming, but I know who I don't want to be."

“So what did you do?”

“I tasered the guy one more time for good measure, and threw the knife in the dumpster. I told the woman to go somewhere safe and call the police. And then I went home.”

“Good. Dan, you know you’re an unusual patient. You saved my life once. And for that reason alone, I’m giving you more leeway than I would most patients. But if I ever decide that you’re a threat to yourself or society at large, I’m turning you in.”

“Doc, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Well, we still have a few minutes left. Would you like to discuss your gender issues?”

Danielle made sure no one could see her, and took off her mask. Then she retrieved her overcoat from where she’d stuffed it behind the trash bin. The coat smelled like garbage – again – but at least no one would see her walking around in her superhero costume. She crossed the street and took the stairs up to her apartment.

Once inside, she threw her overcoat into the laundry hamper and removed her body armor. First, her taser-fingered gloves. Then her heavy combat boots. Her molded plastic vest came off next, and then her black bodysuit. Finally, she removed her underwear and threw it in with the laundry. On the way to the shower, she looked in the mirror and sighed.

As usual, Daniel stared back at her. As men went, he wasn’t bad looking. He was a little on the short side, but he had a clean face and a swimmer’s body. Danielle didn’t hate Daniel. But she longed for the day when she could

look in the mirror and see Danielle.

If that day ever came. She hadn't even started taking hormones yet. There was no way her job would let her transition. Sure, she could try to sue them if they fired her, but they'd just claim they'd fired her for some other reason. And she was lucky to have a decent job, with unemployment on the rise. Of course, even with her job, her paychecks didn't stretch much past the bills.

She could either live as Daniel or starve as Danielle. Those were her only two choices.

Ember ran through the alley, knocking over trash cans as she went. The three men were still behind her. She'd been clocked on the way home from work, and these guys weren't playing around. Ember had become something of a connoisseur of bullies lately. Some of them just wanted to feel powerful, some wanted to impress their friends, and some of them just liked the chase.

But these guys were motivated by blind hatred. Who knew why – maybe they were religious zealots, or maybe they just hated their own lives so much that they had to take it out on someone else. Hell, maybe they'd been bitten by a trans person when they were kids. Regardless of the reason, they weren't playing around. Ember had no doubt that if they caught her, they'd kill her.

She tried to run somewhere where there might be witnesses, but they were so close behind her that she couldn't even take the time to think. It was all react, react, react. As she turned another corner, she belatedly realized that she was in the alley behind her own apartment. She'd subconsciously run home, her panicked brain associating it

with safety. *Idiot!* she admonished herself. She couldn't let them see where she lived.

That last thought had her second-guess her next steps, and she tripped over her own feet. With her pursuers standing right behind her, she just curled into a ball, closed her eyes, and waited for the kicking to begin.

But the kicks never came. "Who the hell is that?" one of the bullies asked.

"Get out of here while you can still walk," another said.

But whoever they were talking to, no answer was forthcoming. Instead she heard sounds of fighting, the clattering of garbage cans, and several cries of pain. When Ember dared to open her eyes, she saw one of her attackers limping away, the other two unconscious on the ground. And that ninja woman was standing over her, offering her a hand.

Ember took it, but immediately realized something felt wrong. The ninja's hand was slippery, and when Ember jerked her hand away, she saw that it was covered in blood. A huge gash ran along her savior's side, and she was teetering, about to collapse.

"Let me help you," Ember said, getting to her feet. "I live just up there." She threw the ninja's arm over her shoulder, and together they made it up the stairs to Ember's apartment.

"You're lucky I'm a nursing student," a voice said, as Danielle slowly regained consciousness. She remembered fighting some jerks in an alley, but then, that could have described any night this week.

"Where am I?" Danielle asked. She could tell she was in a bed, but it didn't feel like her own.

"My place," Ember answered.

Danielle opened her eyes, blinked a few times, and looked around. It was a small apartment, with old fixtures and painted brick walls. She searched the room until her eyes found Ember. When she saw her face, it all came back to her. The chase, the victim, the alley, the fight.

"Are you okay?" Danielle asked.

"Better than you," Ember said, walking over. "You were stabbed three times. This one was pretty deep." She pulled down the blanket and pointed to the bandage along Danielle's side.

Danielle realized she was naked, and pulled the blanket back up.

Ember laughed. "Don't worry, I'm practically a nurse. I would have taken you to the hospital, but somehow I had the feeling you wouldn't like that."

Danielle shook her head. "Thanks," she said. "That might not have gone well for me."

"Can I ask you a stupid question?" Ember asked. "Actually, several."

"Go ahead," Danielle said.

"The chest piece? The ponytail?"

"It's not some fetish if that's what you're asking," Danielle replied. "I just like the look. I feel more like myself that way. You wouldn't understand."

"You might be surprised," Ember said. "Next question. Do you just have a death wish or something? I mean, thank you, seriously, thank you, but you're going to get yourself killed. I saw you the other night too, saving another girl. You're doing good work, I mean that. But I

almost ran off last night, once I was safe. If I hadn't helped you, you would have bled out."

Danielle waved her off. "I know," she said. "And I don't know. This city has gotten out of control, and the police refuse to do a damn thing. There are rapes and murders every night. Gang activity is everywhere. It just makes me so furious. I had to do something."

"Well, you're brave, I'll give you that," Ember said. "And I wish more people were like you. But sooner or later you're going to get shot, or stabbed again, or beaten to death."

Danielle's expression made Ember go pale. She knew that look, because she'd seen it in the mirror herself. It was a look that said, *Would that be so bad?*

Ember's heart melted, and she sat down on the bed, putting a hand on Danielle's shoulder. "You want to die a hero," Ember said.

"It's all I've got left," Danielle said. "I can't transition and work where I do. I can't find another job that pays a living wage. I can't afford HRT or surgeries. I can't afford to move to another city, and I'd feel like a traitor if I did. Like I was abandoning the city's other victims to their fates."

"Have you talked to anyone?" Ember asked. "Like a therapist?"

"I have a psychologist," Danielle said. "That's at least covered by my insurance. But it won't pay for anything transition-related. I feel so trapped, locked in by circumstances. I'm living in a cage, and the key is just beyond my reach. I can't make more money, I can't find more opportunities, and I can't be my true self. All I'm left with is anger, and if I'm going to lash out, I might as well take it out

on people who deserve it.”

Ember nodded. “If you’re going to die anyway, might as well hurt some bad people on the way,” she said. She didn’t agree with the statement, she was just finishing Danielle’s thought.

Danielle considered her words, then quietly said, “Exactly.”

“What’s your name?” Ember asked.

“Danielle.”

Ember looked at her. The person in her bed looked like a man, with a svelte but muscular frame, and close-cropped hair. But if she wanted to be seen as a woman, Ember was the last person who would judge her. At least, not for that. “Danielle,” Ember said. “You’re a fool.”

“Huh?”

“First off, have you considered all the other possible outcomes of your activities? Sure, maybe you’ll die a hero. But you’re just as likely to end up in jail or in a wheelchair, neither of which is going to make your life any peachier. You think it’s hard to get a decent job now, just wait until you have a criminal record. Or when you’re missing a limb.”

Danielle looked like she was about to object, but Ember kept going.

“And secondly, I know you think that going out in a blaze of glory is ‘dying on your own terms’ or ‘taking control of your life’ or whatever, but it’s not. It’s just another way of letting the bad guys win. You said you didn’t want move away because, what was it, you didn’t want to betray the other victims?”

“Something like that,” Danielle said softly. “I’d be abandoning them.”

“Well, it’s the same if you die. You’d be leaving behind thousands of other trans people, like myself. We’re stronger together, and any loss weakens us all. We need your voice and your votes if we’re ever going to make the world safer for all of us.”

They were both quiet for a minute. Finally, Danielle said, “Then I’m back to square one.”

“No,” Ember said, taking Danielle’s hands into hers. “You’re better off than you were yesterday, because now you have a friend.”

Danielle looked into her eyes, lost in thought. She’d always pictured her life as a comic book, with a poverty-stricken backstory leading to years of heroic fights and daring rescues, culminating in a hero’s fall that would inspire others to keep up the good fight. But maybe this wasn’t that story. Maybe this wasn’t a comic book at all, but an inspirational story about someone who almost made a terrible mistake, only to be rescued by someone else.

And maybe the climax wouldn’t be as flashy as the comic book would have been. Gone was the iconic cover where another hero carried Danielle’s limp form away from the alien battlefield, with a splash of text declaring, “In This Issue – A Hero Falls!” In its place, Danielle pictured a photo album, gradually growing over the years, filled with happy moments with her new friend.

Exciting? No. A best-seller? Definitely not. But a better ending? That was the question. Staring into Ember’s beautiful eyes, Danielle found her answer.

They moved in together two months later. As roommates, they faced fewer expenses, and were able to save

a bit more. Ember eventually became a full-time nurse, and Danielle's search for a better job finally paid off. Within a year, Danielle started living as a woman full-time. A few years later, Ember and Danielle were married.

And Danielle never put on the mask again.

## *Note*

This is an excerpt from *Geek Cutes*, by Xine Fury. *Geek Cutes* is a collection of eight light-hearted short stories, spanning a variety of genres, with a focus on lesbians and trans women. Stories included in the full anthology:

*Dungeon Therapy*: Two women meet over an online tabletop RPG.

*Gilded Cage*: A young tech expert is locked in her room by her homophobic parents.

*Mother's Day*: A cop teams up with an occult expert to track down an otherworldly monster.

*Fairy Dust*: In a war between fairies and dragons, one pixie must embrace her destiny.

*Hero Worship*: A woman goes on a blind date with a superhero, but is it safer to stay single?

*Think Tank*: A team of scholars struggle to break a divine code, racing against the most serious of all deadlines.

*Strangers in the Void*: When the power goes out on a space station, two strangers work together to find the cause.

*Vigilante*: In a neighborhood riddled with violent crime, a masked hero protects women from the local gangs.